

The Council Story

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Prologue to the Journey

O Mama! O Papa!
The Council of Churches is celebrating an anniversary!
It's eightieth!
Not its twenty-fifth or its fiftieth,
but it's *eightieth!*
What gift do I bring?
Not silver or gold...?
But an oak?
An oak *tree?*

The Bible says,
The Lord has anointed [us];
...to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,...
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the Bible says, referring to those who
care for the poor and the oppressed, "the least of these."
They shall be "the planting of the lord,
to display God's glory."

The Rhode Island State Council of Churches:
Eighty years of standing tall.
Now that's a celebration worthy of the oak!

First Steps (1937)

Once upon a time,
80 years ago,
in a place called Providence,
faith leaders saw widespread hunger, poverty, and unemployment
in the wake of the Great Depression.
So they came together
to see what they could do.

A minister called a minister,
and a rabbi called a rabbi,
and the lay people got out of their pews,
and soon there was a confluence of congregations –
36 strong, Christian and Jewish.

On that day at Beneficent Congregational Church,
200 people committed themselves to a common spirit of unity and cooperation.
That very day, April 4, 1937,
they founded the Rhode Island State Council of Churches.

It would be open to any denomination or church in Rhode Island.
It would remain independent of any over-arching organization
that would compromise its autonomy.
Congregations across the State were encouraged to join,
and their names were published yearly in “Council Highlights.”

With \$66.28 in their treasury,
they elected their first president.

God had planted the seed of an oak tree,
and its name was Righteousness.
And God warmed the acorn with the sun
and blessed it with the rain,
and it stretched out tiny green leaves,
and God saw that it was good.

Fruitful Plains (1940-1960)

The oak tree grew and stretched its young branches
to respond to the war years.

As the Nazis rose to power,
the Council set up a Peace Committee
chaired by the minister of the First Unitarian Church
to help victims of persecution.

The rabbi at Temple Beth-El recruited sponsors
for refugees escaping to the United States.

When war broke out,
the Council raised funds and volunteers
to staff a hospitality center for men and women in the service.
And after the war,
the Council collected, cleaned, and mended
more than 100 tons of clothing
which was shipped overseas through Church World Service.

The oak became strong and ministered to migrant workers and Boy Scouts;
appointed chaplains in hospitals, prisons, and colleges;
arranged for a minister to be present at Family Court; and
lobbied Congress for tax-free clergy housing.

Following the war, open conflict ceased,
but there was no peace.
America faced the spread of Communism abroad
and fear and mistrust at home with loyalty oaths, blacklists, and arrests.

Christians from 44 European countries met in Amsterdam
to found the World Council of Churches, and soon thereafter,
Protestant clergy representing 25 denominations
and four Eastern Orthodox bodies in the U.S.
founded the National Council of Churches.

There are many kinds of oaks in the forest –
black oaks, white oaks, red oaks, pin oaks, live oaks, evergreen oaks, bear oaks, to name a few –
that adapt themselves to changing climates and purposes.
In the 1950s, the Council made a decision
to become a different kind of oak tree
and adopted a different membership structure
to align itself with the World and National Councils.

The Rhode Island State Council of Churches
was no longer a Council of *Churches*
but a Council of *Denominations*.
The new organizational structure made it easier to manage in the Lands of Unrest.

Lands of Unrest (1960-1980)

The 1960s were a time of internal institution-building to serve the member churches: newsletter features on hymns and scriptures, suggestions of ways to strengthen family life, promotion of church women and men's breakfasts and youth programs, schools and courses on education.

The oak was strong and it spread its branches across the landscape with religious broadcasting and church planting and the appointment of chaplains. And it stretched its reach to embrace the larger Rhode Island landscape, considered the relationship of Church and State, raised the issue of ethics and nuclear war, and, for the sake of "justice, fair play, and brotherhood," pressed the Legislature to adopt a Fair Housing Bill, placing our State in the forefront of the Civil Rights battle nationally.

The oak grew stronger and more courageous. Council Highlights reported in October 1963 that Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish clergy discussed "The *White* Problem in Rhode Island." Fifty lay and clergy attended the historic March on Washington, and 70 went to Selma and Montgomery two years later. Such roots run deep, as we shall see.

Ecumenical relationships were strong during this time with top leaders, including both the Episcopal and Catholic Bishops, meeting together to enhance understanding, while advocating for the poor, establishing a hospital chaplaincy program, uniting against casino gambling.

In the meantime, leaders of the churches realized they were being called on to do more and more – by taking on new tasks in order to be relevant and by witnessing the burden of need around them.

"Mind your own business!" they were told.

But what *was* their business?

Urban issues? The War in Southeast Asia? Refugees?

Prison Reform? Appeals for relief at home and abroad?

And closer to home, church attendance and an aging population?

One executive suggested that the Council's purpose, at least in part, is to answer the question of how local churches can move to act on *behalf* of the whole church rather than acting *as if they were the whole church*.

The task is to make the church visible and effective – *together*.

The Council of Churches –
with its Departments and Divisions and Commissions –
had taken Isaiah to heart.
They had brought good news to the oppressed and
liberty to the captives.
They had bound up the brokenhearted
and repaired the ruined cities.
They had stood tall as an oak to display God's glory.

And at the end of the 1970s,
40 years after its founding,
spurred on by the Iranian Hostage Crisis,
the Council reached back to its roots for its Jewish brothers and sisters.
And a rabbi called a rabbi and a minister called a minister....

However, the oak was being shaken by high winds –
and not just racism and refugees.
Human sexuality and feminist theology and the ordination of women
were blowing through the faith community.

The landscape was changing.
The Council both led the way
and reflected the changing ways and times.
The oak survives because the oak changes.

Springs in the Desert (1980-2000)

Women were beginning to shatter the glass ceiling.

In the mid-1970s, a woman had been elected president of the Council, and in the 1980s, two more.

Then, in the 1990s, the Council elected an Orthodox president, and in 2000, its first African American.

New life was springing up with new leadership.

The Council was becoming more inclusive.

And not just in the faces sitting around the table but also in its focus.

The Council was moving from an ecclesial, church-focused agenda, ministering primarily to its own constituencies, to a broader witness of social justice and public policy, bringing hope to the wilderness of the world.

And just as the Council had taken a stand for civil rights for People of Color in the 1960s, when a Scout chaplain was dismissed for his sexual orientation, the Council now advocated for civil rights for the gay community.

The 1990s were a testing time for the Council.
Would the oak stand in the midst of the winds of change?
Was it the Voice of the churches, still?

Foresighted leaders in the public arena stood by the Council's side – just as we stood by theirs.

The Council's push for ethics reform in Rhode Island State Government was joined by the United Way and Common Cause, by the League of Women Voters and Hasbro Corporation.

The Council also played a major role in defeating Casino Gambling while keeping the issue from becoming a vote against Native Americans.

Then, with the downing of Air Egypt off our coast in 1999, the disaster fueled the impulse to return to the inclusiveness intended by our founders. And when the State turned to the Council to minister to the families, the Council turned to the Imams. For the first time, inclusiveness included the Muslim community.

The century ended with broad questions about Freedom of Religion, the appropriate relationship between Church and State.

Where were the boundaries?

Could we answer that question focusing on the legacy of Roger Williams?

Some questions would have to wait for the new century, Though the answers would be just as pressing and elusive.

In Search of Fertile Soil (A New Century)

The new century – the new *millennium* – was an expansive time and a cooperative time for the Council.

The shooting of black police officer Cornell Young, Jr., by friendly fire from white officers, was part of a pattern across the country. His killing dominated the first year of the Council's first Black president.

The Council, with the Rhode Island Ministers Alliance, met with the Governor, the Attorney General, and other key players, and together they were instrumental in improving police and community relations.

Advocacy and justice reform had been led by mainline Protestant churches. But now Christian unity meant the embrace of African churches – Pentecostals, Liberians, Nigerians – as well as AMEs and AME Zions. Statewide revivals at Ebenezer Baptist Church in the West End brought everyone together.

In the aftermath of the 2003 Station Night Club Fire, the United Way, corporate funders, social service and advocacy agencies, as well as members of the faith community, trusted the Council's leadership role in bringing healing and restitution. And without the Council's lobbying in the resulting Fire Code regulations – advocacy which prevented houses of worship from being lumped in with night clubs which would have required expensive renovation – many communities of faith would have had to close their doors.

In the meantime, poverty and homelessness were on the rise. Churches and synagogues were opening their doors, bedding down families on their floors, and raising their voices at the State House.

Interfaith conversations were now the norm, enhanced by the Council's collaboration with the Jewish Alliance in founding the Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty in 2008 with its State House Vigils and Poverty Conferences.

For years, members of the faith community had advocated for Marriage Equality, largely outside of the Council.

But by 2013, the Council could no longer remain silent and adopted a resolution advocating marriage as a civil right for all. The Board of Rabbis soon joined the Council in taking a stand, and, together, these *two* giant oaks swayed the General Assembly and Marriage Equality became law in Rhode Island. Again, the question, would the Council hold together – or would it split?

Instead, the Council became stronger. Those who had been hurt by religious views or who thought the church was irrelevant in a modern world were converted to a new understanding of the Council as an agent of God's reconciling love.

Oaks of Righteousness (2017)

The oak tree is not the most massive tree in the forest,
nor the longest living, nor the tallest,
nor the strongest or the fastest growing.
But it is the most insistent and the most flexible.
In most of the temperate world, oak is primary.

It has been argued that civilization has been intertwined with the evolution of the oak.
Its acorns fed our ancestors;
its wood built their houses and towns, wagons and plows;
its ships sailed to new worlds.
its pigment, the ink of Bach's cantatas; its bark, his tanned boots.
It's no accident, then, that Isaiah chose the oak
as a metaphor for righteousness,
for a faithful response to the Spirit's call.

For 80 years,
the Rhode Island State Council of Churches
has sought to be faithful to the ancient prophets –
to offer shade for the oppressed,
to sprout new life in barren places,
to be a Biblical witness to a brokenhearted world.

Where will the Spirit lead us now?
Already the Council is plowing up new fields –
shaping public policy and educating about end-of-life issues;
reaching out to the transgendered community to increase understanding;
preparing congregations to offer sanctuary to refugees;
engaging people in recognizing white privilege.

All this, while advocating for the poor,
and criminal justice reform,
and access to education.
All this, while continuing to connect people with resources.

The Council is not the only oak in the forest.
There are churches and synagogues,
and temples and mosques, all across the world
that stand tall for righteousness.

But in *this* place and in *this* time,
and for the time to *come*,
the Rhode Island State Council of Churches
will seek to be the handiwork of God,
to go in God's name,
to partner in peace,
as an Oak of Righteousness.

May it be so! Amen.

End Note: For fascinating information about the oak tree, read the following: Logan, William Bryant. *Oak: The Frame of Civilization*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2005.