

VCC President's Message

The Rev. John Barton

Peace and Joy to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The State of your Council is strong. Your Council is strong because of the extraordinary leadership. Your Council is strong because you have a very gifted and committed staff, I have been truly blessed to be associated with and work side by side with the more that 200 persons you employ. I am sorry that time does not allow me to recognize each one by name. There are two that I want to lift up Roxanna and Dennis Williams. Their support, long hours and counsel has been a blessing in the life of the Council.

During the year of 400th Anniversary commemorations of Jamestown, your council was busy with a variety of events and programs reflecting on this journey we have all traveled. In May of 2008, the Virginia Council of Churches in partnership with the Interfaith Relations Commission of the NCCCUSA and Regent Divinity School will sponsor a special consultation on "Missiology 1607" with implications for the Church Today. We invited eleven scholars from across the country to present papers and engage in dialogue with the results published in 2009. This is a groundbreaking initiative in the diverse voices that are coming together to prayerfully consider one of the most important aspects of the mission we all share; "How we bring the Good News of Jesus Christ". As we have reflected on or past we have learned many things that have helped to guide where our journey may be taking us in the future. The Council has joined and stands firmly with the six Virginia Native American Tribes seeking federal recognition.

Our audited financials for the year ending January 31, 2011, shows a balance sheet without reportable conditions. Thank you to all our member judicatories, congregations and individuals who support the work of the Council. While, our Council is strong our funding base is fragile and vulnerable. With our current level of support, we are not able to sustain the current work or to meet the challenges that face us in the future. To address these concerns we have taken aggressive actions to open new streams of revenue to support the ongoing work of the Council. The Annual Fund continues to see significant growth in the past year. We launched the Date Palm Society for estate planning, wills and bequests. These efforts are slowly

"The Virginia Council of Churches has inherited the responsibility for developing a movement which was established for the maintenance of our common Christianity! ... The existence of the Virginia Council of Churches is valid proof of a type of Christian unity which will make it possible to maintain at higher level our common Christianity."

**The Rt. Rev. Frederick D. Goodwin
VCC President
Virginia Council News, July 1, 1949**

beginning to bear fruit, yet we still have a long way to go. Many challenges lie ahead. Because we are a council of the communions, their challenges affect us in direct and in dramatic ways. We will need to move even more aggressively in opening new revenue streams of support in the year ahead. We need to develop new ways of communicating and bringing individual congregations into a closer relationship with the Council. We introduced our new Covenant Church program that allows for a greater participation of local congregations as well as provide a new area of support. We have added a new password protected section to our web pages for Covenant Churches to login, providing access to share with each other. More importantly we need to change our thinking, from supporting another agency to do ecumenism for us; to realizing ecumenism is our commitment to one another through this forum we call the Virginia Council of Churches. Councils should not, cannot be as just another “do good agency” that competes with many other valid works for scarce dollars, rather the Council is our means of expressing our commitment to one another as followers of Jesus Christ. In recent years we have witnessed a climate change within the ecumenical movement, and our churches. These changes are challenging the way Councils are funded, their structures and in some cases their mission. During this time of change many Councils of Churches around the country have been forced to downsize and in some cases close their doors. At times the journey we travel may seem overwhelming and discouraging, but we need not feel crushed and hopeless. “For we walk by faith, not by sight”. We have hope and confidence through Christ Jesus. For the God who blesses us with faith walks with us, we have each other in this ecumenical journey; therefore we are not alone. We are privileged sojourners and we pray God will use us to make connections within His Church here in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Ecumenical links are a priority as our world shrinks and our structures change. Your VCC staff continues to seek ways to help our churches and individuals do together what we cannot do alone. We celebrate those councils that have been able to adapt and redefine ecumenism for a new time and place.

We continue to work closely with the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy to address concerns in the Virginia General Assembly. The Center has done an outstanding job in addressing the critical issues surrounding payday lending. We are grateful to Doug Smith for the leadership and voice in this public arena.

The Naomi/Elizabeth Projects continue to be a powerful witness, reaching new mothers in various parts of the state. Peggy Ferguson continues her strong leadership, training new mentors and outreach in Northern Virginia. The Naomi project has received several awards for their work in Northern VA. The work of the Naomi project has captured the attention of many across the country.

As we look to the future, we need to be preparing a new generation of ecumenists. This will require us to look at when and where we hold our meetings. Are we willing to be a new body? For surely if we expand the table to include a new generation of ecumenists we will ourselves be changed.

Rural Family Development has completed another year, with all our Head Start Centers now closed for the season. Ed Rossmore has provided outstanding leadership to this program. The RFD Board continues to search for new ways to meet the emerging needs and the financial support for new programs in early childhood development and a growing settled-out Hispanic population.

The last few years have been a wild roller coaster ride for our Refugee Resettlement office. Earlier this year our office in Hagerstown, MD was closed after a determination by Church World Service and the Department of Homeland Security as being a hostile area for resettlement. For the last two years our office of Refugee Resettlement has resettled more refugees than any other program in the Commonwealth. There continues to be a need for churches to step up as sponsors for refugees seeking to start a new life here in the Commonwealth, I hope you will carry this message back to your churches. Viktor Sokolyuk and the staff deserve high praise for their dedication and long hours under a great deal of pressure, not knowing what was going to happen.

Even with all the exciting work we have been a part of we are called to reexamine and create a new kind of ecumenism. We need an ecumenism appropriate and sustainable for our times. Such a task requires ingenuity and creative thinking, which will not happen unless we are open to the movement of the Holy Spirit among us. It is vital that we begin to witness the reality that Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us. "I can not be all I am, until you are all you can be." We must hear anew the first prayer for Christian unity spoken nearly 2000 years ago. As is recorded in John 17, Jesus prayed that we might all be one that the world may believe.

Today as in every age, the world needs our common witness. How can we, who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior, find our common witness for economic justice, an environmentally sustainable world, and the peaceful settlement of conflict? How can we seek and find the image of God that is created in each of us, respecting one another and the precious gift of life that God has shared with us all? As the Virginia Council of Churches, we look forward to continuing and enhancing our role as a forum where the people of God can reflect together and seek to discern God's will for us in this time and in this place.

It has been a great joy for me to serve our Church and to serve as your General Minister. Thank you for that joy and privilege. May God continue to watch over and bless the Virginia Council of Churches and may the Virginia Council of Churches continue to be worthy of this blessing.

