

February 2007

Housing Trust Fund success!!!

After more than a two year, grassroots advocacy campaign, the City of Milwaukee formally established a Housing Trust Fund on November 28, 2006. Creating an affordable housing trust fund has been a significant public policy priority of the Interfaith Conference for the past two years.

The Milwaukee Housing Trust Fund Coalition, with staffing and leadership from the Interfaith Conference, ran a terrific campaign to establish the Fund. Alderman Michael Murphy led the effort on the Milwaukee Common Council and worked very closely with the coalition. Mayor Tom Barrett also worked with the coalition throughout the process. In a letter to trust fund advocates Alderman Michael D'Amato, an eleven-year veteran of the council, said, "Your effort was the most effective grassroots campaign that I have seen in all of my years in city government."

The city now joins over 400 other cities, counties and states that have established housing trust funds. Such funds generate revenue (often fees on development and real estate transactions) that is dedicated to the development and support of affordable housing and related services for people with lower incomes. The Milwaukee Housing Trust Fund will be kick-started

with up to \$2.5 million in 2007, generated through bonding. The bonds will be repaid with revenue from multiple sources, the most significant being a portion of increased revenue from the Potawatomi Casino and revenue from Tax Incremental Financing Districts (after the city has been repaid for the initial TIF funding).

Our focus is now on ensuring that the Milwaukee fund functions as planned and building support for suburban and regional efforts. To get involved contact Heather Dummer Combs at 414-276-9050 or heatherdc@interfaithconference.org.



Mayor Tom Barrett signs the Housing Trust Fund into law

Second *Common Ground* Conference Reaches Out

The second annual Common Ground Conference on racism and white privilege took place on January 19th. Last year, the CGC drew a large turnout when it was held at UW-Milwaukee. This year the conference was moved to UW-Waukesha to underline our message that racism and privilege are deeply rooted throughout the greater Milwaukee region and that all residents of our area are affected by these concerns. Organizers suspected that the move might reduce attendance (a risk worth taking). Yet, a capacity crowd of three hundred people came out. Perhaps more importantly, our records indicate that the CGC extended its geographic reach. A full 21% of participants came from sixteen different Milwaukee suburbs and another 10% arrived from Madison, Lake Mills and Janesville combined.

This year's Common Ground Conference featured more than thirty spirited presenters, a keynote and outstanding performances by spoken word poets. The most frequently mentioned criticism of this free event was that there was too

much to do! Attendees clearly indicated their appreciation for the day. More than 95% reported that they would like to take part in another conference like it. Participants also admitted that they were affected by the information they received. Nine out of ten people indicated a desire to learn more and nearly the same proportion stated that the conference had helped them to make or maintain a commitment to end racism.

Matters of racial disparity are central to the Interfaith Conference's concerns and priorities. The effects of racism in our community are pervasive and intolerable. This second Common Ground Conference educated a diverse group of people about racism and white privilege. It allowed participants to connect with individuals, groups and organizations active in addressing racism in areas of housing, lending, education, employment, incarceration and affirmative action. We look forward to deepening our working relationships with this committed group in the year ahead.

The old question about the chicken or the egg is still useful in considering many things. Recently, I have been wondering about the “chicken and egg” nature of our personal views about faith and politics.

We are inundated these days with “faith-based” perspectives on political matters. This seems to have increased with government’s focus on “faith-based initiatives,” the need for multiple cable news channels to fill twenty-four hours of programming each day, and the rise in (or rise in awareness about) political activism among politically conservative Christians. It seems that we now continually hear politicians invoke religion. At the same time, many religious leaders call upon us to hold certain political views. In some circles it is explicitly stated that, for instance, as a Christian you certainly must believe (fill in the blank). The Journal Sentinel’s editorial page editor recently addressed this topic.

It is not always easy to see which formed first, our personal political views or our understanding of our faith. I suppose it is perfectly normal to look to one’s faith tradition and scriptures to find justification for something that is already a deeply-held political belief. For instance, in our efforts to oppose the death penalty we often hear scripture-based justification for the death penalty as well as scripture-based opposition. It sometimes makes me wonder how often we change our view on a social or political matter because of what we might learn from our faith.

Speaking personally, I can see certain issue areas where I recall having firmly held beliefs as early as my teen years. It was only later that I discovered that such views were supported by my faith—or at least as I understand that faith.

Perhaps this is more a matter of the values that influenced us as we matured. Often, such values are faith-inspired and

rooted in the beliefs of our family’s faith tradition, even if not overtly stated. It then makes sense that as we mature we would be shaped by those values and practices, form political views, and later discover that those views are, not coincidentally, reflected in scripture and our faith. Of course, many families explicitly teach children the beliefs and expectations of the faith, hoping that such a foundation will shape future beliefs and behaviors.

The challenge for us as people of faith is to be sure we have a good understanding of where our views, values and beliefs are rooted. I always find it troubling to hear my faith tossed about in justification for things that I find to be morally offensive. I suppose the same might be true from the other perspective. That is why we cannot be casual or self-righteous in our references to the religious roots of our beliefs about the world.

My understanding of my faith suggests to me that racism is an offense to God because it insults and denies that which God created. I believe that systems that oppress people and/or mire them in poverty and inequity are wrong because such conditions are not what God wants for this world. I try to share such beliefs without using the “and so says the Lord” tone that we hear from so many religious leaders (some of whom have their own national television shows). They have other purposes and their mission is often one of division.

Through the Interfaith Conference we work together to bring the faith community’s voice (as best as we can represent it) to decision-making bodies and individuals. The Conference is used to share our common values, rooted in what we believe together. Understanding our own traditions so that we better appreciate the foundation of our views helps us to be a more authentic voice in what can seem an overwhelming din of talking heads.

CROP Walk 2006 meets local and global needs

THANK YOU to everyone who participated in the 22nd Annual Greater Milwaukee CROP Walk! On Sunday, October 8th more than 1,000 walkers from over 100 congregations, schools and groups walked through downtown Milwaukee, making an impact on local and international poverty and relief efforts. Walkers and their sponsors raised \$67,400 for the work of Church World Service and donated 17,200 pounds of food for Milwaukee’s Hunger Task Force.

Each year walkers and sponsors from throughout the community support CROP and help to make a difference here at home and around the world. The Greater Milwaukee CROP Walk is one of the longest-running charity walks in the community. It is one of the few opportunities we have to directly make a difference half a world away.

We would particularly like to thank the CROP Committee, Volunteers, Church World Service, Hunger Task Force, John Munger and the Village Ramblers, and the Interfaith Conference staff. Please save the date for CROP Walk 2007 on Sunday, October 14th!



Faith & Ecology Network launched

Rev. Dr. John Strassburger has joined the Conference staff to launch a new and exciting Faith & Ecology Network, building an interfaith network among those who wish to learn more and work together on this vital topic. At a time when more and more attention is devoted to matters such as global warming and stewardship of the Earth, this project promises to grow rapidly.

The project has a particular emphasis on connecting faith communities and people of faith to a deeper understanding of our responsibility to the natural environment, especially in urban areas.

Activities will include education, referrals and resources for interested parties, “hands on” volunteer opportunities and advocacy. Contact John Strassburger at 414-276-9050 or see www.interfaithconference.org for more information.



Health Care Reform a priority for 2007

There is tremendous momentum (and demand) to bring about significant health care reform in our state that will broaden access and control spiraling costs. In partnership with the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Conference will sponsor five community forums that will feature proponents of three major health care reform proposals. These forums will provide an opportunity to get briefed on the three proposals and ask questions. See the Events page at www.interfaithconference.org for dates and locations or call the office at 414-276-9050.

Congregation Action Network is hosting its third annual Advocacy Training Workshop on Monday, March 26th at Underwood memorial Baptist Church in Wauwatosa. See the Events page at www.interfaithconference.org or call 414-276-9050 for more information.

By this summer the State Legislature will adopt a two-year budget for the state. Several issues will be important to CAN in this process. In the state budget process we will keep track of issues related to affordable housing, needed changes to the W-2 program, Treatment Instead of Prisons, sentencing disparity and other issues that address our core concerns of racism and poverty.

Peace & International Issues lecture series will focus on violence

Milwaukee Association for Interfaith Relations co-sponsoring series

This year's annual "Four Tuesdays In March" luncheon lecture series will examine religious understandings of violence. Violence takes many forms in the world today. Three areas will be the focus of the series: poverty (and the growing disparity between rich and poor), war, and the degradation of the environment. Four local religious leaders - Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Buddhist - will share their faith traditions, stories, practices and sacred texts as related to these forms of violence. This analysis will likely reveal a similarity in core beliefs and teachings which may help to mount a common effort to overcome these critical global problems.

This year's series explicitly considers inter-religious perspectives on the matter of violence. The Milwaukee Association for Interfaith Relations is co-sponsoring the series. The public is invited to participate in the "Four Tuesdays In March." Each lecture includes a lunch that begins at Noon. The cost is \$10 each or \$35 to attend the entire series. Each lecture will be held at First Unitarian Society, 1342 N. Astor St.

Speakers are:

- March 6th, Muhammad Isa Sadlon, Islamic Society of Milwaukee.
- March 13th, Bishop Paul Stumme-Diers, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- March 20th, Rabbi Ronald Shapiro, Congregation Shalom.
- March 27th, Rev. Tonen O'Connor, Milwaukee Zen Center.

Please register in advance by calling 414-276-9050.



INTERFAITH CONFERENCE

OF GREATER MILWAUKEE

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Interfaith Conference receives YMCA award

The Conference is very grateful to the YMCA of Greater Milwaukee. On Martin Luther King Day 2007 the YMCA presented the Conference with the Lincoln Gaines Award in recognition of "outstanding leadership in building strong communities." Thank you to the YMCA and to everyone who plays a role in the work of the Conference and the issues we address.

Speakers, Topics galore!!!

Many congregations seek speakers for educational forums, committee meetings, etc. Please do not hesitate to contact the Conference to meet such needs. Staff and committee members can address interfaith relations, affordable housing efforts, racial disparity, health care reform, advocacy, poverty and many other current and important topics. Please call 414-276-9050 to make arrangements.