

Report on my experience as a delegate to the 71st Kentucky Council of Churches Annual Assembly on October 25th and 26th, 2018, at the Jeffersontown Christian Church.

This council has become a model for other councils around the country on how to celebrate diversity in unity, as represented by pastors and lay people attending from across the spectrum of Christian faiths. The theme was “A House Divided” based on 1 Corinthians 1:10, where Paul appeals to the Corinthian church to set aside all discord and center on Christ alone. All the speakers and workshop presenters kept the focus on ways to overcome the polarization and civil discord so pervasive in churches and the culture today. The challenge is how to carry out meaningful dialogue and translate it into effective action to build toward a more civil society.

Church people are increasingly being marginalized in the political and public arena as a leavening force for civil discourse. Many congregations are just as polarized on hot button issues like abortion and immigration as the general public. Unless civil dialogue can be restored in pulpits and pews the church will remain an ineffective voice for social change. Friday’s keynote speaker, Bishop Marvin Frank Thomas of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, addressed the issue of divisions in the church, preaching from 1st Corinthians 1:10-13. Just as Paul admonished that first century congregation, he said dialogue about unity in Christ is good but now is the time for action.

Thursday’s keynote speaker, Rev. Dr. Leah Schade, an Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship at Lexington Theological Seminary, addressed the problem of how to preach about controversial justice issues in a way that promotes civil dialogue within the congregation. Many pastors avoid hot button issues for fear of dismissal or causing division in the congregation. By starting a sermon as a” prophetic invitation to dialogue”, that is, informing the congregation about a controversy without taking a stand, and offering follow up discussions where members’ comments experiences are facilitated, is desired. She said “cultivating trust is the key”; nurturing pastoral relationships, articulating boundaries for civil discourse, and encouraging the sharing of stories.

Five workshops were offered of which you could choose two to attend. I chose one entitled “Poor People’s Campaign: A national Call For Moral Revival”, lead by Pam McMichael, Tanya Fogle, Megan Houston, and Donald Gillett. They gave an overview with slides and comments of the campaign’s 40 days of civil disobedience at the capital building in Frankfort in 2018. Their Phase I objectives were to: change the narrative around poverty and the poor; build a stronger organization; and bring together very diverse people for a common cause. Their Phase II goals are to: continue shift the narrative; build power; and influence elections and policies. They want to work more with congregations by sharing resources and people, as well as bring new life and purpose by being part of a movement.

The second workshop participated in was lead by Dr. Kay Collier McLaughlin, entitled “Talking together: Getting Beyond Polarization Through Civil Dialogue”. Though handouts, singing with her as she played some of her original songs and music from her soon to be performed musical entitled “The Love Umbrella and Rubber Band Me”, and moving about the room to stand by the type of spiritually they best express. She said the biggest problem in society today is how to create an environment where civil dialogue can even get started. Abnormal, dysfunctional behavior has become the new “normal” or “accepted” behavior over the last generation of reality TV, social media, and polarized beliefs. The Myers/Brigs behavioral studies/questions need to be revisited to gauge our level of awareness of others attitudes for a better understanding of each other.

The worship service on Thursday evening was very much enriched by the down to earth sermon by Rev. Paul Prather, a contributing columnist for the Lexington Herald-Leader and pastor of the Bethesda Church in Montgomery County. He admonished us to: keep our speech clean (Eph. 4:29); turn the other cheek (1 Pet. 3:8-9); refrain from judging (Luke 6:3-7) and 1 Pet. 2:2); don't worry (Luke 12:39); be joyful in spite of the circumstances); remember the least of these (Mat. 25:34-36; and love one another with agape love (1 Jn. 4:7-8).

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