

Report of the Executive Director/CEO. February 2017

*Seventy seven percent of Americans believe the nation is divided on the most important values
Gallop Poll. Nov 21, 2016*

*Beyond their disagreements over specific policy issues, voters...differed over the seriousness of a
wide array of problems facing the nation, from immigration and crime to inequality and racism.
Pew Research Center. Nov 10, 2016*

*Most of us live in some version of an ideological silo; the temptation to surround ourselves
almost exclusively with like-minded people who reinforce our preexisting views and biases.
Peter Wehner.*

The Network of Religious Communities is a bit of a misfit. In a time when most of us are focused upon winning an ideological battle, the Network of Religious Communities is focused upon bringing organizations and people with very different beliefs and practices together. In a time when most of us are focused upon spreading stories and rumors proving how terrible those "other people" are, the Network of Religious Communities is working to foster understanding and respect. In a time when we want to separate ourselves as far as possible from those who hold beliefs, values and visions different than our own the Network of Religious Communities has worked to foster cooperation and collaboration. In a time when, as the Pew Research Center has reported, "we are skeptical of progress in many areas", the Network of Religious Communities has held up its purpose of "working together for justice, peace and the common good". Certainly, the Network of Religious Communities is a misfit and out of step with the spirit of our times.

So...what did this out of step organization of misfits accomplish in the year 2016?

First, we brought people together persons from different religious traditions for conversation, sharing and finding ways to collaborate. We brought representatives of the denominations, congregations and religious organizations represented on the board of governors on seven different occasions, for the sharing of food and fellowship, information, conversation, planning and business. We also gathered all of our members for an annual meeting and the 36th Annual Appreciation Dinner.

We facilitated communication and increased understanding among the NRC members and between our members and the wider community. We held Festivals of Faiths and numerous educational programs for denominations and houses of worship, including the staffing a informational booth at the Elmwood Arts Festival. We held a major conference on Spirituality and Healthcare with D'Youville School of Nursing, the Catholic Health System and the Professional Nurses Association. We provided two days of training in Spirituality and Medicine for 175 third year medical students at the UB Medical School. We provided a program on Spirituality and Healthcare for all attending the NRC Annual Meeting held February 4, 2016.

We utilized local media to communicate with the wider community about the teachings, beliefs and practices of the religious traditions located in Western New York. We produced 12 monthly editions of “Kaleidoscope”, a program of and about the religious communities of WNY broadcast over TV 2 and the Time Warner Network; programs included segments on Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Mainline Christianity, Catholic Charities, African American Pentecostalism and more.

We produced 12 editions of “Challenge for the 21st Century”; a program about Spirituality and Medicine broadcast over TV 7 and the Time Warner Network. We produced 52 editions of the radio program “Crossroads”, broadcast over four radio stations every Sunday morning and involving hosts and guests from many different religious traditions and houses of worship.

The Network of Religious Communities member religious communities collaborated together to combat hunger in our region (see NRC Anti-Hunger Annual Report). We operated a food pantry, open to all, and staffed by volunteers from local houses and worship and resident physicians from the Catholic Health System. We provided Food Stamp information, promotions and assistance in Erie and Genesee Counties. We facilitated Summer Food for Children programs and healthy eating classes. We advocated for just and fair legislations to assist the hungry.

We collaborated to provided financial assistance to religious communities in WNY attempting creative new programs to serve the community at large, through the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Riefler Enablement Fund.

Throughout the year we operated an interfaith center at 1272 Delaware Avenue providing a place to meet and office space for a variety of organizations. Organizations having offices in our building are Buffalo Friends Meeting, The League of Women Voters, Indigenous Women’s Initiatives, Rahama and the Western New York Peace Center. We also provide space for Network of Religious Communities programs.

Enabling this and deserving much appreciation is our President, Sue Tannehill and Mary Jane Russell, Treasurer, the NRC officers and trustees, representatives to the Board of Governors, our volunteers and especially Kelly Kowalski, David Bond, Jessica Thorpe and Chris Barbara.

I end this report where I began, with these insightful words.

According to Professor Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, individual reasoning is not reliable because of “the confirmation bias,” the tendency of people to favor information that confirms their beliefs and hypotheses. The only cure for the confirmation bias is other people. “If you bring people together who disagree,” he argues, “and they have a sense of friendship, family, having something in common, having an institution to preserve, they can challenge each other’s reason.”

Stan Bratton

