



The Ohio Council of Churches

An Assessment and Plan for the Future...

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INTRODUCTION:

The Ohio Council of Churches (OCC) has served Ohio for more than 100 years – bringing together Christians across denominational lines for a *Jesus Centered Movement for unity, peace, and justice*.

As the world continues to change around us, the Executive Committee of the OCC wanted to use this year of transition, with the retirement of Dr. Rev. Jack Sullivan, Jr., for an opportunity to reflect on our future direction and build a plan for the future.

While much of this re-visioning OCC's work begins from position of financial difficulty, this report will focus on our assets, relationships, and opportunities first, and will seek to build a direction based on where God is calling us to be.

Section 1: The World as it is...

CURRENT OCC ASSETS & STRENGTHS:

The Council is a coalition of 23 judicatories representing many of the mainline protestant denominations. The Council has some level of engagement from most of our partners in one capacity or another. In the past six months, we have had no engagement from only four of our partner denominations - the Greek Orthodox (Metropolis of Detroit & Pittsburgh), Alliance of Ohio Baptists, and the

Armenian Orthodox Church. In 1-1 conversations with judicatory leads, many expressed a desire for the OCC to continue ministry, but were unsure of its strongest attributes.

Many denominations appreciate a faith-based body that can monitor statehouse, policy, and social justice needs around the state. Others expressed a desire for increased ecumenical relationships and resource sharing. At the same time, many expressed frustration with OCC communication, clear pathways for engagement, and competition for events among membership.

Workgroups and interest areas:

The OCC has passionate advocates on gun violence, death penalty abolition, anti-racism, and mental health. Our anti-racism and gun violence committees meet monthly to discuss the issues. However, they currently do not have a clear strategy to create meaningful change or strategic partnerships. Channeling their energy and passion into a more comprehensive strategy as part of the Council could prove more fruitful to the justice work of our denominations and the Council.

NEEDS OF THE WORLD:



Ohio and the United States are experiencing a rise in Christian Nationalism. This is a well-funded, well organized, political movement that exploits Christian narratives to build political power. Many of the other social issues of our world are currently under this primary movement. Christian nationalism builds on these realities in our world today.

- People feel anxiety (economic, social) about the world today.
- People crave community and relationships.
- The political movement offers clear and concise answers to our worldly concerns.

The economic and social anxiety among our neighbors is very real, Christian Nationalist voices place the blame on LGBTQIA+, immigrants, women, liberals, religious minorities and other marginalized communities and then form deep community among people defined by who is in and who is out. Christian nationalism moves beyond simple disagreement or a liberal/ conservative divide about political philosophy and instead labels those outside of the political

movement as enemies of God, and unworthy to be called neighbor. Social media has only fanned the flames of division, fear and anger.

There is a deep history of Christian Nationalism in the U.S. that has (regrettably) benefited many of our denominations over the generations with a position of privilege and status.

As we seek to prepare the Council of Churches for its next chapter, we cannot fall into the trap of self promotion and restoring our privileged status. We must build up a ministry to prioritize 'the least of these.'

The Council and Our Congregations Moving Forward:

The faith traditions represented by the Council of Churches - and many other ecumenical and interfaith partners have a legacy of proclaiming a new vision for a world that is grounded in human dignity and love instead of division and anger.

To address the rise of Christian nationalism, Ohio needs a strong, Christ-centered voice calling out misuse of Jesus' name to promote division and the concentration of power. To do so, the Council and our denominations need to communicate an affirmative vision for our world.

When the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. Revelation 22:1-3

For such a time as this, the Ohio Council of Churches should prayerfully consider how we can strategically respond to the division and proclaim a world of unity, justice and peace.

PARTNERS IN THIS WORK

Below are statewide **faith-based organizations** engaged in justice work

- **Hunger Network in Ohio** – has grown over the past 10 years into full-time staff and a stable operating budget. HNO is an effective voice at the Ohio Statehouse on economic justice issues and has many relationships with secular non-profits and advocacy partners. HNO works closely with many of the OCC's existing judicatory partners and has been the leading faith voice

on economic justice and other issues on behalf of faith communities.

- **The Poor People's Campaign.** This effort has national staff and in-state volunteer organizers. There is a lot of energy around the PPC in Ohio among faith communities – including regular prayer events at the Ohio statehouse. Their work largely echoes a national policy agenda (top-down) and connects in-state issues into the national strategy as appropriate.
- **LoveBoldly** Works across ecumenical lines to build support for LGBTQIA+ Christians. They engage in advocacy and justice work as well as walking alongside congregations as they explore how to be more loving.
- **Faith Choice Ohio** organizes around reproductive justice issues. Our judicatory partners have nuanced theological perspectives on the issue of abortion. The OCC has historically avoided this topic because of this. However, the OCC should remain open to potential collaboration to illustrate healthy dialogue on a very personal and emotionally charged issue. Faith Choice Ohio works with individuals, parents, and congregations in their work
- **Faith in Public Life-** continues to engage people in Ohio, but no longer has dedicated full-time staff.
- **Ohio Interfaith Power and Light** no longer have paid staff organizing in Ohio and is not engaging Ohioans at this time.

Local Organizing Orgs: Ohio also has local faith-based community organizer groups such as AMOS project (Cincinnati), Greater Cleveland Congregations (Cleveland), and BREAD, (Columbus) among others. These organizations adopt a traditional community organizing approach of how to build power. They also primarily focus on the local level.

Interfaith Orgs: Similarly, there are multiple interfaith associations that do awareness and education locally. The Council has partnered with the Interfaith Association of Central Ohio (IACO) but limited engagement with other communities. There have been efforts to combine the organizers and interfaith associations in the past - but the local work continues to dominate.

Efforts toward statewide collaboration: Multiple organizations have attempted to host regional or statewide efforts to bring people of faith together for more strategic engagement in the work - a role that the Council of Churches could help fill. However, the needs in the local community, and organizational capacity, have long prevented connecting many of these organizations. Also, many of these efforts begin with the concept of inviting people into *their* work or lacking widespread relationships.

Secular partners in justice work.

- **Ohioans to Stop Executions (OTSE)** works to abolish the death penalty. Many faith and legal organizations are members.
- **Advocates for Ohio's Future:** A statewide coalition of about 30 health and human service advocacy groups and researchers including the Ohio Association of Food banks, COHHIO and others.
- **Honesty for Ohio Education:** A statewide coalition of multiple public education advocacy organizations working to promote equity and adequacy in public education in Ohio.
- **AFL-CIO:** While Ohio's labor sector has been dramatically weakened compared to 30 years ago, it is still influential. Many locals, and public/private sector representation are potential collaborators and funders.
- **Ohioans against Extremism: (OAE)** This coalition works against the rise of extremism in Ohio. While they don't directly name it as Christian Nationalism, they are strong voices and strategically aligned in this work.
- **Various Voting Rights Organizations:** Such as Ohio Voice, League of Women Voters, Fair Districts, Ohio Voter Rights Coalition, Ohio Organizing Collaborative, ACLU, and Common Cause - Ohio are potential partners.
- **Ohio Immigrant Alliance:** A key coalition in Ohio on immigration. They have many faith based partners

As we reflect on partners and future relationships, how can the Council build meaningful relationships with other organizations on behalf of our judiciaries for more strategic engagement? How can we avoid duplicating and competing against others and offer something unique and new?

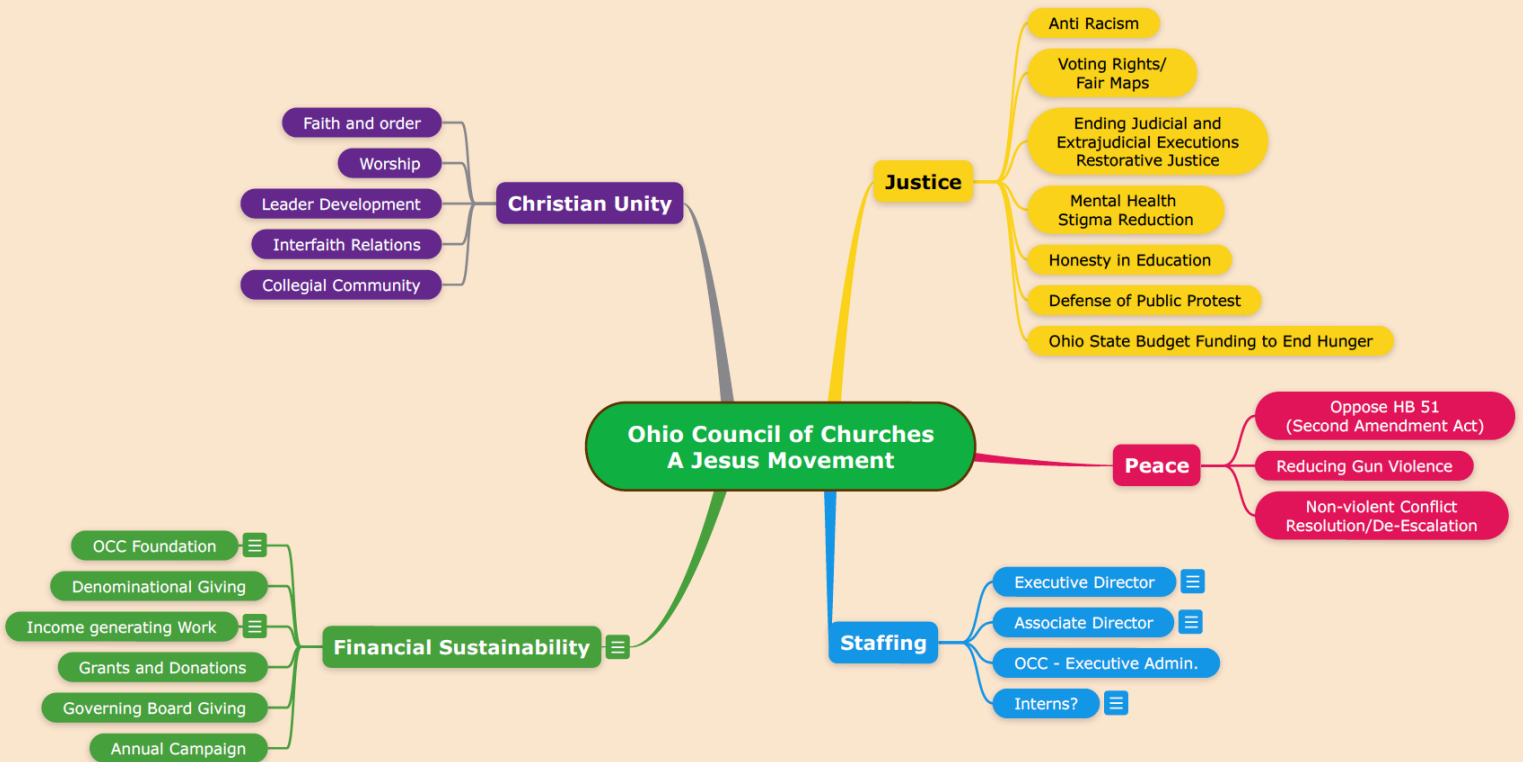
SECTION 2: THE COUNCIL’S WORK

The Ohio Council of Churches staff is currently spread very thin as we have attempted to be everywhere for everyone. In 2022, the Council re-structured itself to have an Executive Director, an Associate Director, and an administrative assistant. There was hope to add a fourth staff person specifically around gun violence prevention, but the funding never materialized. The work has been divided as follows:

Executive Director (ED) – Full-time - 25% Christian Unity; 25% Justice; 25% Peace; 25% Administration and Fundraising;

Associate Director (AD) - Formerly Director of Public Policy, still part-time – 90% Justice; 10% Administration;

OCC Current Executive Administrator (EA) part-time – 33% Coordination of schedules; 33% Administration; 33% Governing Board and Staff Communication.



A categorical summary of the work of the Council of Churches.

ACTIVITY	TYPE OF WORK	ASSESSMENT
Admin.	Internal Admin.	Outsourced bookkeeping and payroll. We are reviewing other overhead expenses and saving money and strengthen work - such as improving fundraising and donor management (end of year giving statements, etc). Admin assistant currently does not do 33% of of their time scheduling.
Speak at judicatory gatherings	Relations	Invitations to speak and engage judicatories and others centers mostly on the personal relationship between the judicatory partner and the individuals at the Council.
Public Ed.	Advocacy	Our engagement has predominantly been keeping abreast of the issues through coalition calls. Have previously submitted
Anti-racism Sunday	Coalitions/ Education	Hosts in October - coordinates resources for judicatories to use. Unsure how many are utilized.
Anti-racism coalition manage.	Coalitions/ Education	Holds monthly meetings on zoom, no clear ties back to judicatories. These meetings have not been able to develop a strategic vision for the work.
Anti-racism/ Christian Nationalism events	Coalitions/ Education	Hosted 3 online events (Jan), in-person event in January, and in-person event in May. In-person events were predominantly Columbus people, and no clear judicatory engagement. The coalition members and staff are organizing participation.
OCAGV manage.	Coalitions/ Education	Inherited a list from OCAGV. Many other gun violence organizations in Ohio. Little connection to judicatories.
P.L.A.N.	External	Submitted a TANF grant and are 1 year into its implementation. The PLAN was developed through the

	Support	gun violence committee, but implemented separately.
Faith & Order Commission	Relations	Very little judicatory engagement. Monthly zoom call. Wrote gun violence statement in 2025, but little action or awareness made by council. (no comms. strategy)
Mental Health Advocacy	Coalitions/ Education	Hosts events, attend trainings. Hosted Mental Health Fair in May. Prevention First Grant was \$1,000. No clear tiebacks to judicatories. Formerly received MHAS grants to coordinate trainings (qualifications changed)
Death Penalty Abolition	Advocacy	Advocated at Ohio statehouse, coordinated congregations to host local events, Former Director Sullivan continues advocacy on this subject through OTSE and Journey of Hope.
Communi-cations	Comms	The Council has no clear communications strategy. Must identify target audience and what mediums to communicate to them and update the professionalism of many of materials. The work currently falls on all staff to develop and distribute through email, SM, and print materials.
Sedgwick	External Support	OCC holds a bureau of workers comp fund, this generates revenue for the council.
Statehouse advocacy	Advocacy	Partner with HNO – host annual luncheon, advocacy days. Most of this work falls on HNO and the OCC walking alongside.
Voter Rights	Advocacy	LWVO partnership, ballot initiative advocacy. Much of the leadership of this work falls on secular partners, and we walk alongside.
Interfaith	Relations	Currently participate in handful of interfaith assoc., build relationship with CAIR and others.

TYPES OF WORK:

The OCC's attempt to do all of the work above has left us spread too thin without clear vision and direction in how we seek to create change. The work above can be summarized as:

- **Internal administration**- fundraising, internal staff relations, bookkeeping and more. What we need to do to keep the lights on.
- **Judicatory/External Support** – shared grant writing, trainings, fiscal sponsorship of new initiatives. How can we support others to do the work collectively that they cannot do alone.
- **Relationships** – building interfaith and ecumenical relationships. Strengthen relationships with existing judicatory partners
- **Coalitions/education** – how to get judicatories to collaborate with one another, and issue areas where we are doing direct organizing.
- **Advocacy** – requires not only the engagement with lawmakers, but the building of relationship and strategy with other advocacy organizations.
- **Communications** – how do we communicate with our judicatories? With the public at large? With the media and lawmakers? Who is our primary audience and how do we effectively reach them?

What are we doing well? During the assessment period, many judicatory leaders expressed appreciation for the Council's potential to lead on justice work and ecumenical relationships. However, our current committee structure has not meaningfully engaged our judicatories. Our anti-racism team has organized stand alone events. We must consider if we wish to strengthen our committees to do organizing work outside of our judicatories or restructure our justice committees to focus more on judicatory collaboration for justice work.

Committees: The OCC currently runs three monthly meetings - gun violence, anti-racism, and Faith and Order.

Faith and Order: The Faith and Order Commission has had 6 judicatories participate in 2026. This committee is named in our governing documents. In 2025, Faith and Order wrote a statement against gun violence, but the commission and OCC did not have an action plan or communication strategy to accompany it. While a great statement, it was a statement into the void without a strategy with media, lawmakers, or our judicatories.

Gun violence: This committee meets monthly and has conversations about different community violence issues and legal strategies. However, there has

been no connection to judicatories and even little connection to our congregations. Within the gun violence prevention movement, there are difficult political realities, which means we need a clear, purpose and strategy. We do not have that.

Anti-racism: This is our most engaged committee. However, they are not well connected to our judicatories and not well-connected to other anti-racism efforts in Ohio. The most successful justice work must be done in partnership with others. The event on Christian Nationalism in May had about 40-50 people in attendance with substantive racial diversity - which is often missing in our judicatory-sponsored events. However, most of the African Americans were from Mt. Olivet Baptist Church - the hosting congregation.

Considerations for our committees:

The Faith and Order Commission work may need to return to the Governing Board. Judicatory leaders are overstretched and if the OCC wants them to engage, we should focus their energy on one meeting - not two. Faith & Order can be re-activated as needed to focus on specific issues for in-depth discernment. This way judicatory leads can appoint individuals from their judicatory with expertise or interest in that specific topic for a limited commitment. **The governing board must consider and approve a new approach.**

In conversation with judicatory and community partners, there is not a lot of energy around gun violence prevention. Our current opportunity for engagement is 'wear orange'. Understandably, many feel hopeless on the issue. **The question for the governing board is if we are called to inspire hope (likely substantial staff time) in this issue or put it to the side and support others who are leading on it.**

Our anti-racism team (ART) is passionate about the work, but lacks a clear direction outside of organizing specific events. They continue to organize and plan events that sometimes conflict with judicatory specific programming. In January, for example, the three ELCA synods, Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio, and the Scioto Valley Presbytery all hosted events within a week of the Council's anti-racism event on similar topics. The ART was not connected to these other events. **The question for the Governing Board must center on strategy for our anti-racism work and what unique role can we offer. Should we actively organize congregations and community members or focus more on engaging and connecting judicatories together?**

SECTION 3: MOVING INTO A NEW FUTURE:

THEORY OF CHANGE:



The Council needs a clear theory of how we will impact the world. [Movement ecology](#) is a theory of change that recognizes that different individuals and organizations can adopt *different strategies* toward the long-term change we wish to see. We are a Jesus-centered movement for unity, peace and justice! **The question that we must answer is how do we *do it*? and how & who are we doing it with?**

Personal Transformation: Engages individuals through charity and mercy work.

Create Alternatives: Establish something new to address a local need.

Changing dominant institutions: Recognizes multiple strategies.

- **Advocacy:** Seeks to engage policymakers in power through relationship, research, education, and stories and influence them to pass better policies.
- **Organize:** Builds new power by engaging under-represented communities to shift power to the people.
- **Electoral:** Change who holds positions of power. (As non-profits, congregations are limited in electoral work around candidates).
- **Protest:** Seeks to disrupt power through peaceful means and draw attention to an issue that is ignored.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Below are a three considerations for the work moving forward.

We don't need to do it all! It is unlikely that the Council of Churches will have capacity to adopt all of these strategies as our primary efforts. This does not mean we can't attend protests, but we are unlikely to be organizing them if we are primarily focused on advocacy or creating new resources for our partners.

The good news is - as the body of Christ - we don't have to do it all! Instead, the Governing Board should reflect on what we could do that others cannot do and how we can enhance our shared witness.

Who are we called to be in relationship with? The Council has strong ecumenical relationships with multiple judicatories. Who is the Council called to build relationships with? Congregational leaders, laity, judicatory leaders and staff? With only 1-2 staff people, we need to be intentional on how we spend our time.

How do we build relationships? Many of our judicatories have strong formal relationships through denominational agreements with one another. We can partner in formal events (commissionings, annual gatherings, etc.), and sign joint statements. There are also more personal relationships over shared work, personal connections, and deep relational work and dialogue. What skills and experience will staff need to build the relationships needed among judicatories? Do we need staff that is a strong presence in worship settings and formal settings, leading workshops and trainings, or building relationships behind the scenes to help build up ecumenical strength?

Potential Staffing Models

Regardless of staffing structure chosen, the director will have to assume administrative and fundraising responsibility. Similarly, a clear communications plan will be needed to guide our work moving forward. The below proposals assume 50-60 hours a week of staff capacity. (30hr director, 20 hour support person). Similarly, staff can engage in other work as needed, but the OCC needs a clear identity of the work we do to strengthen our fundraising efforts.

Influential Director Model: This model relies on the gravitas of the director ability to influence lawmakers and judicatory leaders through their existing relationships and gravitas. This model prioritizes a strong, charismatic director that will be invited to speak by lawmakers, judicatories, and media as a clear moral voice and a representative of our shared community values. Building relationships at the highest levels and answering these invitations will be their primary role in addition to administrative work. The idea is that a strong personality and great speaker will be effective at getting the Governing Board's message and priorities into the world and coalitions will form from a strong personality. This is historically how many organizations structured themselves. The director, with support from our judicatories, are our power. This model will require a support staff person to coordinate the director's talking points, research, and policy specifics (ie. *a policy director*).

Judicatory collaborator Model: This model focuses on a director who can facilitate a public witness through our judicatory partners. The OCC staff will seek to connect judicatory voices to social issues. This model does not engage in general community organizing of congregational leaders or the general public, but will instead equip and connect our judicatory partners and their staff and committees with one another and secular partners to witness to justice. This

director will be supported by a communications and outreach staff person who can assist with effective communications strategy and research. This model will require commitment from our judicatories to engage in specific work and collaboration in an ecumenical fashion.

Community Organizing Model: This model is a more traditional community organizing effort to build a new base of power throughout the state. The Governing Board will set the general direction by identifying key themes and issues to address, and then step back. The director will identify ways to organize people (regardless of judicatory partnerships) who care about those issues. This model could work to engage congregations more directly in local communities and heavily focus on replicating programs congregation to congregation. Christian witness may be less amplified under this model for the sake of the work and coalition on the issues. The director will be supported by a grassroots community organizer.

Judicatory Support Model: This model leans more into a theory of change around creating alternatives. This model would see the director build relationships with judicatories, ecumenical and interfaith partners to identify increased opportunities for collaboration - such as shared printing, utility purchasing, or trainings. The Director would be supported by a grants manager who can help provide fiscal sponsorship to new initiatives and bring organizations together for collaboration. The Director will still speak publicly on justice issues to offer a faith voice to the work, but would not actively organize or develop an advocacy and justice strategy. The director would need to be cautious and strategic about these partnerships.

Focused work: *Relationships*

As the Ohio Council of Churches intentionally focuses the future of our work into a specific strategy of impact, it will allow our staff to be intentional about strengthening existing relationships, and fostering new relationships with other denominations (with particular attention paid to African American traditions and the Roman Catholic Church). Through intentionality, we can foster positive and trusting relationships that offer clear value and opportunity to denominations to engage.

POTENTIAL 2027 OCC OPERATING BUDGET:

This budget allows for approximately 50-60 hours of staff time. Whether this is offered through a 30/20 or two 25 hour employees is yet to be considered. Employee compensation should be further discussed based on skills and experience. This is just a broad overview of what a budget could look like.

Regardless of staffing model, The Council should consider sub-letting office space (HNO is interested) and identifying ways to reduce administrative overhead. Similarly, the Governing Board should work with the new director in developing a budget outline that better reflects our mission and strategy.

Future grants should be explored to fund existing work, not programmatic grants that do not support staff time. Mission should drive funding direction, not the other way around.

SOURCE	AMOUNT	EXPENSE	AMOUNTS
Judicatories	\$90,000	Office Space	\$7,000
Individuals/ grants/ grassroots	\$30,000	Staffing	\$130,000
Congregations/ endowments	\$25,000	Tech fees	\$3,000
Events/Fees	\$10,000	Travel	\$4,000
		Admin/coalition fees	\$6,000
		Programming	\$5,000
TOTAL REVENUE	\$155,000	TOTAL EXPENSES	\$155,000