

## **North Carolina Council of Churches** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **North Carolina Council of Churches**

by Sister Evelyn Mattern, 2006

The North Carolina Council of Churches, founded in 1935, preceded the National Council of Churches, with which it nevertheless has a spiritual affiliation. The state council owes its origin to some remarkable North Carolinians, chief among them Greensboro <sup>[2]</sup>-born H. Shelton Smith <sup>[3]</sup>. Smith, after serving as professor of religious education at Columbia <sup>[4]</sup> and Yale <sup>[5]</sup> Universities, felt called to return home because of, in his words, "the ecumenical concern, the racial concern, and the concern for academic excellence in a region that sold down the river in a terrible war its best people and suffered for a century as a result of it." While teaching at Duke Divinity School <sup>[6]</sup>, he gathered together leaders such as Episcopal bishop Edwin A. Penick, Methodist bishop Paul Kern, Moravian <sup>[7]</sup> bishop Kenneth Pfohl, and the Reverend Trela Collins, executive secretary of the Baptist Sunday School Association.

They envisioned the council as a way to promote fellowship and joint service among Christian denominations. The acting secretary for the council's preliminary forum was Christian novelist and educator Liston Pope <sup>[8]</sup>. Prominent black leaders such as Harold L. Trigg also worked with the North Carolina Council of Churches in the early years. From the beginning, the North Carolina Council of Churches sought to balance theological concerns with social action. Its programs have addressed such matters as "spiritual awakening," outreach to the unchurched, religious education, foreign missions, greed and society, promotion of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and ecumenism.

The council has garnered public attention and even controversy mostly because of its stands on issues related to race, peace, labor, criminal justice, migrant farm workers, gays and lesbians, and other social concerns. For its first 20 years, it was the state's only interracial religious assembly. Its 1977 hearings and follow-up document questioning the immorality of the tobacco industry attracted national attention. Since the 1970s, the North Carolina Council of Churches has maintained a legislative liaison at the General Assembly <sup>[9]</sup> and publishes a legislative newsletter as well as a general-purpose one.

All the mainline denominations, including Roman Catholics <sup>[10]</sup>, whose dioceses joined the organization in 1977, belong to the North Carolina Council of Churches. Despite the early involvement of Baptist leaders, the Baptist State Convention declined to join, though some individual Baptist churches have remained active.

Sixteen member denominations provide financial support for the council and are represented on a governing board in proportion to their denomination's number in North Carolina. Delegates and denominational leaders occasionally issue joint statements and position papers, but most council work is practical and program oriented, conducted through working committees made up of volunteers or through special projects that attract outside funding. Such projects have included an Office of Economic Opportunity program that grew into a multistate organization for migrant and seasonal farmworkers, a refugee resettlement program, an interfaith disaster recovery committee, a program providing health care for low-income children, a program to train church members for ministry to persons with AIDS, People of Faith against the Death Penalty <sup>[11]</sup>, and the JUBILEE project, which convenes churches to assist with and monitor welfare reform.

#### **Reference:**

Sister Evelyn Mattern, SFCC, *We Come Together by Working Together: The First Fifty Years of the North Carolina Council of Churches* (1985).

#### **Subjects:**

Religion <sup>[12]</sup>

#### **Authors:**

Mattern, Sister Evelyn <sup>[13]</sup>

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Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[14]</sup>

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