FROM THE DIRECTOR

The 2019 year was full – full of news, of change, of challenge, and of an increasing sense of division. I’m sure I don’t have to remind anyone that it’s an election year, and elections by their nature push people into separate camps as we rally behind preferred candidates, dig in our heels, and head to the ballot box. We’re led by pundits and politicians who point their fingers and demonize colleagues who hold different views. But it’s not just ideological or political division we live in – neighborhoods in cities, towns and rural areas all over the country also are (still) segregated by income level, ethnicity, and race, resulting in schools, parks, churches and shopping centers that are equally segregated. The Center’s staff sees that in dramatic ways every time we pull up a demographic map of a visiting group’s home community and gasp out loud at the starkly segregated visual before us. Division and polarization are deeply entrenched in the world around us. »
But this is not the world God created, the world of beauty in its diversity, the world where the Holy Spirit called people of many languages and cultures together on the day of Pentecost and gave birth to the Church, the world we are called to build even in the face of new and complicated ways we have become separated from each other as we enter 2020.

The Church is not called to choose and remain within a familiar and comfortable place, whether it be ideological, theological, or geographic. God has issued a clear call to the Church to create something different – to be a catalyst for breaking down barriers and bringing people together around our common humanity.

The Center’s work is all about training, and equipping, and calling people to come together – about giving people from very different cultures, races, economic classes, ages, and theologies the opportunity to get to know each other – to break through division and isolation and offer experiences of community that bridges division.

Social researcher and Professor at the University of Houston School of Social Work Brené Brown’s recent research is on belonging. She contends that “...at the very heart of belonging is spirituality – not religion, not dogma, but spirituality – and a... specific tenet of spirituality, which I believe cuts across faith and denomination and belief system. And by ‘spirituality’ I mean the deeply held belief that we’re inextricably connected to each other by something greater than us. And that thing that is greater than us is rooted in love and compassion – that there’s something bigger than us and that we are connected to each other in a way that cannot be severed.” (Brené Brown, On Being with Krista Tippett, January 2, 2020)

She then offers a challenge to the faith community:

“He or she who chooses comfort – over courage and facilitating real conversations in towns and cities and synagogues and areas who need it; when you choose your own comfort over trying to bring people together, and you’re a leader, either a civic leader or a faith leader, your days of relevance are numbered.” (Brené Brown, On Being with Krista Tippett, January 2, 2020) »
The Center challenged the way I view theology and ministry in my personal life, and forced me to truly think of mission outside the box. This internship drew me out of my comfort zone and because of that I got to know amazing people I wouldn’t have known otherwise.

Emma Kate Lander  /  Senior, Susquehanna University, 2019 Summer Intern

FROM THE DIRECTOR

In this national moment where division and isolation have become a new norm, taking the risk to be connected to people different from us is not simply “the right thing to do” – it is urgent and essential.

Creating space for people to learn each others’ stories and to be curious about another’s perspective is at the heart of The Center’s ministry. We are blessed to see almost every day what happens when fostering deep connection between people causes the fierce walls of division to come crashing down.

Here are a few recent snapshots:

▪ After a long and hot summer day of playing outdoors together, kids from Missouri and Baltimore City who had been strangers hours before fell asleep on each other’s shoulders on the bus ride home.

▪ A very silly Halloween fashion show and dance party put on by a local city school that had kids and teachers and neighborhood volunteers laughing and dancing along.

▪ A group of college students here for a winter service trip have an honest conversation about the opioid epidemic with staff from a non-profit recovery center.

▪ During a monthly neighborhood kickball game in Northeast Baltimore sponsored by a group of Presbyterian churches, a young girl reluctantly joined in the game, although she’d never played before. Everyone (both teams) encouraged her to play and pumped her up to go up to bat. In rain boots too big for her, she scored every time she kicked and had the biggest grin the whole time.

In our current moment of fear, division, and isolation, the ministry of The Center is not simply a way to fulfill a church need for a one-time mission project or a short-term mission experience. It is about equipping the Church to be the Church that God is calling us to be - a catalyst for love and compassion, across the deep divides that separate us.

There is nothing more urgent than that.

Rev. Kate Foster Connors
Executive Director

“The Center challenged the way I view theology and ministry in my personal life, and forced me to truly think of mission outside the box. This internship drew me out of my comfort zone and because of that I got to know amazing people I wouldn’t have known otherwise.”

Emma Kate Lander / Senior, Susquehanna University, 2019 Summer Intern
“The Center has been instrumental in our church’s life and growth this year. We’ve realized a need to be more connected to our community, and with training from the Center, have embarked on a whole new journey of learning about our community and its needs. Most profound for me at this stage of our journey is watching the members of our church team become invested in what they’re learning and in figuring out how to help, even when it’s difficult. They’ve also been growing in how to share their faith and why we’re doing all of this. I can’t wait to see where the journey takes us next!”  

Rev. Kimberly Secrist Ashby / Pastor, Fallston Presbyterian Church

Photos: Tracy Watts
Thank you for making our “Connect at The Center” campaign such a success! Thanks to our individual, congregational and organizational donors, we surpassed our goal of raising $100,000 in 2019. Thank you for your generosity.

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- Presbyterian Women of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic
- Second Presbyterian Church
- Springfield Presbyterian Church
- Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church

Tom Wilcox
Andrew Yeager-Buckley
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“I can’t say enough about our experience at The Center. Our youth and adult sponsors were both inspired and challenged by working with the good people of Amazing Grace Lutheran Church. We learned about following Jesus by forming relationships across boundaries of race, class, and background. Our time at The Center inspired us to stay in Austin for our mission “trip” this summer, to practice meeting people who are different than we are and form relationships that can lead to true, long-term partnership.” 

Ellen Williams Hensle / Westminster Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX
I have spent my whole life trying to rebel against God and established religion. I felt that religion left no room for conversation and questions. To be honest – I am kind of mad (not really) at you guys for making me feel the closest to God I ever have. I felt it as you sat and listened and respected our questions....I am thankful for this experience and how it will format my next steps in spirituality.

Clare Connell / Youth participant, State College Presbyterian, State College, PA
2019 Statistics

434

Mission Experience Participants from 12 States

Visiting groups in 2019 were from:
MD, PA, VA, WV, NY, OH, IL, MO, MA, NC, TX, WA

Led Justice Tours for all visiting groups, and for:

Big Tent participants, PC (USA) /
Cuba Partnership, Presbytery of Baltimore /
First Presbyterian Church of Howard County /
Office of the General Assembly Staff, PC (USA) /
Second Presbyterian Church of Baltimore /

104

The Center sent 104 people to visit the PCUSA Office of Public Witness in DC

OUR STAFF PREACHED AT:
Ark & Dove Presbyterian /
Brown Memorial Park Ave. Presbyterian /
Chestnut Grove Presbyterian /
Christ Memorial Presbyterian /
Dickey Memorial Presbyterian /
First Presbyterian of Howard County /
Granite Presbyterian /
Havenwood Presbyterian /
Hunting Ridge Presbyterian /
Hope Presbyterian /
Light Street Presbyterian /
Northminster Presbyterian /

OUR STAFF CONSULTED, TAUGHT WORKSHOPS, AND LED RETREATS ABOUT MISSION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR:
Catonsville Presbyterian, Catonsville, MD /
Center Partner Congregations /
Dickey Memorial Presbyterian, Baltimore, MD /
Fairlington Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, VA /
Fallston Presbyterian, Fallston, MD /
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THE CENTER IS A MISSION INITIATIVE OF THE PRESBYTERY OF BALTIMORE

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Emma Kate Lander, Summer Intern

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JT Paulk, Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore
Ed Skinner, First Presbyterian Church of Annapolis

THE VISION OF THE CENTER
We envision a world of just communities and thriving congregations.

THE MISSION OF THE CENTER
Our mission is to inspire and equip churches and individuals to engage boldly with their neighborhoods - to get involved where Christ’s love and justice are already at work.
The Center

c/o The Presbytery of Baltimore
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Baltimore, Maryland 21239

2019 ANNUAL REPORT