

A Short History of NAEIS

Note: This history was written prior to the 1997 name change to the National Association of Ecumenical and Interreligious Staff (NAEIS) and so it uses NAES, the 1971-1997 name. This document will be updated to reflect the complete history of the organization.

Introduction

The roots of ACS and NAES go back farther than the fifty-plus years recorded here. In the early minutes of the Employed Officers Association, a forerunner of NAES, is the notation:

"No meetings are so 'full of ginger' as are those of the EOA. It is a royal fellowship, and promises much for the welfare of the work. The sparks fly sometimes, when the discussions get warm, but there is always the undercurrent of choice brotherliness."

One speaker at an early meeting challenged the group to set its sights high and live up to the future that awaited it: "Realize your prophetic function! I predict that there will yet be such a gathering as this of a thousand men!" An unknown editor added the notation to these minutes, "If ever the 1,000 mark is reached, it will be discovered that among the best men of the legion will be some women!"

Even such forward thinkers as our unknown editor did not foresee, however, the contribution that would be made later in the century by their black brothers and sisters, or that the council movement would grow and deepen to encompass work with other faith groups to bring about God's vision of a just community empowered by God's caring spirit which we call love.

We look back with appreciation and gratitude to the contributions of which we are the heirs, and look ahead to discern the responsibilities entrusted to us by our God, who waits for us in that future.

We are grateful to Grover Hartman for the careful and thorough work he has done for us in researching and recording the history of NAES, so that we may share this rich historical record with our new members.

Roots: The Sunday School Movement (1824)

The National Association of Ecumenical Staff has deep roots in the movement of Christian cooperation in cities and states. The first appearance of employed staff was in the Sunday School Movement. Organized in 1824, the American Sunday School Union, based in Philadelphia, had staff from the beginning. By 1830, the Union had established a network of Sunday school

missionaries — employed persons engaged in the development of Sunday schools in practically every state from Pennsylvania to the Mississippi River.

After the Civil War, the missionaries moved into the trans-Mississippi West with leadership in the eastern half of the nation passing to state Sunday school associations, the first being that in Illinois organized in 1864. Predominantly lay led and a model for utilization of volunteers, the Sunday School Associations moved slowly toward limited paid staff. In 1892, a fellowship of state and local Sunday school executives was organized, and for thirty years provided peer support and exchange of ideas when it met in connection with the national Sunday school conventions and through newsletters and other communications.

The Church Federation Emerges (ca. 1890)

Meanwhile, there was developing across the country another ecumenical structure known as "the church federation." After 1890, these cooperative instruments began appearing in major cities and in some states. In 1891 five denominations created the Interdenominational Commission of Maine, the first federation or interchurch organization within a state; and in 1895 the Federation of Churches and Christian Workers of New York City emerged.

In distinction from the Sunday school associations which had only the loosest ties with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the federations from the first were instituted by congregations and denominations. The federations became an important element in the call for the establishment of a national linking organization which was effected in 1908 with the formation by denominational action of the Federal Council of Churches.

Early in 1915, the Federal Council called to its staff Dr. Roy B. Guild, and made him director of field promotion. On January 7, 1915, the Council's Administrative Committee appointed Fred B. Smith to chair a Special Committee on Federated Movements. Smith and Guild had already developed a working partnership in the Men and Religion Forward Movement. The Committee immediately set as its goal:

1. Organizing, inspiring, and standardizing local and state federations. No community with two or more churches, they declared, should lack a federation.
2. Bringing the various kindred Christian organizations into closer fraternal cooperative relations with one another and the Federal Council.

The Church Federation Secretaries Council (1915)

In making his first annual report at the end of 1915, Dr. Guild noted with enthusiasm the first conference of church federation executives at Columbus, Ohio, December 7-9, 1915. Eleven men representing city federations, and two from states, had attended together with five national staff and members of the Special Committee. They discussed financing, comity, Bible study, boys' work, missions, community surveys, delinquency and recreation. The budgets reported ranged from \$800 in Dayton to \$12,000 in New York City. The salaries varied from \$100 (part-time) to the top of \$3,500. The sixteen leaders gathered at Columbus formed an organization which they called "The Church Federation Secretaries Council," and Morton C. Pearson of Indianapolis was elected as the first chairman.

The Secretaries Council met for the second time on December 5, 1916, with eleven state and local executives and four from national staffs responding to the roll call. They received badges giving them the privilege of the floor for the Federal Council's quadrennial assembly running December 6-11. A motion by Dr. E. Tallmadge Root of Massachusetts sought the inclusion of the executive secretaries as "corresponding members of the Federal Council or as denominational representatives."

In 1917, the executives council met in Pittsburgh and listed twenty members. The organization's letterhead carried the slogan: "For a trained ministry – representing all churches in service to the whole community." Executives were in attendance from Atlanta, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Duluth, Erie, Gary, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Louisville, Lowell, New York City, Pittsburgh, Portland (Maine), San Francisco, Toledo, and the State of Massachusetts. Dr. Morton Pearson was chosen to represent the executives on the Special Committee on Federated Movements.

The Association of Executive Secretaries (1920)

The period from 1910 to 1920 was marked by a rapid increase in the number of federations. Dr. H. Paul Douglass once observed that one third of the federations in the United States began in those ten years. This growth was reflected in the expansion of membership in what, by 1920, was called "The Association of Executive Secretaries." In that year, forty-two city federations, two county organizations, and six state bodies were represented in the annual meeting of the A.E.S.

Employed Council Officers Association (1934)

On the Christian Education side, the fellowship of state and local Sunday school association executives, which dated from 1892, disappeared with the organization of the International Council of Religious Education in 1922. The ICRE had brought the denominations fully into the education picture, for its board was drawn on a 50-50 basis from territorial units in the states and Canadian provinces, and from denominational structures. A working relationship among the professional Christian educators was once more effected when in July 1934 seven men representing the Sunday school association heritage meeting in Tipiwakan (Cottage) at Conference Point Camp (Williams Bay, Wisconsin) founded the Employed Council Officers Association. A year later, fifteen state executives and seven International Council staff persons gathered under the banner of ECOA. Among the leaders in that session were Harry C. Munro, executive secretary for the Committee on Field Programs of the ICRE, Otto Mayer of the ICRE, who served as staff executive, and Hayden Stright of Minnesota, who was elected president.

International Field Committee (1935)

Through the remaining years of the decade of the 1930's, there was steadily increasing interchange among national staffs and state/regional personnel related to the Federal Council, the International Council of Religious Education, and the Home Missions Council. The iron curtain of separation setting apart these ecumenists was wearing thin.

On January 12, 1934, seven interdenominational executives conferred informally on means to secure greater unity within the cooperative forces in the states. Key persons in these conversations were Fred B. Smith and Roy Guild from the Federal Council of Churches; Mark Dawber and W. R. King from the Home Missions Council; and Harry Munro from the International Council of Religious Education. A year later, in 1935, the Intercouncil Field Committee was formally established with Dr. King as chairman.

New national leadership appeared in Christian education when, in 1937, Dr. Forrest L. Knapp began his work as director of field administration in the International Council, and John B. Ketcham became associate director. In 1938, following the death of Fred B. Smith, and the retirement of Dr. Roy Guild, J. Quinter Miller became the head of the Federal Council's field program.

Association of Council Secretaries (1940)

From 1935 to 1940, simultaneous sessions of the Employed Council Officers Association (ECO), and the Association of Executive Secretaries (AES) were held at the annual meeting of the International Council of Religious Education, at the Federal Council's quadrennial assembly, and at Conference Point Camp in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. In 1940, at a July meeting at Conference Point Camp, ECO and AES were merged to form the Association of Council Secretaries (ACS). O. M. Walton of Cleveland was elected the first President by the 53 executives attending the organizing meeting where it was reported that there were then 58 city councils, and 22 state councils, serving 23 states and the District of Columbia.

It is interesting to note that this organizing conference of ACS called for the merger of national interdenominational agencies into one ecumenical organization. This call was phrased in a statement by Dr. Ralph C. McAfee of Detroit, which declared: "Protestants do not and cannot understand the maze of interdenominational overhead. We must move as rapidly as possible to a single federal structure in America." Thus, at its inception, the Association of Council Secretaries, in bringing together from states and cities practitioners of ecumenism from divergent traditions, previewed the merger of the national bodies consummated in the founding of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in 1950.

For twenty years after its creation in 1940, the Association of Council Secretaries, in close relationship to and serviced by the Intercouncil Field Committee (especially J. Quinter Miller and John B. Ketcham), held annual meetings at Conference Point Camp, and sought to strengthen and encourage the professional leaders of the nation's regional and local councils. The annual meetings were well attended and lively as participants wrestled with the issues of the World War II era and post-war problems demanding a united approach.

Furthermore, ACS took leadership in involving its members and their councils in the faith and order movement beginning with the historic North American Conference on Faith and Order at Oberlin College in 1957. This conference outlined the role of state, local and national councils in theological discussions of the national and world Church. Out of it came the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches, and the landmark document "The Ecclesiological Significance of Councils of Churches."

National Association of Ecumenical Staff (1971)

The decade of the 1960's brought new issues and new structures into the ecumenical picture. Organizations to secure civil and human rights, urban ministries, and interdenominational consortia less broad than the historic councils of churches, emerged in strength and needed to be comprehended. With Vatican II, Roman Catholics entered the ecumenical scene as a major factor. The word "council" for them had a different meaning, and hence the associations which they entered tended to take the name "conference of churches," or one of the many other titles now utilized by ecumenical organizations.

Furthermore, Jewish leadership, which had been involved in a limited number of local structures, became more generally a participant in ecumenical relationships. Rising to the new situation within the movement for inter-religious cooperation, the Association of Council Secretaries, in its 1970 annual meeting held in June at Conference Point Camp, voted to terminate the thirty-year old fellowship in favor of a more inclusive structure, the National Association of Ecumenical Staff. The new organization, established the following year, took as its purpose:

1. To mobilize the creative energies of ecumenical staff for reflecting on critical concerns, devising strategies for addressing these concerns, mobilizing resources for achieving results and enriching fellowship.
2. To develop standards and guidelines for identifying and reporting these concerns.
3. To arrange an annual conference for exchange of information, discussion of common concerns, devising strategies, celebrations, and training.
4. To provide communication through such publications as "On Location" (now Corletter), "Living Ecumenism," conference reports, special papers, and other mailings to members.
5. To recruit and help place personnel.

Overall, NAES declared that the Association now had been established: "... to provide creative relationships among persons serving professionally in the ecumenical ministry of the Church by enriching their fellowship as committed workers in this specialized field, encouraging mutual support and promoting personal and professional growth."

During its first years, NAES organized highly relevant annual conferences, accomplished some effective networking on imperative concerns, strengthened a supportive fellowship among professional workers in ecumenism, and produced publications of clear-cut significance in sustaining ecumenism at the grassroots (some in cooperation with the Commission on Regional and Local Ecumenism (CORLE) of the NCCC, now Ecumenical Networks Office). This period has also seen a great increase in the number of local ecumenical structures which have become interfaith in order to represent the entire religious community.

NAES sees as one of its most important goals for the future that of being a herald for closer ties among all sectors of humankind for mutual benefit and common attack on problems which threaten the future of all.

National Association of Ecumenical & Interreligious Staff (1997)