The Keystone Connection

A Message to the Conference

July 28, 2026

Members and Friends of Keystone Conference,

"…all [persons] within our territories are protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of their consciences…" (George Washington)

Following his inauguration in April 1789, various religious bodies wrote to the new President, George Washington. Among them were Presbyterians, German Lutherans of Philadelphia, the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, Baptists from Virginia, Moravians in Bethlehem, Quakers in Philadelphia, Roman Catholics, and the German Reformed in Pennsylvania. Their letters expressed gratitude and admiration for Washington while also revealing the particular hopes and concerns of their communities. Virginia Baptists worried about religious liberty in the face of the established Episcopal Church. Quakers reaffirmed their commitment to pacifism. Some Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, and Congregationalists emphasized the place of Jesus Christ in the leadership of the new nation.

The German Reformed were no exception. They wrote, in part, "As it is our most firm purpose to support in our Persons a government founded in justice and equity…we shall continue in our public worship and all our devotions before the throne of Grace to pray that it may please God to bless you in your person, your family, and your government, with all temporal and spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus." They are among the few groups to invoke the name of Jesus, though only as the source of divine blessing rather than as the foundation of the republic itself.

The Presbyterians of Massachusetts and New Hampshire were more explicit. They prayed that Washington's administration would "restore true virtue, and the religion of Jesus to their deserved throne in our land," and establish America's civil and religious liberties on an enduring foundation. Like many New England Congregationalists, they envisioned an explicitly Christian nation.

Washington consistently declined to embrace that vision.

Although an active member of the Episcopal Church (even if he ceased receiving Communion after the Revolution), Washington carefully distinguished his personal faith from the responsibilities of public office. In his replies to these religious bodies, he repeatedly affirmed that every citizen should be free to worship according to the dictates of conscience. His language for God was intentionally broad and inclusive—"Divine Providence," "Almighty God," "the Great Disposer of Events," "the Great Father of Lights," and similar expressions. Significantly, he never invoked Jesus in these official responses. Instead, he left explicitly Christian language to the churches themselves while emphasizing religious liberty as the proper concern of government.

Washington was hardly a flawless figure. His correspondence with the Moravians reflects the paternalistic assumption that Native peoples should be Christianized, and we know from other sources that he enslaved human beings. He was unmistakably a man of the eighteenth century, shaped by both the Enlightenment and the blind spots of his era.

Yet on the question of religion and public life, he is consistent. Again and again, Washington resisted invitations to define the United States as a Christian nation. He envisioned a religious people, but not a government that privileged one faith over another. Religious conviction, he believed, flourished best when protected by liberty rather than directed by the state.

A collection of these remarkable letters survives today. The exchange with the Moravians is perhaps the most uncomfortable to read through modern eyes. By contrast, Washington's correspondence with the Hebrew Congregation in Newport—especially his assurance that the United States would give "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance"—remains one of the nation's clearest and most enduring statements of religious freedom.

Peace,

Carrie

Rev. Dr. Carrie Call
Transitional Executive Conference Minister
Keystone Conference

Ready to Make an Impact?

Join one of our 2027 Annual Meeting committees and help us build on the success of this year's meeting. Your ideas, skills, and enthusiasm can make a difference!
If you have any interest in serving on one of the following committees, please reach out to Sue Creswell at sue@keystoneucc.org.

- Accessibility - Golf Carts/Scooters/Eyes on all things accessible
- Excursions - Tours/Events taking place outside of venue
- Fun/Fellowship - Open Mic/Food Trucks/Poetry/Mystery Night/Morning Walk - coordinate whatever events and be responsible for having them take place
- Hospitality/Welcome - Greeters/Assistance with directing people/Assistance with Registration
- Mission - Choose and Manage a Mission for the event
- Registration - Prepare for and manage registration for event
- Rooming - Assign rooms at the dorm
- Speakers - Responsible for coordination of 100% of the details and management of our guest speakers
- Tech - Work with location to set up tech needs for all meetings
- Slides (subgroup of Tech) - Compose and arrange slides to meet meeting needs
- Vendors - reach out to, manage and organize outside and internal vendors
- Visual Arts - Elevate the event with decorations
- Volunteers - Compose write ups to draw volunteers, coordinate volunteers during meeting
- Worship - Work with Carrie to plan worship for event
- Music (subgroup of Worship) - Work with worship to arrange music - will be reaching out to churches for bands, bell choirs, etc
- Youth Service Team - Compose write ups to draw youth service team members, arrange schedule and co-ordinate youth while on site
- Youth childcare - Arrange for childcard, plan for Playground (if wanted) plan schedule for younger attendees