

FOREWORD

JONATHAN ZUR | President & CEO,
Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities



What a year 2015 has been in the march toward a more inclusive and just Commonwealth and country. This Holiday Issue of *Unite Virginia* comes out at a time when LGBTQ people have unprecedented rights, visibility, and acceptance. This progress can be seen from courtrooms to board rooms, from classrooms to living rooms.

Yet, there is so much more work ahead to achieve full and lasting equality. Workplace and housing discrimination against LGBTQ people is still legal in Virginia. Transgender people – especially People of Color – face disproportionate violence. Bullying in schools remains a persistent and painful reality for LGBTQ students. And while more people are finding support when coming out to family and friends, too many still face rejection from their parents and religious communities.

It is sometimes hard to assess when to celebrate and when to feel overwhelmed by the work that still needs to be done.


I find the history of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities instructive here, especially as we mark our 80th anniversary as a nonprofit organization serving the Commonwealth. Back on November 25, 1935, a group of clergy known as “The Tolerance Trio” who had been traveling the country spoke on the campus of Lynchburg College. Remarkably, nearly 1,000 people were in attendance to hear this Rabbi, Priest, and Minister team speak about the value of interfaith understanding. Imagine a gathering of that size, for that cause, at that time.

But the people there did not just come to be passive listeners: they were so motivated by what they heard that they went back to their homes, schools, workplaces, and communities to start local chapters of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). Those gathered on that Monday night in 1935 could never have known what they catalyzed in the ensuing decades. But it didn't happen by accident. It happened because people invested their time, their finances, and their passion for a mission that is as critical today as it was 80 years ago: that of promoting understanding and respect.

Over the years, NCCJ catalyzed efforts to bring together religious groups during and after World War II, to bridge racial divides in the 1950s and 1960s, to empower women leaders in the workplace, and to address bullying in schools based on sexual orientation. This evolution is part of the reason that NCCJ in Virginia re-launched as the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities nearly a decade ago, to reflect our broad and deep work that helps schools, businesses, and communities achieve success through inclusion.

In the same way as that 1935 gathering was a pivotal moment for diverse religious groups, the publication of *Unite Virginia* represents a key step forward in informing, connecting, and engaging Virginia's LGBTQ community and allies. With our support, *Unite Virginia* has the power to be a catalyst for continued progress in the years and decades to come.

Let's get to work!


Jonathan C. Zur
President & CEO
Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities