

STRIB VOICES

RACIAL EQUITY

How the Minnesota Council of Churches repeated its oldest mistake

It's a pattern: Institutions pledging to confront racism, only to retreat when the costs become too high, the discomfort too great or the political climate too fraught.

By YOHURU WILLIAMS

In 1993, the Minnesota Council of Churches announced a bold intention: to support congregations in becoming “deliberate and intentional about their identity as an anti-racist institution.” Those words – spoken by Lou Schoen, then-director of the council’s Commission on Life and Work – signaled what could have been a transformational era of truth-telling within Minnesota’s faith communities. Yet within two years, the council quietly stepped back from that work, overwhelmed by the weight of the commitment it had made.

It would take another quarter-century – and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 – before the council reclaimed that promise in a more public and determined way, launching an ambitious statewide “Truth and Reparations” initiative intended to address historical harms with honesty, humility and moral clarity around Black and Indigenous communities in Minnesota. The Minnesota Council of Churches pledged that truth telling would be the centerpiece of its work. And the public face, moral compass and community anchor of that commitment was the Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, a citizen of the Stockbridge-Munsee band of the Mohican Indians and the council’s program co-director of racial justice.

Last month, just days before Thanksgiving, Jacobs was told his position was being eliminated. This was on the heels of the council’s other co-director of racial justice, the Rev. Pamela Ngunjiri, leaving the organization.

It was a stunning decision – one that represents not only the removal of a respected leader, but the repetition of a long and painful pattern: institutions pledging to confront racism, only to retreat when the costs become too high, the discomfort too great or the political climate too fraught. For faith institutions, this retreat is especially damaging. When corporations backpedal on diversity pledges, we call it cynical. When churches do it, we must call it what it is: a betrayal of spiritual values rooted in justice, shared humanity and truth.



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARI • The Minnesota Star Tribune
The Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs discusses the history of Fort Snelling State Park memorial for the 1,600 Dakota people imprisoned there after the 1862 Dakota Conflict during a 2020 tour. Last month, Jacobs was told his position at the Minnesota Council of Churches was being eliminated.

Jacobs knew this history well. Through his “Healing Stories” work and his Sacred Sites tours, he reminded Minnesotans that healing begins with honesty – that trauma, when brought into the light, loses its power to divide. “Stories heal because they make invisible pain visible,” he taught. “The listener and storyteller are both healed by their acts.” His work invited congregations to confront genocidal violence against Native peoples, treaties broken by the state and the complicity of the American church – especially the white church – in upholding systems of white supremacy.

He was also clear about the stakes, especially for faith communities. “We have to be the prophetic voice for our time, now,” Jacobs said in 2023. “I hope that we can.”

The Minnesota Council of Churches, with this decision, has shown that it cannot – or will not.

Institutions of faith have long been entangled in a cycle of shallow commitments followed by abrupt, painful retreats. They make sweeping statements in moments of crisis, but when the work grows difficult, when the energy wanes, or when the political winds shift, they abandon the very communities they pledged to serve. That cycle is as old as the church in America, and as contemporary as this dismissal. For Jacobs – who has devoted his life to exposing these historical harms – the irony is tragic.

The council’s decision is more than an administrative restructuring or a budgetary adjustment. It is a repudiation of the values it claimed

to uphold. And it comes at a moment when truth-telling about race is under assault nationwide – when DEI programs are being dismantled, when the teaching of Black and Native histories is being censored, and when leaders who dare to speak uncomfortable truths are punished for doing so.

The council pledged in 2020 that it would not be part of that retreat. Now it has chosen to join it.

It is true that the work of racial justice is larger than any one individual. But it is also true that people of color have disproportionately borne the weight of this labor for generations. Jacobs stood in that long lineage – as a healer, a truth-teller, and a steady presence in a state still wrestling with the legacy of its violence against Indigenous and Black communities. His departure leaves a vacuum that cannot be easily filled.

Racial justice work is always either an invitation or an indictment. The Minnesota Council of Churches now finds itself on the wrong side of that divide. Its decision raises a painful but necessary question: What becomes of a truth and reparations initiative when the truth teller is pushed out? And where does the trail of broken promises lead when the institution that vowed to confront its history instead chooses silence? Minnesota deserves answers. And Jim Bear Jacobs deserved better.

Yohuru Williams is a distinguished university chair, a professor of history and founding director of the Racial Justice Initiative at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

The Minnesota Business Coalition for Racial Equity is sunsetting. Our work is not.

A look at five years of achievements to build upon.

By JAMES BURROUGHS and LULETE MOLA

In 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, more than 80 companies across Minnesota came together to establish the Minnesota Business Coalition for Racial Equity (MBCRE).

The coalition was founded under the leadership of James Momon, a Minnesota-based equity and inclusion leader, with a shared commitment to advancing a new and courageous approach to racial equity in the business community. From its inception, the MBCRE set out to confront the deep inequities that have long shaped the lives of Black Minnesotans.

Over the past five years, the MBCRE’s members, as business leaders, have aligned to take collective action against the racial disparities embedded in our economy and institutions.

Today, the community faces a renewed moment of strain. Access to resources has grown more precarious, public commitments have waned and many Black-led initiatives are being asked to do more with less – precisely as the need for trusted, community-rooted responses grows more urgent.

As the MBCRE nears its sunset on Dec. 31, leaders are charged with rebuilding momentum in a significantly changed political landscape.

That’s why the remaining assets will seed the Black Economic Prosperity Endowment, stewarded by a former MBCRE partner, the Black Collective Foundation MN (the Collective). This first-of-its-kind fund in Minnesota is dedicated to advancing Black economic well-being, recognizing that Black-led organizations doing essential, community-responsive work are too often forced to operate with inadequate and unstable support.

This endowment is intended to help counter that reality – uplifting the partnerships the MBCRE has built and sustaining initiatives that face challenges and uncertain conditions today. As the Collective carries the work forward, we have the rare vantage point of seeing both the distance the MBCRE has traveled and the road yet ahead.

In the beginning

In the early days of the MBCRE, members held “fil-

ter-free Fridays,” confronting uncomfortable truths together. Meeting via Zoom (because the pandemic was still very real), leaders pushed past corporate niceties to challenge one another and examine racial gaps embedded in hiring practices, leadership pipelines, philanthropy and policy. Those conversations were as necessary and transformative as they were difficult.

From there, working with tri-chair colleagues, Reba Dominski and Lee Anderson, we created a long-term strategy anchored in four pillars: work place, philanthropy, allyship and policy. The four groups met regularly to compare best practices and develop tools for businesses across Minnesota to advance equity in practical, measurable ways.

Now, as this valued MBCRE era draws to a close, there is deep humility and gratitude for what the coalition has accomplished and for the member leaders who helped lay the foundation for continuing change.

These achievements were the work of a coalition, and yet the efforts were particularly propelled when Tiffani Daniels, then a brand manager at General Mills, joined as our managing director in fall 2021. Together, the MBCRE achieved a host of tangible outcomes, including:

- Support for the passage of the CROWN Act addressing bias based on natural hair styles.

- A campaign that helped direct \$3 million in deposits to First Independence Bank, strengthening its capacity to invest in empowering community.

- Three cohorts of the Minnesota Black Fellows, developed in collaboration with the Partnership, in Boston, to grow and retain Black midlevel leadership statewide.

As we look ahead, one truth guides us: The work MBCRE began must endure. The assets invested in the Black Economic Prosperity Endowment will fund wraparound services for economic empowerment programs, support self-determined Black institutions and businesses, and fund policies that strengthen economic mobility for generations to

come. While the Collective celebrates Black culture and Black-led change, it also offers many initiatives, training and engagements that serve everyone.

Lessons learned

In its brief five-year existence, the MBCRE taught us lessons that will live on:

- **Change requires both courage and tenacity.** It is one thing to talk about equity. It is another to align strategy, resources and power to make it real.

- **Racial equity is economic prosperity.** The cost of inaction – estimated at \$287 billion in Minnesota alone – is too high for any of us to ignore.

- **Collective leadership is our most powerful tool.** Progress happened when business leaders showed up repeatedly, even when the work was uncomfortable or slow.

- **The Black community must lead its own solutions.** For progress to be lasting, the voices, institutions and leadership of Black Minnesotans must be centered.

We close this chapter with gratitude – to the founders who had the courage to act, the partners who showed up month after month, and the leadership and communications team who fueled the coalition’s day-to-day work. The greatest thanks go to the community itself, which held the coalition accountable.

In the coming months and years, we ask business leaders across the state to continue supporting this important work by investing in the Black Collective MN and the Black Economic Prosperity Endowment.

The MBCRE’s legacy will live on, and with continued collective action, Minnesota can become the state it aspires to be – one where health, wealth and opportunity are shared by all.

James Burroughs is a founding tri-chair of the Minnesota Business Coalition for Racial Equity, and senior vice president of government and community relations and chief equity and inclusion officer at Children’s Minnesota. Lulete Mola is a social change strategist and philanthropist who co-founded and leads the Black Collective Foundation MN, advancing community power and equitable philanthropy.

FRAUD IN MINNESOTA

We should all be demanding answers to the questions raised by this 23-year-old YouTuber

Nick Shirley’s viral video raises more troubling questions about Minnesota’s fraud epidemic and what the state is – or isn’t – doing about it.



ANDY BREHM
Columnist

Minnesotans are known to appreciate the local angle in national news stories. That perspective certainly shows up in this newspaper a lot. It makes sense. We’re proud of our state. And we like living here. Minnesotans like me enjoy when the country is talking about the special place we call home.

But in recent days, there was no local angle to the biggest social media story out there – 23-year-old YouTuber Nick Shirley’s viral video documenting apparently egregious displays of day care fraud being perpetrated in Minnesota’s Somali community. No, Minnines was the entire angle of the story. And the picture was not pretty.

When it comes to the monetary enormity of the fraud committed in Minnesota in recent years, our ability to be shocked has probably passed. The U.S. Attorney’s Office in Minnesota, which has the most credibility of any agency on this issue, has already predicted the total could be nearly \$9 billion in stolen taxpayer dollars. That’s nearly 2% of Minnesota’s annual GDP, and is real money you and I work hard for that is meant to help needy Minnesota families. It’s only natural to be outraged that our state government let so much of it fall into the hands of fraudsters. My blood has been boiling for a while now.

But what made it boil even more was what stood out to me while watching Shirley’s video, which has over 100 million views on X: how extraordinarily little Minnesota state government does to prevent this kind of obvious fraud from happening. And by little, I mean nearly nothing. You’d almost think the Walz administration just didn’t really care. It was painful to watch an out-of-town kid do the kind of simple due diligence in a single afternoon

that state agencies should have been doing with rigor for years.

In one now infamous scene, Shirley visits the Quality Learning Center in south Minneapolis, which the video notes has received roughly \$4 million in funding from the state. But while the facility is apparently licensed for 99 children, Shirley could not find one. He visited other state-funded day care sites around the city, too, and found them to also be absent of minors, the reason they receive our tax dollars in the first place. It was alarming and compelling footage.

Some have argued Shirley’s evidence is potentially circumstantial. Fine. Minnesota media should be digging in on these claims and either substantiating or disproving them. The manager of the Quality Learning Center told reporters Shirley visited his facility during off hours. In another conflicting explanation to that one, Tikki Brown, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, initially said the day care had actually closed last week. Taxpayers deserve a decisive and truth-

ful explanation.

But what we do know is that it would not be hard for a day care facility in Minnesota to perpetrate the kind of fraud Shirley believed he recorded in his YouTube video. As former state legislative auditor Jim Nobles recently wrote on these very pages: “For example, we saw documents – paper attendance sheets filled out by child care staff and used to claim payments from the state – that were suspect on their face. Yet the state paid the claims without any independent verification of how many children had been served. This permissive approach made it easy for fraudsters to steal.”

Even if these facilities are indeed serving actual children, which I find hard to believe, it’s still hard to comprehend how they are receiving tax dollars to do so.

The Quality Learning Center referenced above is so incompetently mismanaged that they spelled “learning” as “learing” in the sign over their front door. Did Walz’s inspectors, who claim to have visited the site, notice that before sending them more



EVAN VUCCI • The Associated Press

Nick Shirley speaks during a roundtable meeting with President Donald Trump on antifa in the State Dining Room at the White House on Oct. 8. A recent video by Shirley has gone viral.

checks? During its first licensing review in 2022, the center racked up more than 25 violations and continued to be flagged for numerous violations over the years apparently without funding consequences. This day care, if not up to malfeasance, is enough of a dump to have gone out of business long ago. But public money likely kept it afloat.

Former Minnesota Gov. Arne Carlson recently said, “The taxpayer is entitled to the same quality management we expect of business.” Quite right. Can you imagine if a private enterprise had doled out billions of dollars to phony vendors without stan-

dard financial controls and oversight, as the Walz administration did? Shareholders would revolt. Executives would be fired. Federal regulators would be welcomed in. Reform would be put in place at every level. Minnesotans must demand nothing less of this inept state government that has failed them. This catastrophe demands we get answers to the kind of tough questions Nick Shirley is rightly asking. Now.

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