

New York Conference, United Church of Christ
COMMISSION ON ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS
Annual Report, June 2022

ECUMENICAL OUTREACH

North American Partners

- We continue partnerships with the United Church of Canada, the Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, sharing programs, resources, and information whenever possible.
- Rev. Howard Cain has been our interface with the Eastern Ontario Outaouais and the Nakonha:ka Regional Councils of the United Church of Canada, and has kept abreast of the continued restructuring of the regions. Rev. Jan Jorgensen, ordained in the UCC, is serving the Kahnawake United Church in the Montreal area.
- The Reformed Church in America is also engaged in a 2-year plan of restructuring, which will likely make it more difficult for churches to hold dual affiliation. Meanwhile, five additional RCA churches have become dually aligned and have joined the Reformed Association of the NY Conference UCC.

NY State Council of Churches (NYSCOC)

We continue our financial support of the NYSCOC, where Rev. Peter Cook serves as Executive Director, Gary VanKennen serves as President of the Executive Committee, and Rev. Alan Dailey represents the NY Conference on the Council and serves as Vice-President of the Executive Committee. The NYSCOC provides tools for community organizing and legislative actions for faith-based organizations. More info can be found at nyscoc.org.

Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau (EKHN)

We are blessed to celebrate our 15th anniversary of partnership with the EKHN at the 2022 Annual Meeting! Many thanks to Rainer Brunssen, Rev. Birgit Hamrich, Jessica Kogoi, Jonas Pabst, and Dr. Wolfram Wirbelauer for joining us at Silver Bay; to Rev. David Seiple, Rev. Geoffrey Black, and EKHN President Dr. Volker Jung, for sending video greetings; and to Rev. Detlev Knoche and other members of the EKHN's UCC Partnership Team for their continued support. Other highlights:

- Zoom Meetings Regular meetings have been held to share our experiences of the pandemic and offer support. The EKHN has continued to hold monthly "Meet and Pray" services for their partners around the world, which have provided spiritual encouragement and a sense of unity in Christ.
- Internships We were greatly saddened that, in spite of yeoman efforts by the First Congregational Church in Ithaca, the US government did not come through with a religious worker visa in time for Dominik Koy to serve here. Visas have been increasingly difficult to secure for visiting pastors. There has been discussion about whether we might have more success by coordinating with other conferences and requesting visas from the national setting of the UCC. Time will tell whether this rich program can be continued. Churches interested in hosting an intern in the future should be in touch with Sue Frost, sfrost@uccny.org.
- Gospel Choir Born out of our relationship with the EKHN, the UCCNY Gospel Choir works collaboratively with friends in Germany and Wisconsin to share the Gospel through music. Much of this has been done virtually during the pandemic, but in the coming months, the Rev. Carolyn Blair, Musical Director, will be spending a 3-month sabbatical with the Wisconsin Gospellers.
- Youth Exchange Plans are underway for a visit from EKHN youth in July and August, which will start in NYC, continue to Camp Fowler in the Adirondacks and then to Western NY, and will include a service component.

Kirchenkreis Berlin Stadtmitte (KKBS)

Now in its sixth year, our partnership with the KKBS has remained strong and energized. Some highlights:

- We are inspired by the establishment last year of the “House of One” in Berlin, a place of worship for Christians, Jews and Muslims.
- Chris Slomski from Berlin returned to the Greenpoint Reformed Church in NYC in the fall of 2021 to resume his project of translating materials from English to Polish for the surrounding community, which has a large Polish-speaking population.
- Alexander Benatar, a German-American from Berlin and a student of Theology at the University of Marburg, serves as Seminary Intern at the Fort Washington Collegiate Church. Because he has dual citizenship, he did not need a visa to work in the US. He shares a rich background in law, international relations, South Asian studies, communications, and interreligious dialog, as he participates in church life in New York.
- Silke Radosh-Hinder, the KKBS Assistant Dean, participated in a panel discussion, "Dismantling Discrimination: The Role of Faith Communities in Transforming Society" on May 12, 2022, in a webinar coordinated by Intersections International.
- From April 24 – May 1, 2022, a delegation from Berlin spent 10 intensive days of learning in the NYC area, focused on the theme: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Melva Victorino, our coordinator extraordinaire, once again put together a stellar program. Many thanks to the churches and ministries that offered hospitality and insights for our guests.

UEK Forum

Rev. Martha Koenig Stone serves as Co-Chair of this national steering committee for the UCC’s partnership with the Union of Evangelical Churches (UEK) in Germany. This year marks our 41st year of *Kirchengemeinschaft* – that is, ecclesial communion – between the UEK and the UCC. A celebration of the 40th anniversary this bond took place via Zoom during the 2021 General Synod. Our partnerships with regional and local church bodies in Germany are built on this relationship.

United Reformed Church, Northern Synod, United Kingdom

Rev. Chris Lawrence continues his work with InnerChange.org, building intentional missional communities in places of high density/low income populations where church presence is weak. In these “Urban Villages,” Christians who live on adjacent streets gather ecumenically to collaborate on projects that help marginalized people in their own neighborhoods. One project this year sent 15 cyclists on a circuit of Central Park to raise funds for the creation of a permanent green oasis/community garden with live music performances for seniors living in a 20 floor apartment building in East Harlem. Chris is in regular contact with folks in the URC Northern Synod, who are doing similar work, which helps to inform efforts in both locations.

Puerto Rico

Maria Vives keeps us abreast of needs and developments in Puerto Rico. One long-term goal is to see whether we might re-establish ties with former UCC churches there.

INTERFAITH RELATIONS

The Commission has struggled to offer leadership in the realm of interfaith relations, especially in these last two years of pandemic. We welcome your thoughts on how to promote interfaith conversations and programs, in the local church and in the Conference setting. Meanwhile, we are aware of many local interfaith efforts by UCC members and groups, and have tried to support them whenever possible:

- The Rev. Lori Keller Burns continues to work with the Network of Religious Communities in the Buffalo area, sponsoring dialogs to counter fear, increase knowledge, and promote peace across faith communities. Their executive committee issued a powerful statement denouncing the racial hatred that led to the recent shooting in Buffalo, and promoting “individual and collective action that seeks to eradicate attitudes of supremacy and systems that perpetuate it, and to establish a united, vibrant community that looks out for the spiritual and material wellbeing of all.”
- Rev. Mark Lukens and Rev. Dwight Wolter are both active in the Interfaith Institute on Long Island. Current programs include: Women’s Peace Interfaith Peace Delegation to Afghanistan; Children of Abraham youth events in the Bellmore, Merrick, and Oceanside school districts; Emergency Response teams for Hate Crimes and mutual support; Podcasts:” We our Your Neighbors.” In addition, they hosted one UCC specific event that was organized by Melva Victorino, in which Dr. Faroque Khan, former chair of the IFI and the Islamic Center came met with German pastors to speak about Muslim-Christian relations.
- In collaboration with the NY State Council of Churches, Gary VanKennen, Howard Cain, and Peter Cook continue to monitor the ongoing human rights abuses in India and the persecution of Christians, Muslims, and all non-Hindus. 2021 was the most violent year on record for Christians in India. At the same time, COVID has taken a huge toll on the people there, but international relief efforts and charitable contributions have been severely restricted by the repressive nationalist government. Nevertheless, we were able to donate \$2,000 through our office of Global Ministries to the Evangelical Hospital – Khariar, in Odisha. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has requested that India be designated as a Country of Particular Concern.
- In an act of prophetic witness, this Commission endorsed the “Declaration for a Just Peace between Israel and Palestine,” drafted by the UCC Palestine-Israel Network in response to pleas from our ecumenical partners in the region. The resolution was adopted by UCC’s General Synod in July, 2021. By naming the occupation of Palestine as “sin” and “apartheid,” this resolution drew international attention to the ongoing escalation of human rights abuses there and sparked conversation in many other church bodies. We are now in the implementation phase of the resolution, and a host of webinars on the issue have been held throughout the year. Coincidentally, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has caused renewed attention to the illegal occupation of Palestine. Congregations interested in learning more about the issue are encouraged to visit uccpin.org.

FAREWELL TO THE REV. DAVID GAEWSKI

The Commission wishes to thank David for his leadership in these last 10 years. We have been blessed in so many ways by his wisdom, his gifts, and his hard work. He shared with us: deep affection for the UCC and appreciation for our history and structure; courage in proclaiming and living out our call to promote social justice within and beyond the Church; passion for creative networking and bridge-building with other denominations and faith communities and organizations; enthusiasm for developing our formal partnerships and our impromptu collaborations; extensive connections with the individual congregations and pastors of the Conference; and a willingness to learn and try new approaches in sharing the Gospel. We thank God for his time with us, and we offer our blessing for the next part of his journey.

Respectfully submitted by the Rev. Martha Koenig Stone, Chair, on behalf of the Commission:

Rev. Howard Cain
 Rev. Peter Cook
 Ms. Sue Frost
 Rev. Ryan Henderson

Rev. Lori Keller Burns
 Rev. Chris Lawrence
 Rev. Mark Lukens
 Rev. Prabhu Sigamani

Ms. Melva Victorino
 Ms. Maria Vives
 Rev. Dr. Ruby Wilson
 Rev. Felicity Wright