

New York Conference, United Church of Christ
COMMISSION ON ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS
Annual Report, June 2023

ECUMENICAL CONNECTIONS

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 commission sent a donation to help with the translation of the Bible into the Mohawk language.
- The Reformed Church in America is 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. Peter and Gary attended the World Council of Churches Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, in August.

Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau (EKHN)

- Gospel Choir In the summer of 2022, Rev. Carolyn Blair spent 3-months as Sabbatical Pastor at First Congregational Church, Waukesha WI. This was an offshoot of Carolyn's work with the NYC Conference Gospel Choir (which was born from our partnership with the EKHN), and the Wisconsin Gospellers (who have a partnership with the *Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz* --EKBO).
- Visits to EKHN Many thanks to youth workers in Frankfurt and Offenbach, who hosted Rev. Ryan Henderson in a planning session for youth exchanges. Thanks also to Rainer Brunssen, Rev. Birgit Hamrich, Jessica Kogoi, Jonas Pabst, and Dr. Wolfram Wirbelauer for hosting Randy and Martha Stone, who visited the Frankfurt region for a few days in July 2022.
- Leadership Transition Rev. Birgit Hamrich has left the Ecumenical Center in Frankfurt to take on the position of Dean in the Deanery of Büdinger Land (northeast of Frankfurt). We wish her well in her new position. She is succeeded by Rev. Christina Schnepel, who is serving as the new Officer for Europe, USA and the Action "Hope for Eastern Europe.
- A delegation from the EKHN, including Rev. Christina Schnepel, Rev. Detlev Knoche, Director of the Ecumenical Center, Rev. Volker Jung, President of the EKHN, and Mrs. Claudia Jung, will be visiting the NY Conference in July, 2023. They will then attend the UCC General Synod in Indianapolis as well.
- Internships We hope to revive this program as the US restrictions on visas for religious workers loosen in the coming years.

Kirchenkreis Berlin Stadtmitte (KKBS)

- Visit to Berlin In August, 2022, Peter Cook visited KKBS partners in Berlin, in connection with his trip to the World Council of Churches. Christoph Schmid, Transatlantic Partnership Coordinator for the KKBS, will attend General Synod in Indianapolis in July, 2023.
- Covenant Renewal After six years of partnership, the KKBS and the NY Conference have decided to renew our covenant and extend our partnership. A new covenant document will be signed in July, 2023, at General Synod.
- Leadership Transition Berthold Höcker will be retiring from his position as Superintendent in December, 2023. Silke Radosh-Hinder and Matthias Lohenner will succeed him as co-Superintendents.

Evangelische Kirche in Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz (EKBO) and Evangelische Landeskirche Anhalts (ELA)

- In October, 2022, Melva Victorino coordinated a visit to NY City for a delegation from the Berlin area, including Church President Mr. Joachim Liebig (Protestant Church of Anhalt); General Superintendent/Regional Bishop Ms. Theresa Rinecker (Goerlitz Region of EKBO); Rev. Dr. Christof Theilemann, Director of Berlin Mission and Ecumenical Center; Rev. Ms. Barbara Deml, Deputy Director of Berlin Mission; Ecumenical Officer; and Alexander Benatar, Representative of EKBO. Their itinerary included a wide range of churches and ministries in the Metro Association. Although we do not have official partnership with these churches, we are connected through their partnerships with several other UCC Conferences.

EKD Forum (formerly UEK Forum)

- Rev. Martha Koenig Stone serves as Co-Chair of this national steering committee for the UCC's partnership with the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD). This year marks our 42nd year of *Kirchengemeinschaft* (ecclesial communion) between the *Union Evangelischer Kirchen* (UEK) and the UCC. Because the UEK has now been subsumed into the larger EKD (which includes not only the Reformed and United churches in Germany but also the Lutheran churches), our forum now has a new name.
- As this report is being written, a delegation of six from the UCC is on the way to the *Kirchentag* (an international gathering of Protestants from all over Germany and their ecumenical partners from around the world), held this year from June 6-11 in Nuremberg. Dr. Randall Stone is representing the NY Conference at this gathering and will attend a luncheon hosted by the EKHN. Rev. Traci Blackmon will lead a workshop on "Black Lives Still Matter and serve on a panel on "Theology between Crisis and Catastrophe"; the delegation will host an open mic session on what it means to be a "Just Peace Church"; and Rev. Blackmon will be the preacher at an English language communion service, led by members of the UCC delegation along with Adele Halliday of the United Church of Canada and several German partners from the EKD.
- Rev. Ute Hedrich is now serving as Executive Secretary of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and Head of the Middle and the Far East, Australia and Pacific Desk. Ute visited our Cleveland and Washington DC offices in May, 2023, and coordinated the planning for and hosting of the UCC delegation to *Kirchentag*. We look forward to working with her in the years to come.

United Reformed Church, Northern Synod, United Kingdom

Rev. Chris Lawrence continues his work with InnerCHANGE East Harlem, a small ecumenical community in NYC that is pioneering a new initiative with partners in the UK and other parts of the USA. Called “urban village” they are hoping to foster debate and practical initiatives around the crisis of local churches in inner-city locations that have disconnected from neighbors, because of the almost total absence of local congregation members who still actually live within these neighborhoods. InnerCHANGE has established a 501(c)3 called EL BARRIO HOMES, an investment prospectus for those interested in supporting us with interest free equity-linked loans for 7 year terms to help make deeply affordable housing an option for church members being pushed out of their neighborhoods. Chris is hosting conversations in the US and UK on Zoom about leaning into the neighborhood, particularly inner city neighborhoods in larger cities. By mid 2024 they hope to have material in the form of recorded webinars and podcasts ready for distribution. The idea is to grow the conversation about how URC and UCC congregations in these sorts of neighborhoods might reimagine mission in order to become “hyper local.”

Puerto Rico

Maria Vives keeps us abreast of needs and developments in Puerto Rico. Damaris Whitaker has moved back to Puerto Rico and is our contact there. Recovery from the multiple hurricanes has been slow. The Commission has sent another financial donation to help with relief efforts through a group called Proyecto Matria.

Liberia

The Commission helped to support the Rev. Dr. Ruby Wilson on a trip to Monrovia, Liberia in April 2023, where she spent two weeks teaching seminarians.

INTERFAITH RELATIONS

- Rev. Lori Keller Burns continues to work with the Network of Religious Communities in Buffalo.
- Rev. Mark Lukens and Rev. Dwight Wolter continue to work with the Interfaith Institute on Long Island.
- 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. Gary spent two months in India earlier this year. We are concerned about the persecution of Christians, Muslims, and other non-Hindus, some of which is supported financially by Hindu nationalists here in the US.
- The Commission stands ready to assist local churches in their efforts to connect with persons of other faiths, counter fear, increase knowledge, and promote peace across faith communities. Please let us know of your projects and needs.

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