

# **Unitarians and Universalists at the United Nations**

By Bruce Knotts

Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have been involved with the United Nations from its beginning. The diplomat who actually wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was John Peters Humphrey<sup>1</sup> a Unitarian and member of the Unitarian Church of Winnipeg Manitoba Canada. Another Canadian Newton Bowles was a founder of UNICEF<sup>2</sup>. I spent many hours talking with Newton about the founding of UNICEF. The first UUA General Assembly voted to support the United Nations in its important work.

Unitarian Universalists have had an office at the United Nations since 1962. In 2021 the office was closed and in September 2022 the UUA ceased to have a continuous presence in New York at the United Nations. The only remaining international UU presence at the UN is the International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women. What follows are some of the achievements UUs have accomplished at the UN and how we lost our office and influence at this global body.

With the passing of Harry Belafonte, I'm reminded of our work together. The UU Office at the UN together with Harry Belafonte and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights launched the UN Decade of People of African Descent committed to end structural racism around the world. In addition to Harry Belafonte, Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter, and the family of Tamir Rice and many others spoke at this important event.

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Peters\\_Humphrey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Peters_Humphrey)

2 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/legendary-un-adviser-newton-bowles-held-record-for-service/article4786015/>

As co-chair of the NGO (Civil Society) Committee on Human Rights, I played a key role in establishing the UN Decade of People of African Descent: 2015-2024. Harry Belafonte was a keynote speaker at our inaugural event: Confronting the Silence: Perspectives and Dialogue on Structural Racism against People of African Descent Worldwide. The recording of this event is well worth viewing.<sup>3</sup> At least listen to my remarks, my introduction of Harry Belafonte, and his wonderful speech. (6:14 - 20:53) I feel the path that we are taking with the United Nations using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights working for diversity, inclusion and integrated efforts of us all to solve common problems, such as climate change and nuclear weapons is the way to move forward.

In addition to founding the UN Decade of People of African Descent, the UU office at the UN also established sexual orientation/gender identity human rights at the UN. When I started work at the UN in January 2008, I was determined to end the discrimination I'd faced in the Department of State due to my sexual orientation. The UN was planning to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris in September 2008. I attended planning meetings which discussed the human rights of everyone except for LGBTQIA people. I kept raising my hand and demanded the inclusion of LGBTQIA people. Slowly after many meetings, people begin to accept my proposal. The most important was Sister Joan Kirby, a Catholic Nun. She championed my cause, and I was given the first ever workshop on LGBTQIA rights at the conference in Paris. At the last moment Sister Joan Kirby made me a speaker on a much larger round table discussion. I spoke to a Catholic official from the Vatican who told me he was gay and supported everything I was doing. I spoke to the Swedish Ambassador who said that the European Union planned to propose a draft

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3 <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1k/k1kizhtslm>

resolution at the UN General Assembly to condemn violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. When we returned, we met regularly at the Mission of Norway to the UN where we planned the resolution that was adopted on December 18, 2008. I was at that General Assembly.<sup>4</sup>

The UU office at the UN played a key role in the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which has recently indicted Vladimir Putin for War Crimes. Elaine Harvey, UU of Kingstone Ontario, Canada, and John Washburn of New York, both older White people, led the faith-based caucus to establish the International Criminal Court. Both went to Rome for the negotiations for the Rome Statute which established the International Criminal Court.<sup>5</sup> They worked especially hard to ensure that women would be protected. Most of the cases that have come before the ICC have been about violence against women.

The UU Office at the UN insisted on gender equity. Every year, we hosted two workshops at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women<sup>6</sup> which takes place every year in March. We were the only organization which routinely included trans-women.

The UU Office at the UN was part of a large UU network of international engagement. This included the International Conference of Unitarians and Universalists which brought together UUs from around the world; the Partner Church Council which brought American congregations together with UU congregations in other countries; and the only remaining UU international organization, the International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women which I am proud to represent at

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4 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/12/18/un-general-assembly-statement-affirms-rights-all>

5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rome\\_Statute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rome_Statute)

6 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>

the United Nations.<sup>7</sup> Rev. Carol Houston lives in New York and attends meetings when she can.

Our work was accomplished with a minimal staff plus volunteers and interns. I served as the Director from 2008 to 2022. We had 6 interns during the academic year and 4 during the summer. We recruited interns from New York University, Columbia, Fordham, Adelphi University, SUNY New York, and the University of Michigan. Many volunteers from New York area churches and elsewhere contributed substantial time and energy.

In 2005, the UU Office at the UN founded a project supporting the education of orphaned children in Ghana. This program was strongly supported by UUA Presidents Sinkford and Morales. An article I wrote about the project in 2017 is still posted on the UUA website<sup>8</sup> as well as an article written by Peter Morales in 2012<sup>9</sup>

I also spent a good deal of time in Taiwan. Taiwan struggled with the issue of same-sex marriage. They held a referendum and a majority of voters voted against same-sex marriage. I spoke in Taiwan to the World League of Freedom and Democracy. I said, “You can’t vote against peoples’ human rights. The majority will always vote against the minority.” My statements were reported in the December 4, 2018 edition of the *Taipei Times*<sup>10</sup> I was repeatedly quoted during the National Assembly debate on same-sex marriage. Soon the Taiwanese government enacted same-sex marriage. It is the only nation in Asia to do so. I am proud of the role I played. Nonetheless, an official high up in the UUA Administration complained, “Why is Bruce in Taiwan? How is he helping Unitarian Universalism there?”

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7 <https://www.intlwomensconvo.org>

8 <https://www.uua.org/international/blog/every-child-our-child-giving-orphan-children-chance-bright-future>

9 <https://www.uua.org/international/blog/every-child-is-our-child>.

10 <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/12/04/2003705464>.

That brings us to the beginning of the end. And the end. With the focus of the UUA increasingly turning toward White Supremacy Culture. This surprises me because I saw no White Supremacy Culture at the UUA during the Presidencies of Bill Sinkford and Peter Morales. During this UUA administration, international involvement seemed to be no longer important. In fact, currently the only sustained international engagement overseas and at the UN is being done by the International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women.

The UUA let go of the UU@UN office lease in 2021. Our Envoy Coordinator and I worked from home. We had three interns that also worked mostly remotely but we also went to the UN when it was open. The Envoy Coordinator quit in April 2022 and was not replaced. I retired in September 2022 and I've not been replaced. New York University pulled their interns from the UUA because they were ignored. NYU sent them to Catholic Charities. There is now no office, no staff, no interns, no intern coordinator. The UUA also ended the International Conference of Unitarians and Universalists and the Partner Church Council.

The UUA claims to continue the work of the UU Office at the UN, but I see no evidence of this at the United Nations. The work civil society does at the UN, including all our faith partners requires presence in New York and sustained and continuous engagement with the United Nations Community of civil society, member country diplomats and UN staff.

For 49 years prior to 2011, the UU Office at the United Nations (UU UNO) was an independent affiliate of the UUA, supported by UU churches and individual donations. In 2022 I sent an email to the Co-Moderators of the UUA asking them to undo the 2011 merger agreement to allow the UU UNO to return to an

independent organization that could independently raise its own funds. Meg Riley was silent. Charles DuMond said they would unwind the merger if the UUA administration asked them to.

I hope the UUA will return to international engagement and sustained engagement with the United Nations. Donald Trump when he was President told the UN that he hated globalists. I've been a globalist all my life. I don't want the UUA to be a domestic organization focused only on America. An America First policy has a long and terrible history in the United States that we should not repeat.

Bruce Knotts Served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia and worked for Raytheon in Saudi Arabia and on a World Bank contract in Somalia before he joined the U.S. Department of State in 1984. State Department posts took him to Greece, Zambia, the Office of Central American Affairs, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and the Bureau of International Organizations. In 2004, Bruce was elected to the Board of Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies. Bruce retired from the Foreign Service in 2007 and joined the Unitarian Universalist Office at the United Nations as its Executive Director at the beginning of 2008.