From Gotham City to Capitol Hill

by John Dart in the March 20, 2013 issue

The National Council of Churches, long strapped for cash, is leaving its costly digs in Manhattan and consolidating with a slimmer staff in a Washington, D.C., office within walking distance of two branches of the federal government.

Therein lies a tale of church leaders who sought to wield moral influence from the high-rise “God Box” in New York but have shifted to the triangle-shaped United Methodist Building, said to house the only nongovernmental offices on Capitol Hill.

“The critical NCC policy work can be coordinated from any location,” said Peg Birk, transitional general secretary of the council, “but to be the prophetic ‘voice of the faithful’ on the ground in the places of power, it is best served by establishing our operations in Washington.”

The Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive was envisioned in the 1950s as “the Protestant Vatican on the Hudson.” Philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, an American Baptist, was influential in its planning and financing. President Dwight D. Eisenhower helped to break ground for the building in 1958, and it was dedicated two years later.

The National Council of Churches, made up of 37 member communions, occupied three floors of the Interchurch Center in the 1960s. Three denominations had their headquarters in the building, as did some church-related agencies. But amid antiwar protests, civil rights movements and sociocultural changes, the established churches in the late ’60s saw the start of a long decline in church memberships.

When the God Box was rededicated in 2010, the NCC had gone through a series of downsized budgets. Michael Kinnamon, then NCC general secretary, said the building never became a Protestant Vatican. He and other Protestant ecumenists welcomed Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish and Muslim neighbors in the building.

With the NCC’s 2011–12 budget showing a $1.1 million deficit, which was covered by shrinking reserve funds, council officials framed new program priorities, cut staff and

reduced spending. A key report last year rejected a management style that it termed rigid and outmoded in favor of one that was “agile, integrated and flexible.”

On February 13, executives announced that the NCC will relocate most of its staff to Washington—a staff that had six fewer administrative employees and that reflected other personnel cuts made last year. Three satellite offices will remain in New York in other facilities for two associate general secretaries, Joseph Crockett and Antonios Kireopoulos, and a third person, Ann Tiemeyer, program director of women’s ministries.

NCC president Kathryn Lohre, while expressing reverence for the council’s history “in the beloved God Box,” said that consolidation at its existing office in Washington “will enable us to witness more boldly to our visible unity in Christ, and work for justice and peace.”

The move will yield $400,000 to $500,000 in annual savings, according to Birk. The NCC Washington office—which has been in the United Methodist Building for at least 28 years—occupies a ground-floor suite at 110 Maryland Avenue, an annex around the corner from the Methodist entrance at 100 Maryland Avenue.

Birk will join Cassandra Carmichael, who directs the NCC’s Washington office and a task force on environmental ministries, and Shantha Ready Alonso, director of the NCC’s poverty initiative. Birk said outside vendors will be hired to provide office, accounting, communications and other services.

“I’ve long urged the NCC to consolidate their offices in our building, and I’m pleased they have finally done so,” said Jim Winkler, general secretary of the United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, in an e-mail interview. That agency owns and operates the building. The NCC rent “remains the same,” Winkler said.

Occupants of the main building, which include offices of some other Methodist agencies, already constitute a mini–God Box. Among the tenants, Winkler said, are the Washington offices for the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), plus Catholic Relief Services, the Churches for Middle East Peace and the Islamic Society of North America.

At 200 Maryland Avenue, a like-minded neighbor is the Baptist Joint Committee, which addresses church-state issues, and like the Methodists finds the proximity of the Capitol and the Supreme Court a valuable asset.

If the NCC structure in New York City once merited iconic status, the United Methodist Building, with an even longer history, still does. The corner site was purchased to build a five-story building, completed in 1923, to house Methodist offices, especially its Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals. Orator-politician William Jennings Bryan spoke at the building's January 1924 dedication.

To finance expansion of their social witness, the Methodists built an annex at 110 Maryland Avenue in 1931. "For many years," said Winkler, "it primarily consisted of apartments rented to members of Congress and Supreme Court justices." Gradually, most of the 55 apartments were converted into offices.

The main building has been a focal point for protests and marches, including causes espoused by farmworkers and Native Americans, and it sometimes served as a refuge for anti–Vietnam War protesters. The women's rights movement used the building to organize support for the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and early '80s. The Americans with Disabilities Act had its genesis in the building, which was also the ecumenical center for the 1980 and 1990 Earth Day celebrations.

The structure's Simpson Memorial Chapel—opened in 1929 and often refurbished—has hosted a number of religious rallies. On the night in 1983 when Congress passed legislation making Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday, celebrants, including Coretta Scott King, lit 150 candles there to express thanks.

The Methodists' initial impetus to build a center at the heart of Washington was to lobby for Prohibition. When the ban on alcoholic beverages became law in 1920, church leaders said they still had mandates to oppose gambling and obscenity and to act on other moral issues. Their intensified antiliquor campaign years later could not prevent the constitutional amendment's repeal in 1933.

Winkler and the church's social justice arm have been criticized by Christian conservatives as too liberal, but the worldwide denomination has kept its traditionalist stance on most homosexual issues.

And while not all Methodists are teetotalers, the denomination includes a "strong commitment to alcohol avoidance" in its Book of Discipline.

"Normalizing alcohol use is an ongoing concern and threat to public health," said Winkler, who asked church members this year to observe an alcohol-free Lent. "Consider how much money you spend on alcohol over the 40-day period," he said.

Winkler advised that such money be given instead to alcohol-abuse prevention projects.