

Methodist agency leaves NYC as other institutions face rising property costs

by [Linda Bloom](#) and [Christian Century staff](#)

This article appears in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue.

When Betty Thompson arrived in New York City in 1950, she soon got a job with the Methodist Board of Missions on Fifth Avenue in a stretch she called “Protestant Rome.”

Ten blocks of the avenue were home to several mainline groups, including Presbyterians, Baptists, and a World Council of Churches office. A decade later, when the Interchurch Center—originally called the Protestant Center and later nicknamed the God Box—opened across from Riverside Church, several denominational and interdenominational groups moved there. The Methodist mission board was one of the original tenants.

“We all dwelt in ecumenical harmony,” Thompson said. “It was kind of the heyday of the ecumenical movement.”

Now the mission board’s successor, United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries, is relocating to Atlanta, after nearly two centuries of Methodist global missions based in New York City.

John McCullough, who heads Church World Service, one of the ecumenical partners at the Interchurch Center, and is a former Global Ministries employee, said, “It is this agency that brought some of the most important voices of the 20th century into this building to bring witness to a world that in many ways experienced brokenness and a sense of hopelessness.”

While the move is being completed in early November, the Atlanta headquarters is already in operation. Some New York staff, including 39 support staff, were not invited to move. United Methodist Women remains at the Interchurch Center.

The American Bible Society, which for most of the 20th century was associated with Protestant ecumenism, also reduced its staff when it [sold its building and moved to Philadelphia in 2015 after nearly 200 years in New York City](#).

The National Council of Churches relocated its headquarters from the Interchurch Center to Washington, D.C., in 2013. In the past three years the organization has run large budget surpluses and doubled its reserves, NCC staff said.

Other national ecumenical organizations that remain in the God Box include Church Women United and Ecumenical News. And several mainline denominations have an office there, such as for a pension board or foundation.

Some of the institutions staying in the city have made deals with real estate developers to get funds to keep up older buildings.

Park Avenue Christian Church, which is affiliated with the Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ, celebrated its 206th anniversary on October 10. The congregation recently sold property and development rights for a high rise, which includes an annex for the church “as well as funds for upkeep of the sanctuary built in 1911 inspired by La Sainte-Chapelle in Paris,” Disciples News Service reported. The building is considered an architectural landmark.

The amount of money the congregation received through the development deal is confidential, church staff said. The *Wall Street Journal* reported an estimate of nearly \$25 million in funds for the church.

Union Theological Seminary could raise more than \$100 million to make its aging stone buildings safe [by selling development rights to a contractor planning to construct high-rise condominiums on campus](#). The plan sparked [protest from some students](#), faculty, and alumni concerned about the lack of affordable housing or union labor in the project. Administrators and prospective developers met with students and alumni in October to give more details about the deal, which had not yet been finalized.

“If Union decided not to do this, it would simply mean that eventually our whole campus would be sold to a developer who would come along and do it,” said Serene Jones, Union president, told the *Christian Century* in January. “Better that we, in the midst of this environment, use our assets for the sake of our own future.”