

The shifting patterns of ecumenical global engagement

World Mission will be engaging an integrated and relational approach with PC(USA)'s many partners around the world

by the Rev. Mienda Uriarte, director of World Mission in the Interim Unified Agency of the PC(USA) | Special to Presbyterian News Service

LOUISVILLE — The World Mission ministry area of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Interim Unified Agency (IUA) is in the process of shifting from the current mission and ministry model to a more integrated and relational approach aimed at more effectively engaging with our changing world [as shared in this February 5 story](#).

Christianity's influence continues to grow in the global South and in the movement of diaspora communities to the U.S. The new approach is being designed to embody greater agility in responding to global dynamics, some of which this article will address, and foster deeper connections with faith communities worldwide. What follows are a few of the shifting patterns of ecumenical global engagement that we anticipate the new model will help the church better engage!

The unification of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly into a new unified agency also led us to think holistically about work that had been carried out in two places. OGA has carried responsibility for worldwide ecumenical relationships, even as PMA has been led by "[Presbyterians Do Mission in Partnership](#)" (since 2003). Unification offers us the possibility of bringing together these ecclesial and missional connections in new ways.

Listening and Consulting with Global Partners around the World

Global-ecumenical partners have been providing feedback to World Mission for years, reminding us that the world has significantly changed; the landscape of the ways in which we engage with one another continues to call us into ongoing reformation of theological and missiological understanding and practical, day-to-day behaviors and actions. The shifts the IUA World Mission area anticipates making are discerned in partnership with these valued partners around the world and in North America. Communication and collaboration with global ecumenical partners continues. Here are a few signposts along the way:

- 2003: "Presbyterians Do Mission in Partnership" policy adopted by General Assembly
- 2012-2014: Dallas II, Partner Consultation
- 2018-2019: Global consultations held in all regions of the world
- 2022-2023: Global Partner Roundtables (GPR) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Argentina
- Oct. 2024: Global Partner Roundtable gathering in Fiji
- Nov. 4, 2024: Communication with ecumenical partners to let them know of upcoming changes as we re-design

Dec.19, 2024: Survey to global ecumenical partners to gather information about their connections with PC(USA).

Further, the “success” of PC(USA) and other ecumenical partners’ global engagement over the centuries has led directly to the formation of churches and ecclesial bodies all over the world. While we maintain strong connections and in many cases co-equal partnerships with these bodies wherever possible, many have also matured to where they are fully capable of directing and governing their own missiological, theological and ecclesial life. Take for instance the robust, spirited Presbyterian and Reformed life in South Korea, which has surpassed the U.S. in global mission engagement.

Evolution of missiological, theological and relational engagement

God continues to work in mighty and powerful ways through the work of the Holy Spirit in every corner of the world. While humans have the responsibility of sharing God’s love and embodying the good news of the gospel in myriad ways, with everyone we encounter, the truth is not found solely in the practice of “the West to the rest” to save humanity.

Since at least World War 2, the way the PC(USA) engages in global mission has been continuously evolving beyond that former practice of sending “the West to the rest” to save humanity. That’s a crass way of putting it, but we have learned that while much of global mission engagement in the past has led to greater love, health, justice, equality and equity, some of it has also fostered an unhealthy dependency relationship, a “[toxic charity](#)” kind of relationship, that prevents the church from maturing, and in some cases causes relational and cultural harm.

Our global partners keep telling us we have further to go to “de-colonize” our theology, missiology and practical engagement. We’ve made significant progress in this regard since World War 2 — for instance, decades ago we shifted to the language of “mission co-worker” to reflect this mutuality from past iterations such as “missionary.” We need to continue the process of de-centering ourselves and our mindsets away from thinking we are primary agents, benefactors and senders with the good news to bring to others toward recognizing we are one part of a mutual circle of partners working together on God’s mission, which manifests in unique cultural and regional expressions all over the world.

The world is getting smaller and more connected

The nations are in our neighborhoods. The mass movement of people across the world has significantly accelerated in the last 50 years. This migration of individuals and groups and sometimes entire villages for myriad reasons is having a significant impact on many countries that are being left and countries that are turning into destinations. The United States is experiencing this dynamic, and communities around the country are now homes for individuals from all over the world. Some of these diaspora communities may hope to return to their mother country someday. In the meantime, they are forming communities of worship and searching for ways to belong. Through

congregations and mid councils, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to connect and accompany this effort.

The world is so much smaller and more accessible than it was even 10 years ago. Through networked and economical digital communications like videoconferencing, social media, and smartphone apps (WhatsApp anyone?) we can connect with people around the world almost immediately — with coordination of time zones, of course. And airline travel has proliferated over the last 100 years to get us to so many global destinations, our global partners to us, and pretty much anywhere we and our global siblings in Christ would want to go.

Congregations and mid councils connect directly

The accessibility and proximity of communication and travel make it easier for congregations and mid councils to connect and partner directly in mission and ministry all over the world, and they do! The reforming IUA global engagement effort will continue to encourage and equip the church with wisdom, resources and diplomacy. Yet the national/international denomination does not and need not play the same role we have in the past in order to form, build and sustain long-term mutual mission partnerships. In fact, because of this shift to a more direct, networked relationship between congregations, mid councils with global partners and communities, we believe that there is far GREATER global mission engagement than ever before in our history. This engagement reflects the connectional theologies and structures that ground the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in both how we order ourselves, how we reach out to build relationships with others, and how we faithfully respond to others who reach out to us for the same!

There are dozens of examples of this direct connection approach where national staff may help liaise the connections and partnerships, yet these congregations and mid councils do most of the direct engagement and partnership building over the long-term. An example of this kind of partnership is the Presbiterio del la Costa (Barranquilla, Colombia) and the Seattle Presbytery partnering together that was covered by the [Presbyterian News Service in 2023](#).

Similarly, several mission networks have an affiliated relationship with the IUA World Mission denominational programs, and they connect with IUA staff persons while they maintain direct relationships with those individuals and communities around the world. In 2000 there were no PC(USA) connected global mission networks. Today there are approximately 43 global mission networks and counting. These networks help create connections and partnerships between the people, congregations and other ecclesial, nonprofit and government agencies in identified regions around the world; with PC(USA) members, congregations and mid councils.

Financial sustainability

The reformation of global mission engagement into a fresh approach comes after communal discernment of the factors above, alongside rigorous analysis and

consideration of financial sustainability. Here are a few factors contributing to the financial conversation:

- An actuarial financial sustainability assessment in 2020 during the pandemic's peak highlighted the need to reassess our financial commitment to maintaining mission personnel under an outdated operational model. Mid-2023 revisions to the actuarial financial sustainability assessment in 2020 confirmed that to preserve and indeed flourish our global partnerships and ecumenical relationships, we need to transition toward a new approach.
- The dynamics described previously such as the growth in direct mission partnerships between mid councils, congregations and communities around the world means there is a wider distribution of how financial giving is directed. More through the direct partnerships and less through the denomination.
- In 2022, while travel restrictions and a hiring freeze related to Covid-19 were in effect, an internal HR review underscored the urgency to modernize recruitment to address declining candidate pools and better support future hiring for mission personnel positions.
- Further, our compensation structure, which historically compensated below market levels supplemented by an extensive number of discretionary benefits (e.g., housing, education, transportation, re-entry and counseling) has created disparities among employees.
- This redesign aims to harmonize compensation and eliminate perceived inequity, thereby enhancing our organizational coherence and employee morale.

These reasons and more have led to the development of a fresh approach to ecumenical global engagement crafted to enhance our mission and partnership effectiveness and increase the probability of the PC(USA) sustaining it over a longer term.

The 226th General Assembly of the PC(USA) passed a recommendation encouraging the Unification Commission to retain funds to preserve placement of mission co-workers "'on the ground' in ecumenical, interfaith, and civil society contexts globally." We have taken that into account as we've discerned the future of global missional and ecclesial engagement.

- The Unification Commission has taken no action to reduce the budget for World Mission and funds have been retained.
- Despite the reduction-in-force, the critical placement of global field staff and PC(USA) leaders is being preserved.
- A significant portion of funding for mission co-workers comes from gifts restricted for use in sending and supporting mission co-workers. Gifts into those accounts have been \$1M less than budgeted for several years in a row. The prior path was not sustainable.
- The Funding Model Development Team will report back to the General Assembly in June of 2026. It may be that new funding modes will be created that reverse the decline in funding for historic Presbyterian commitment to international mission and ecclesial engagement, but until then, it is the sustainability of the long-term pattern that has us concerned.

In the next few weeks we anticipate sharing more about shifts to be made and how the evolving approach will work. But for now, please pray for God's wisdom and guidance for everyone involved taking these steps!

We furthermore invite all Presbyterians to look deeper into the changing patterns of global mission engagement (both these and those we didn't identify) so that we might together participate in God's mission for the salvation and flourishing of all humanity, build and maintain these relationships with care and equity, and listen well to one another and our siblings in Christ around the world.

By integrating the wisdom of the past with the needs of the present and the possibilities of tomorrow, we are committed to advancing our collective mission in ways that are faithful, innovative, and impactful. This moment represents not an ending, but a beginning — a call to live into a renewed vision with courage, hope, and steadfast faith. A few previously published articles for our readers' reference:

<https://www.pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/interim-unified-agency-pcusa-announces-shift-approach-global-ministry-engagement>.

January 23, 2025 - <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/new-vision-taking-shape-global-ministry>

November 5, 2024 - <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/new-interim-unified-agency-pcusa-takes-next-step-reimagining-work-going-forward>

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/visit-united-church-christ-philippines-delegation-marks-new-era-strategic-partnership-between>

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/mutuality-and-co-learning-are-guiding-principles-collaboration-between-seattle-and-colombian>

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