

'God Box' in New York more diverse as it turns 50

by [Chris Herlinger](#)

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New York, November 24 (ENInews)--The 19-story granite building on Manhattan's upper west side, often referred to as the "God Box", has been seen as a symbol of "unbridled arrogance" on the part of traditional Protestantism, but now represents a much more diverse religious community.

New York's Interchurch Center is one of the most visible symbols of Christian ecumenism in the United States as it marks its 50th anniversary, the year the modern ecumenical movement for Christian unity is celebrating its own centenary.

A series of events in 2010, including a rededication in May, have marked the anniversary of the centre, often called the "God Box", by tenants and visitors.

American philanthropist and Baptist layperson John D. Rockefeller, Jr, played a major role in the planning of the God Box, and U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower attended the groundbreaking ceremony in October 1958.

Asked by ENInews to reflect on the building's historical significance, Randall Balmer, who teaches U.S. religious history at nearby Barnard College and Columbia University, said that he once regarded the centre, "as an expression of unbridled arrogance on the part of mainline Protestantism, an arrogance that was symbolised by the international style design ... and in the fact that Eisenhower himself, the symbol of post-war, white-bread Protestantism, laid the cornerstone."

Built in the late 1950s, and dedicated in 1960 to house the National Council of Churches, the largest ecumenical body in the United States, the Interchurch Center remains the home of the NCC, as well as the main mission body of the United Methodist Church.

The "God Box" also once housed a number of national denominational headquarters, including those of major U.S. Presbyterian and Lutheran communions.

"I revelled in the paradox that I, who grew up as a fundamentalist in the Midwest, occupied an office that looked across the street into the God Box," Balmer said. Still, the historian says he now regards the Interchurch Center with, "considerably more sympathy".

Today, the building houses more diverse groups, including other religious bodies, local or regional offices of U.S. churches, humanitarian and philanthropic agencies, faith-based activist organizations, New York Theological Seminary, and some offices of Columbia University.

The term "God Box", sometimes used with affection and sometimes not, is a reference to the building's "international style" block shape, which some architecture critics have dismissed as bulky and graceless.

"I still believe that postwar ecumenism, driven as it was by the Cold War, was a mistake in that it reduced Protestantism to a theology of the lowest common denominator," Balmer commented. "I nevertheless admire the impulse behind it: interdenominational cooperation that would maximise resources by eliminating the duplication of effort."

While nostalgia is discernable among veterans of the building - once there was real thought that the building would become a "Protestant Vatican" - Michael Kinnamon, the current NCC general secretary, hailed the building's current character.

"The Interchurch Center is a richly diverse community of many faiths: Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and more," Kinnamon said during the May rededication ceremony. "The Interchurch Center family today is almost a perfect microcosm of God's world."

He added, "Clearly, the fact that we did not evolve into what our creators expected us to be is part of the eternal promise that God is not through with us yet."

The rededication came just before church bodies marked the centenary of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, a 1910 event described as the launch of the international ecumenical movement for church unity, and which triggered the eventual founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

The expense of being in Manhattan and a desire for some U.S. communions to be in a non-New York City locale closer to their members have been cited as reasons for

some Protestant bodies leaving the Interchurch Center.

Still, the building does have a reasonably priced cafeteria, one blogger has noted. "The God Box ... houses a fairly good and decently priced café that is opened to the public. Think beyond loaves and fishes, my friends, because the God Box café offers a variety of food to fill the stomach, if not the soul," wrote Pete C. on the blog www.yelp.com/biz/the-interchurch-center-new-york.

When the centre was built, the prominence in the 1950s of what are called the U.S. "mainline" Protestant churches was at its height. Today, such churches work in a far more religiously pluralistic society in which they are no longer dominant.

Kinnamon noted that predictions of the future are rarely safe, especially for religious institutions. "Just state your plans for the next 50 years if you want to hear God laugh," he said.