

**CCIU 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Brief History**  
**April 30, 2019**  
**Remarks by Shyamala Raman**

Good Evening and Namaste!

As a member of the Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding since its founding, it is my pleasurable task to share with you the history of CCIU from its very origins to where we are today. Thank you for being here to celebrate with us.

CCIU was founded twenty five years ago by the late Reverend Dr. Richard B. Griffis. It is in the frequent telling of the story of CCIU's beginnings that we draw inspiration and strength to continue in the footsteps of our founder.

A minister in the United Church of Christ for 51 years, Rev. Griffis was a unique human being. He was deeply influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and the war in Vietnam. He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. at Selma, Alabama in 1965. He and his wife, Anne, traveled to Nigeria to volunteer in with the American Friends Service Committee on the reconstruction after the Biafran Civil War. Later, Rev. Griffis served as a pastor of the Immanuel Congregational Church UCC in Hartford. He was on the Board of Trustees of American College in Madurai, India where he left an indelible imprint at that institution.

He was an ardent participant in the United Nations Association both in Connecticut and later in the Washington DC area, Rev. Griffis conceived the idea of an interfaith collective around the time of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations. In all of the work he did throughout his life, there was a quiet determination to create a more just and peaceful world.

Having started his multi-layered and multi-faceted ministry in the 1960s, Rev. Griffis had the extraordinary ability to connect the broader issues of social justice and global peace alongside of an interest in inter-faith relations.

In 1994, Reverend Griffis, not only connected with various religious leaders in the majority community in Hartford, he was also the Chair of the UN Association of Greater Hartford. In addition, his local, national and global connections gave him a wide and interconnected set of issues to share with others: social justice, interreligious harmony, status of refugees and public policy. Ever the consummate cosmopolitan and a very polished organizer, Rev. Griffis was able to bring together a wide variety of individuals together. At that time, it was quite unusual to have an interfaith organization in which there were representatives from nine faiths. That was an extremely farsighted approach on Rev. Griffis's part, born out of his multifarious experiences.

**1995-2003**

Post the United Nations's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration, we continued to meet as the Connecticut Committee for Interreligious Understanding at the Hartford Seminary. During these meetings, discussions about how to grow an organization with multiple faiths became the focus. At the programming end, Rev. Griffis would spearhead conferences for multi-faith understanding. Soon, it became apparent to him that it was time to incorporate this group. Based on the archival minutes,

Rev. Griffis had already created a draft set of bylaws and set up a group to look into the incorporation. Shortly thereafter, Rev. Griffis moved to Washington DC.

This goal of Rev. Griffis was carried forward by a team of two CCIU Board member(s), Jim Friedman and Dr. Shyamala Raman, working with the Legal Clinic at UCONN. The following five individuals: Jim Friedman, Dr. Shyamala Raman, Dr. Robert Saunders\*, Rev. Dr. Steve Sidorak, Jr., and Rev. Connie Sternberg\* signed off as the original incorporators. CCIU was incorporated as a 501(c) 3 corporation in 2003 and had its first Annual Meeting as CCIU, Inc. on May 15th. There was a slight name change—we called the incorporated organization, Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding.

\*(Deceased.)

### **2003-2013**

CCIU continued to have a series of activities, library lectures, speakers and a retreat in 2010. A strategic plan was drawn up during 2011-2012. In the meantime, systematic approaches were made to the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving for a major grant.

Milestone: Award of grant by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. December 2012.

We are delighted to acknowledge Jim Friedman and Courtney Bourns, here with us tonight, who worked relentlessly on the application for the grant. The grant application was ably written by Claudia Bell who is also with us tonight

Two major developments took shape as a result of this grant award. The first was the hiring of the Executive Director, Rev. Dr. Terry Schmitt in June 2013, and the second was the design of summer institutes for Public School Teachers on teaching about religion. Jim Friedman and Terry Schmitt designed five institutes with the assistance of Dr. Diane Moore, from the Harvard Divinity School and with the support of the administrators and teachers from the West Hartford School System. We are delighted to have Dr. Karen List with us tonight.

According to data available, five summer institutes were held starting in the year 2013 with 35 teachers participating and 10,000 students benefiting because of the new ways of teaching and learning.

On the programs front, under the leadership of Anne Alleva, two highly successful events, the first one on Multi-Faith Healing held in April 2012, and the second event in early January 2013, focused on Martin Luther King garnered considerable praise.

Under the leadership of Ritu Zazzaro, a film team was formed in the summer of 2013, and collaboration with the Wadsworth Atheneum was begun. Since then, six Annual Interfaith Film Series have been held. After Ritu Zazarro's leadership, the series was overseen by Shyamala Raman from 2014 until 2017. Anne Alleva has been leading the Film Team since the summer of 2017. Our most recent collaborators have been NCCJ and the Hartford Seminary.

In April 2013, a youth event, featuring social activist, Valerie Kaur, was organized by Dr. Faquir Jain and Courtney Bourns. The Connecticut Youth Forum collaborated with CCIU.

Now to the next set of five years in CCIU's History.

## **2014-2019**

Throughout CCIU's growing years, collaborations and connectedness have been an important consideration. We draw our inspiration from Rev. Griffis's pattern of organizational initiatives.

In January, 2015, through the facilitation of Rev. Bruce Steinway, (who is the current Co-Chair, 2017-2019), CCIU was grateful for being chosen as one of three organizations to receive the remaining funds of the Christian Conference of CT as it closed its office permanently.

In 2015, the Honest Conversations with your Muslim Neighbors was begun at the initiative of Jim Friedman in collaboration with the Muslim Coalition and the Hartford Seminary. The planning team, consisting of Dr. Jane Smith, Prof. Fatma Antar, Carole Fay, Terry Schmitt and Jim Friedman plan sessions throughout the State of Connecticut. As you might have seen in the slide show, 37 sessions since 2015 with 3005 attendees have been held until April 2019.

Other types of programming include community service led by Aida Mansoor and lunch conversations on religion titled "Can We Talk".

Two *Interreligious Call to Love thy Neighbor and Act for All Americans* were held at the Cathedral of Saint Joseph Cathedral in collaboration with the Archdiocese of Hartford in 2017 and 2018. Considerable attendance from the community was recorded in January 2017.

We are also pleased to say that CCIU has been receiving continual invitations to speak at area churches and schools about many of the nine religions represented in our group.

We believe that in an interconnected world, the more such interfaith dialogue that CCIU can generate and promote, in collaboration with similar organizations, the more understanding about our neighbors becomes possible, one step at a time.

We are all in this together. Rumi, the Persian Sufi poet, said (though in a different context), "every story is us". In telling CCIU's story and continuing in our mission, we hope that we can create our collective stories to tell every day into the future.

Thank you.