

Ecumenical Institute (EI) History

Lucas Bensley, August 2019

The 20th century was a time of crisis and decision for the Church. Social upheaval and unprecedented political conflict forced a reevaluation of the purpose of the Christian faith and its advocates. This century, Rev. Joseph Wesley Mathews said, experienced both worldwide economic depression and the Second World War within years of each other. “In the midst of that,” Mathews said, “man could no longer avoid an awareness that our civilization was in deep [trouble](#).”

The Ecumenical Institute was born out of a spiritual response to this time of change in the postwar era. In 1954, the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches created the Evanston Institute for Ecumenical Studies to serve as a counterpart to similar organizations like in Chateau de Bossey, Switzerland or the House Church Movement in England--except that this one would work without formal ties to the Council.. Under its first director, German-born theologian Dr. Walter Leibrecht, the Institute began devising [programs](#), conferences, and research projects geared toward “the enhancement of the vocation and commitment of the laity,” as well as attracting both church and non-church leaders towards vocational seminars and other discussion groups.

Furthermore, the Council intended that the new Institute serve as a center that would address problems related to “Christ the Hope of the World” and the broader socio-political world, and devise solutions to them. Toward this effort, the Institute supported graduate-level [research](#) that was published and disseminated to churches, congregations, and other institutions of higher education. These efforts fell in line with the Institute’s founding “purposes”: providing information about the ecumenical movement, training men and women church leaders, and engagement with research in its related concerns. (EI STATEMENT OF PURPOSES, 1960)

The Institute collaborated with the Church Federation of Chicago. A lingering issue to Dr. Leibrecht and the board of the Institute, however, was the question of how to pursue its experimental research while also better relating to the formal structures of the Church and the network of churches in the Chicago-land area. The answer to this dilemma came in the form of the Institute’s [merger](#) with the Federation to become the Ecumenical Institute in 1962, one capable of tapping into this network and financially supporting the Institute’s budget and operations. This networking was a natural extension of the Institute’s mission to relate its work “to the many and varied pioneering experiments conducted within church and civic organization” and its focus on “ecumenicity in secular and religious life in America.”

With the merger came the new directorship of Rev. Joseph Wesley Mathews of the Christian Faith and Life Community of Austin, Texas. [Embed link to Mathews and/or CFLC page]

Mathews moved to Evanston (indeed, into the mansion of former-director Liebrecht) with seven families from the Austin project and with the intent to execute the Institute's reinvigorated [vision](#) of renewing the Church and its role and purpose in the modern world. The Institute's strategy, as Mathews laid out in the press, was threefold: 1. To continue to train laymen and clergymen; 2. To conduct "Community Reformulation" in underserved communities in Chicago; and, 3. To expand research into models of the family and society, at large. Mathews and his team lived by the Institute's valuation of chastity through sharing meals and facilities, common study and workshop, and supporting themselves with a yearly salary of a single dollar.

The Institute staff were concerned with the "urban revolution" -- that is, dominating socio-political trends identified in urban locales at the time. As a 1965 publication by the Institute put it, its staff saw this revolution as "a shift in attitudes rather than as something geographical or confined only to big cities." While living in the suburb of Evanston, they sought a location that relate them more directly to urban issues. They found a more fitting location at the vacant Bethany Church of the Brethren Seminary campus on Chicago's West Side. The Institute's move to this location in 1963 proved fortuitous, in that it afforded them the opportunity to enact their mission of community reformulation in the "Fifth City" project. Fifth City became the locus of the Institute's "local work" from 1963 until 1986, during which time the Institute's staff gradually sought to replicate their community development demonstration beyond Chicago. For more information, refer to the Human Development [Collection](#).

The Institute's Fifth City project was a pilot for its national work. In 1966, for instance, the first Global Research Assembly conceptualized and developed Imaginal Education off the Institute's work in Fifth City. Subsequent Assemblies developed other concepts and organizational structures that went on to define and shape the Institutes' activities, such as the New Religious Mode, the New Social Vehicle, and the Town Meeting Program. For further information, see [Social Change](#) collection.

The Institute were offered nationally from the 1960s onwards. Between 1967 and 1972 Institute courses taught around the world increased from 15 to about 300, reaching over 23,000 participants in that time. (Spring 1972 Global Report) Religious and cultural courses made up the core of the Institute's curriculum. Religious studies courses taught students about the theological revolution, the historical church, the local church and its place in the ecumenical movement, and world religions. In the introductory religious course, RSI, talks were given, authors studied (Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Deitrich Bonhoeffer, and H. Richard Neibhur, and conversations were led on the future of the church. The introductory cultural course, CSI, focused on the "urban style and secular mood of the postmodern world," with courses on psychology, art, sociology, and philosophy. The Institute also offered advanced courses from the family to the community and the nation. (1970-1971 EI Calendar) These courses reached people from all walks of life, from high school and college students to laymen and social workers.

Specialized conferences were designed for target audiences such as the Parish Leadership Colloquy was offered to clergy.

Over the years the Ecumenical Institute grew and diversified its tasks. By 1971, the Institute had religious houses and deployed leaders in thirty-six urban centers across North America-- including Los Angeles, New York, New Orleans, and Montreal. (Fall 1971 Assignments) For more on the religious houses and the global approach of the Institute, see the Institute Foundations [collection](#).

Brochures and publications, including IMAGE magazine, were published from the 1960's onwards to introduce the Institute's mission of conceptual reeducation, structural reformulation, and spirit remotivation to a public audience. Publications served as a means for inviting communities to take religious and cultural studies courses at the Institute's regional centers. (EI Development and Story PSU) Local church leaders appreciated the bevy of tactical principles, networking support, and other factors that the Institute brought to their communities.

Aside from the Institute of Cultural Affairs, one of the lasting fingerprints and physical legacies of the Ecumenical Institute has been the Kemper Insurance building in Uptown. In 1972, the 166,000 square foot Chicago School-style building was donated by the Kemper Insurance Group to the Ecumenical Institute for the sum price of \$1. The donation came at an ideal time for the Institute, as its expanding programs necessitated a larger home base in which to offer services. By 1972, the Institute had projects ranging from the Local Church Experiment, summer lobal Research Assemblies, thirty-six centers across North America and expanding projects globally. With the support of many donors and aligned organizations, the building became a center for community demonstration, research, and education to expand the spirit movement and the mission of the church. (Just What is the Ecumenical Institute?) For more information, see the Institute Foundations and Human Development collections.

In summary, the Ecumenical Institute could be described in a number of ways: the church-facing arm, the predecessor to the Institute of Cultural Affairs, or, as Joseph Mathews described it, an institution that was equal parts "religious-secular, disciplined, practical, and profoundly human."