

UIMF members discuss advocacy at the UN with LDS Charities



(L to R) Ryan Koch, Damon Ashcraft, Andrew Jensen, and Samuel Elzinga after their meeting.

On Wednesday, July 18th, 2018, during the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of clubs at Utah Valley University (www.utahimf.org), were able to meet with Mr. Ryan Koch, director of LDS Charities' New York office. The meeting was an excellent way for the UIMF delegates to learn about advocacy at the United Nations while also learning more about what the branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, titled as LDS Charities, does at the United Nations (UN). LDS Charities is registered as non-governmental organization (NGO) with Economic and Social Council of the UN. Therefore, it was interesting for us to know whether we could get it involved in our activities like we do with similar NGOs, who provided us the opportunity to participate at HLPF, like the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, the Mountain Institute and the Utah China/China Friendship Improvement Sharing Hands.

Our delegation met Mr. Koch at the Café Olympia, a location close to the UN and it locations of our other meetings that day. At the beginning of the meeting, our delegation asked Mr. Koch about how he ended up running the New York office of LDS Charities. Mr. Koch was originally a Foreign Service officer with the United States Department of State. After some years working as a Foreign Service officer and living in many different countries, Mr. Koch was offered a job with LDS Charities in their New York Office. He remarked how he has lived in New York the longest out of everywhere he has lived in his professional career. Our delegation found that remark humorous.

Mr. Koch also described the many initiatives LDS Charities does in New York, chief among them advocacy work at the UN. LDS Charities is playing an increasingly larger role on the global stage, ranging from providing humanitarian aid to helping organize volunteers to distribute this aid after a disaster. LDS Charities also participates in the UN by giving presentations much like our own to various UN bodies. For example, he mentioned how the President of the Relief Society, Jean B. Bingham, participated recently in a panel hosted by UN DPI together with a number of other NGOs representing different faiths.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the parent church of LDS Charities, has many times taken stances viewed by other members in the global community as old fashioned and out of touch, specifically surrounding social issues. Mr. Koch explained that even though LDS Charities participates in forums on women's rights and reproductive rights, the charities advocate for the Church's stance on these issues. Mr. Koch mentioned how hard it was sometimes to participate in UN forums with NGOs who disagree with his institution's core values and beliefs. He also remarked how it is truly an exercise in diplomacy and compromise

when discussing issues with other stakeholders and states who have vastly different agendas than the Church.

We mentioned to Mr. Koch that LDS Charities made a written statement during the 62nd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women on March 2018 and whether it would be possible for us to do that jointly. He responded that it was the first experience in his office and there are still many questions how to do that in the future.

Mr. Koch answered also on our question whether his institution has interns. He said that his institution did in fact host interns, and that he currently works with an Intern from UVU. We were particularly interested in the internship opportunities and my colleague Andrew Jensen in particular. The interns at LDS Charities have intern duties, but they also are able to participate in many substantive negotiations and meetings during their time in the New York office.

Overall, this meeting was a great way for the delegation to greater learn about the role civil society plays in the United Nations and how to discuss issues that are important to the sustainable mountain agenda while being tactful and not offending people. The insight shared with us was invaluable, and this meeting definitely prepared us for future negotiations with other stakeholders in the implementation of the sustainable mountain development agenda.

Samuel Elzinga, President, Foreign Affairs Club