

# Pre-Assembly Regional Consultation Reports

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Advancing *Shared Well-being* by Preventing  
and Transforming Violent Conflict



**Religions for Peace** 

## AFRICA

Africa is plagued by incessant conflicts, mostly internal conflicts and the scourge of terrorism. These conflicts are exacerbated by ethnic and political polarizations. Religious leaders appreciate and understand that their roles in building the bridges for peace and healing the wounds inflicted by these conflicts in order to reconcile their nations and build a caring common future. The national and regional consultations were unanimous in the need for religious leaders and their institutions in Africa to play a big and more decisive role in preventing and transforming conflicts in the region and confronting the evil of terrorism. To help, they recommend to the 10th World Assembly that:

- The global society to denounce the culture of violence and conquest to one of peace and sharing. We call on religious leaders globally to work towards eliminating the glorification of violence in movies and the media. We call on all states and non-state actors to renounce violence of as the primary focus of foreign policy and to end the decades of subjugation and domination of global affairs based on the culture of might military prowess, building of instruments of violence and visiting on conflicts and violence on less powerful states, religions or communities.
- The deliberate and continuous inclusion of all faith leaders including women and youth, in peace building processes at the local, national and regional levels for sustained efforts especially on emotive issues such as wealth distribution and land access and distribution.
- All faith leaders to work in collaboration with women and youth to stop the politicization and manipulation of religion by political actor and other actors and stem the radicalization of our youth as instruments of terror.
- The provision of technical support and knowhow through financing and skills training to faith leaders, women and youth, and their institutions to be able to engage appropriately, prevent conflicts, act as mediators and bring healing as well as reconciliation in their communities.
- The strengthening liaison amongst stakeholders in government, local administration, traditional rulers and civil society to ensure a transparent and inclusive system that promotes and respects human rights, human dignity, freedom of thought and assembly and the equitable distribution of resources.
- The support of women and youth empowerment through advocacy and training on dependable livelihood skills to provide for their socio-economic needs.
- All faith leaders to be actively involved in the rehabilitation of women and youth that are victims of injustice and violence. In addition, the religious leaders should take a key role in the counseling and provision of psychosocial support to returning foreign fighters who are chiefly youth and are often ostracized in the community.
- Need to develop alternative counter-radicalization theology to counter the misinterpretation of religious texts in the context of violent extremism. In addition, there is need to promote the concept of welcoming the other in order to break down religious stereotypes especially among the youth.
- The universalization and implementation of international, regional and national legal instruments to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons; and promote nuclear disarmament and victim assistance through the Treaty on the Prohibition on the Nuclear Weapons.

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## ASIA

Strategies were developed to further strengthen conflict transformation. Examples were given from work in Thailand, where the Religions for Peace Inter-religious Council for Thailand Secretariat at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies at Mahidol University supported and facilitated a Buddhist – Muslim Interfaith Dialogue, between 1-2 November, in Songkhla, deep South Thailand. The purpose of the dialogue was to provide a safe space for 30 Buddhist and Muslim leaders and lays—both male and female—to exchange their experiences and discuss possible solutions to the violence impacting South Thailand. Leaders from RfP Thailand shared that trust building advanced during previous and recent dialogues are progressively assisting in the evolution of better relationships among/within the Buddhist and Muslim (both Sunni and Shiite) leaders and lay participants.

Dr. Suwanbuddha stated that after the dialogue both Buddhist and Muslim participants engaged in direct communication to advance, “interreligious cooperation” and will implement an “emergency solidarity visit on behalf of inter-religious leaders” during critical times of escalating violence – in the name of religion – in the deep South of Thailand. This evolving trust is measurably advancing successful dialogues and peace-oriented solution discussions and actions in South Thailand. Examples such as these inspired participants to consider their own unique national contexts and to apply similar concrete actions that are relevant, impactful, and sustainable.

The Asia Women of Faith consultation brought forward following recommendations:

- There is a need to respect others’ “otherness” and to learn to use dialogue and non-violent action to transform conflicts. There is also a need for training in non-violent communication and human rights and a need for collaboration amongst state and non-state actors.
- RfP International and Asia when necessary will provide support and expertise on mediation conflict resolution in conflict affected areas.
- RfP members use mindful language and abstain from hate speech when making statements on controversial and difficult situations.

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## EUROPE

### Observations

In relation to transforming conflict ECRL identified four priority areas/issues in the European context:

- The challenge of terrorism;
- The continuing conflict in Ukraine;
- The possible negative impact of Brexit on the Northern Ireland peace process;
- Tensions caused by increased migration and associated issues and challenges.

An analysis of problems and possible responses focused particularly on issues 1 and 4.

The Council believes that radicalization and extremism resulting in terrorist attacks, and anti-immigration rhetoric and action, are driven by some common dynamics and fears: rapid changes in societies and communities, and perceptions of unequal opportunity and support, leading to some people feeling insecure, angry and resentful. This in turn perpetuates anti-establishment sentiments, xenophobic attitudes, and in some cases violence.

One very evident indicator of this phenomenon is the rise in hate speech across Europe; not only amongst extremist and ring wing factions, but also amongst ordinary people. Derogatory language and overt displays of prejudice that we thought had been overcome years ago, are once again becoming more prevalent, and seemingly acceptable.

One apparent reason for this is the lack of religious literacy. Many people do not understand their own or others' religions; and when allied to the existing negative perception of religion in many parts of Europe, this ignorance creates fear and anger, which underpins negative stereotyping, discrimination and scapegoating.

### Opportunities

Religious leaders and actors can attempt to counter these destructive cycles/phenomena by doing more to demonstrate to broader society the positive benefits of multi-religious collaboration and social action for the broader society. Public examples of religious leaders and actors working together, and making public appearances together, is a powerful image which can help change negative perceptions of religion in Europe.

Practical initiatives which address common problems in communities and societies have also been shown to challenge and counter negative perceptions and stereotypes about religious people – thereby contributing to preventing radicalization and violent extremism and countering negative attitudes towards migration. Grassroots organizations and religious communities are integral to delivering such initiatives, and ECRL should make attempts to work more closely with national and local organizations.

ECRL should also engage more directly with governments, who we can petition for support, not just on the basis that our work is multi-religious (although this is important), but because it is helping people from all sections of society – whether religious or not.

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From the perspective of many religious traditions, conflict starts within the individual due to feelings of anger, injustice or insecurity. As a result, our religious leaders and traditions have an important role in supporting those in need and in helping overcome destructive feelings or tendencies.

We also need the personal skills to positively transform conflict, such as the abilities to communicate in a non-violent and positive way. Dialogue opportunities and events, which bring diverse groups of people together to deepen understandings about shared issues of concern, should be supported and encouraged; and as religious communities and leaders we can create spaces and opportunities for these vital conversations to happen.

## **Actions**

As part of the current ECRL strategy we have already committed to including more opportunities for public engagement and social action in all our meetings, and we will continue to do this wherever possible. We also encourage all our members to provide platforms for religious leaders from different traditions to come together whenever possible.

ECRL will continue to develop and support the Religions in Action project and website, which can support networking and cooperation on a wide range of social action projects, across different religions and European countries.

ECRL is committed to taking the lead role in the reorientation of RfP in Europe, in order to ensure that religious leaders, national and local organizations, and women and youth networks, work ever more closely together to develop and deliver projects and initiatives which address problems and challenges shared by people of all religions and none.

## LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

### Observations

Our Latin American and Caribbean peoples face similar realities such as migration, that in the past few years it has become very alarming. Migration forces people to be displaced from their lands, among their reasons are armed conflicts, land conflicts, people relegated and forgotten by governments, which bring them social and governmental problems. This whole situation makes them migrate to find a better quality of life and a better future for their descendants.

In their fight walk they have encountered different social problems that they are currently facing. For instance, the Shipibo immigrants in Lima have not receive a fully government support after the fire of 2016 that left 283 families affected, causing them to displace their families among the city (when usually their traditional lifestyle is living in community as groups of multiple families).

In this panoramic context, our indigenous communities have to face situations of vulnerability, which remain the same year by year: domestic violence, relocation of families, maternal mortality, lack of education, unemployment, few basic services (water, electricity, sewage, etc.), environmental impact, land grabbing.

### Opportunities

We are all invited, and specially the different representatives of faith communities, to accompany our peoples, to create adequate conditions to approach different conflicts; with the sole main goal to avoid destruction between governments, peoples, communities, ethnic groups, among others.

No one should be discriminated because of their race, ethnicity, nationality or religion, neither to be subject of any other form of discrimination, nor use our religious power to be manipulators of the faith of our peoples.

We are all called to be social seers, to participate without fear and with freedom, in order to end fraud, corruption, and other incompatible resources in the society; with the sole demand for justice, equality, transparency and accountability.

### Action Proposals

As religions we are called to do physical and psychological healing, which must be introspective: on one hand, education and prevention of different topics; and, on the other, support for leadership training for men and women, so that they can take part of governmental institutions.

We must establish mechanisms of negotiation, mediation and must be democratic, inclusive and in good faith; with the sole purpose to promote conciliation and dialogue, towards a common good and to the improvement of social and human coexistence.

# Religions for Peace

We must all embrace life together with freedom of conscience, religion and belief, to all be promoters of health, education, humanitarian work and protection of human rights for the most vulnerable and unprotected peoples.

From the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, we are called to reduce, contribute and build peace communities, justice and strong institutions. In this sense, we call to be multidimensional in human and sustainable development, in search of the common good, to have a better future by 2030, because we are all co-responsible: Government, people and religions to reduce violence in all its dimensions, protect appropriate resolutions and sustain them over time.

## NORTH AMERICA

### Key Concerns

- Religions need to confront their role in violence. Sometimes they perpetuate actual violence - intentionally or not - and they need to be honest about this. Confronting this violence can be done within each faith tradition.
- Addressing power dynamics and privilege and how these can help perpetuate inequalities and provoke violence. This includes addressing classism.
- Addressing unresolved internal pain and trauma in communities. This includes individuals working to achieve their own internal peace.
- The combination of religion with electoral politics can be dangerous. One group pointed out that religious leaders and communities should be mindful of the risk of having their agenda manipulated for counterproductive political means.

### Role of Religious Resources

- Leverage different conceptions of reconciliation and repentance exist across faith traditions, (e.g. idea of teshuvah or repentance in Judaism).
- Use Scriptures to speak out against violence. Religious institutions can also lead dialogue on murky histories in relation to violence, including troubled relationships with native peoples, dispossessed land, and race in general.
- Convenor and identify values and areas of mutual interest to bring people together as communities. Religious leadership is also crucial in taking a stand against violence - particularly against minorities.
- Prioritize prevention over intervention (one example that was used was the New Zealand shooting and how the perpetrator could have been educated or counselled before the tragedy). One group mentioned that training in proper gun use and mental health counselling can be part of this prevention.

### Further Capacity Building

- Communities need to educate each other and share resources (listen to each other). Resources include networks of public health officials and mental health professionals who can work in tandem with religious leadership.
- Voices of “prophetic leadership” and enlightened changemakers must be amplified around issues of violent conflict.
- Enhancing representation of minorities in arenas of power.