



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

## The Culture of Encounter and Interfaith Dialogue as the Bases of Building Peace through Youth

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### INTRODUCTION

Are young people motivated enough to engage with building lasting peace from an interfaith perspective? Is the youth community educated in terms of environmental commitment and humanitarianism? What space do institutions of faith offer young people? What concrete experiences can they contribute to a universal model of global youth and faith work? What are the challenges to consider and how can you address them to create a safe environment in practice? What opportunities do we find for institutions when youth are engaged?

### DEVELOPMENT

Despite the efforts of the international community to find a solution to the disputes, conflicts, and the worst human understandings that have led to the

greatest tragedies of humanity, several decades have gone by for private individuals to obtain sovereignty and the capacity to take action as agents of change beyond the initiatives carried out solely by Heads of States. Desire transformed into a commitment to peaceful coexistence forged by civil society in demanding peaceful responses from the public sphere as a collective aim, succeed in integrating society in responsibilities related to coexistence.

Large international organizations have taken the commitment to bring together people and leaders of faiths seriously, giving access to participation to men and women leaders or activists in this field.

*Religions For Peace* is a clear example—founded 50 years ago as a peace movement, it responds to world events by working together with religions and faith organizations committed to peaceful coexistence throughout the world.

In the current period at a global level, we are starting to witness programs dedicated exclusively to youth, with a focus on participation in religious diversity, the environment, and human rights. The environmental issue is the latest addition to the agenda.

In recent years, it was possible to observe a call and space for youth in these contexts that were only led by men, and then women. The programs that are offered to young people with respect to peacebuilding are in general, international programs that summon young people with leadership profiles in their different countries. Although in these programs, i.e. *Seminars, conferences, contests or retreats*, the participation of the best applicants is assessed, the reality we face is that there is no requirement for the institutions from which these young people come. In many cases, the accurate daily commitment of these institutions with their youth is unknown, e.g., what opportunities are offered and what appropriate teachings on issues such as peace, the environment, and human rights are addressed jointly with the youth group. Despite the fact that receiving an invitation to participate in an interreligious and intercultural event from international organizations is a great motivation for these institutions, we are not certain that after participating in large international symposiums, the institutions will be committed to their own youth and will have an annual agenda on these issues.

With regard to the relationship of youth and their institutions, it must be borne in mind that faith institutions should have an adequate program and personnel for youth leadership, to work dynamically and with enthusiasm to improve the world that young people perceive and especially the need to engage with their religion or faith.

One of the most common mistakes today and the one we must work on is the segregating of young people on youth issues. In most cases, activities, problems and institutional or social commitments are not shared with the youth, believing that they would not understand the matter, or even worse, that they are

not part of it. If we want to find a path and reach outcomes that allow young people to maintain a sense of belonging to their respective religions and engage in the problems of global society from religious and human standpoints, first we must give young people the same room, time, and place in the agenda that is given to adults, and understand that young people are also adults or capable of understanding like them.

The aforementioned is the first step to understand, as people responsible for engaging youth in religions, that if young people cannot feel a sense of belonging it is because they are being separated from the agenda of the institutions. If we include youth in the institutions' agenda together with adults, young people will value being called, but especially, their integration. This would be a confirmation that their discernment is as valid as that of those who have been in religious or faith institutions for a longer time.

### **The importance of religion for young people within institutions**

Religion is the central axis, of every human being inclined to faith or religious beliefs; religion will be present in every act of life. And that is why as long as young people are informed and educated, as equals on matters of religion, they will understand the importance of getting involved in religious education linked to social and humanitarian commitments such as peacebuilding, the environment, and rights among men and women.

In the case of Latin America, in general, and Argentina, in particular, we may notice that young people have a sense of belonging due to religion and its practices, but there are no programs dedicated to the formation of youth and engagement in the different fields and age groups within religious institutions. In general, in this region of the world, beyond faith and individual feelings, the interest of faith is linked to the intention of informing this intercultural melting pot about the different entities and traditions of each one.

Regarding the Islam for Peace Institute (Argentina), we are an institution of faith composed mainly of young adults from different sectors of Islamic thought where each one fulfils the role of leading spaces and projects intertwined between Islamic tradition, Argentine culture, and commitment to society, which pertains to the diversity inherited in Argentina.

### **Impact on religion due to stereotypes**

Moving forward with the case of Argentina, the motivation for engagement with a religious institution arises from being a member of a minority religion in the country, in this case Islam; due to misinformation regarding concepts of the religion and misconceptions, there are stereotypes regarding people of Islamic faith, making them victims of constant Islamophobia. When a society group is threatened by false accusations or misconceptions, the motivation to clarify differences and be able to share the way of life, in this case, Islam, is greater and young people feel more predisposed than adults to form groups or spaces with young people of other groups and creeds, since youth tends to respect and value diversity and freedom of expression in all senses.

Nonetheless, for the motivations of young people to work in their religious groups to occur in a successful and respectful process, it must be accompanied by an agenda and goals that are the outcome of a peaceful coexistence beyond differences on the same topic.

We must be prepared for every challenge:

1. We must be ready to face a group that might have felt disappointed or unmotivated before; thus, we need to be patient until, eventually, the resulting trust bond brings motivation.
2. It is essential to speak clearly, about how we are going to offer the youth group the space and freedom to plan and decide.

3. It is essential that in each proposal there is a presentation and agenda of steps to follow, who will be involved, and what will be the terms for performance.
4. It is important to guarantee young people that they are protagonists, and that they will have the necessary tools and support. And show them that, in the view of institutions, youth are capable of carrying out the projects that motivate them.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Involving youth is a great opportunity to ensure the religious future in each of the institutions.

Young people interact in different places, from their neighbourhood, public transport, university, their first job and outings with friends; all these non- religious spaces may be possible scenarios for a way of life where respect for diversity prevails.

How do we motivate Youth to bring religious commitment to all areas?

There is no doubt that we must first strengthen our institution-youth relationship as mentioned above. Every action, in order to be beneficial, must be based on regional programs and maintained by a common agenda among the different faith institutions, where young members are part of their organization; these events can be coordinated by adults or by other young people with experience in the subject-matter.

Young people should no longer be mere guests; they should be involved in the coexistence proposal.

In the case of the Islam for Peace institute, when we receive an invitation to participate in a forum, we ask the entire youth team who wishes to participate. When we put together the annual agenda, we ask who wants to lead the projects and what projects they

have in mind, prioritizing the ideas and schedules of young people. It is also essential to accompany them on the projects and offer all kinds of assistance and communication resources.

We should take into account some elements drawn from the successful case of *Diversity Network* Argentina, founded in 2016 as an interfaith community dedicated to conflict resolution:

1. Understanding the profile of young people through interviews where they are motivated to tell what they expect from an institutional project or program and how they can contribute to it.
2. Performing follow-up and providing support to know how they feel once they are participating in the programs.
3. Coordinators and managers must be alert to detect any conflict escalation or misunderstanding. On some occasions, external conflicts that are linked to the communities can be imported, whether due to an ethnic or religious issue.
4. Holding meetings where an atmosphere of trust is created.

For example, you can take the exercises from the book **“Partners in Conflict/Partners in Peacebuilding Projects: Methods and strategies to transform differences into beneficial opportunities.** By Ana Boutsey and Edward Kaufman<sup>1</sup>

Some exercises in the book propose:

1. Understanding the conflict and its level; generating trust relationships by asking about the origin of their name, who were born in summer or fall, who prefer meat burgers or vegetarian dishes. This type of exercise will organically invite young people to identify with each other despite other differences or labels that even exist within the same community or institution.

2. Another exercise within the book which is used in *Diversity Network* is: *The “My identity”* exercise which involves asking the participants to write on a blank paper the most important things in their life to define their identity, then they are asked to eliminate the least important aspect until there is only one: the most essential one. What we can observe through this exercise is that although there are differences between the participants, many will agree once again that they believe each one is essential beyond the religious or ethnic aspect. For instance, most of the time young people, regardless of religious, geographical and political views, all agree on the element of “family” as essential. These types of activities help break the ice in a group that has just met, and bring them closer together because they already have something in common.

### **Activities within institutions after the instance of trust and recognition**

1. Deliver workshops on social engagements from a religious perspective, for example caring for the environment in religions. Young people no longer want to listen to a speech in which they are reproached for the youth lifestyle, the neglect of the planet or the departure from the faith; on the contrary, they want to be invited to a speech that motivates them to sign up to engagements of relevance to the world.

We see how young people are committed to global warming: many no longer use plastic straws, believe that it is not necessary to consume meat or that it is necessary to know where the clothes they buy come from, if the manufacture is nature-aware or not. This constitutes a possibility to educate from religious institutions with a narrative of invitations to care for Mother Earth that the Holy books or religions of faith preach about and of course fulfilling related-commitments.

Imagine that a religious or holistic institution begins to deliver sermons where it invites humanity not to waste water or to recycle and within the same institution there are recycling bins.

Young people will be able to imitate a healthy practice that is committed to the environment through faith or if they already exercise it, these young people will feel identified with their institutions, here we can take into account the recent article by Religions For Peace which is a motivation to understand religion as a way of life for the coexistence between humanity and mother earth. This article includes the vision of the Evangelical faith, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Protestantism in various languages to which it opens an international door. See: [https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/faith-toolkits/ 2](https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/faith-toolkits/2)

Let's think about this matter of the Environment, and give it an interreligious context. Young people can organize an ecumenical prayer for each time an environmental disaster hits the earth or organize awareness campaigns with a religious perspective. In this way we are giving prominence to young people, they learn on the basis of their religions and are committed to practicing and preaching them.

2. Another great commitment of the youth is education based on equality between men and women, i.e. gender equality. This can be carried out jointly with state organizations and religious institutions.

Holding a meeting where young people can comment on the areas of the institutions that have not yet committed to gender parity, taking into account equal participation between the sexes. Brainstorming on how sacred messages and revelations can be a motivation for non-violence and equality between men and women?

And hence, set up activities where young people can communicate these facts and raise awareness about equal rights to other groups within their communities and institutions.

In 2020, *Islam for Peace Institute* created a Gender and Diversity secretariat aimed at generating activities that educate about equal rights and the problems faced by women, women of faith and minorities.

Likewise, we have also come across opportunities in which young people themselves do not know the value that Islam gives to Women. This secretariat motivates women and young people to enter an Islamic institution to work on the problem of violence in the communities and to learn about the rights that religions grant to women.

See Seminar: Women, Latin America and Morocco with the participation of UN WOMEN Latin America and Dr. Asma Lamrabet. Organized by The Embassy of Morocco in Argentina, Afifa, org and Islam for Peace Institute.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBpL4gh8qoE&t=1s>

3. Put together a scheme of activities where young people summon their peers to work in the various work commissions that will be formed during the year.
4. Motivate young people to think about projects that commit them to work for the rest of the year. Example: Organizing a *youth camp or retreat* where they carry out recreational activities and workshops to learn about social engagement in religion, with dialogue as the first action taken by messengers and spiritual guides.
5. Fundraisers for young people to analyse particular basic needs in certain vulnerable places of the civil

society. The fundraiser may be organized by young people of various religions, faiths and institutions. In this way, they will be showing solidarity with the society in which they live and preaching religions from diversity and cooperation.

In 2020, amidst the pandemic, Diversity Network carried out a charitable fundraiser based on the precepts of the Jewish, Catholic and Islam religions to collect food and winter clothes for people in need, the motto was “*one who saves a life saves the world*”, a religious precept shared by messengers, scriptures and practices.

6. Inviting young people to carry out outreach campaigns on customs, traditions, stereotypes, festivities and celebrations, whether national or religious or related to human rights. Today technology is a fundamental pillar for the lives of young people: as long as they have connectivity, they spend a long hours daily on social media. Taking into account that young people know how to manage social media, this poses an opportunity for them to feel protagonists and the visible face of communication strategies and of their faith institutions and projects.

For example, they can posts on these questions: What do religions say about Interreligious Dialogue? What do religions say about non-violence and other topics of interest?

### **From young people to children**

Religious institutions still have unattended areas.

What areas do we dedicate to children? Although this article focuses on the contribution and engagement of youth in the institutions of faith and the subject-matter under analysis is peacebuilding, we must understand that, in order to reach lasting peace, it must be a path treaded with the society as a whole from the onset of interaction.

Young people who are knowledgeable in pedagogical issues, religion, and dialogue can create a forum where, since childhood, boys and girls interact with the diversity of communities. This is a possibility in which youth can work for the youngest members of their communities. Through games, music, and literature, children can interact with religious groups and faiths that are foreign to their own but with the common purpose of having fun.

### **Youth Interreligious Encounter, an opportunity to work on peace building from friendship**

When young people begin to interact in interreligious spaces, due to the enthusiasm that this generates, groups of friends are created that will experience interreligiousness in intercultural or leisure activities, such as a watching a soccer game, going for an evening walk, throwing a birthday party, or scheduling a day out. These small actions begin to introduce young people to a room of trust and friendship in which they will see each other as close friends, rather than acquaintances.

Interreligious dialogue between young people has the potential of creating encounters of enjoyment; diversity will be understood as a starting point for the journey. And when an escalation of conflict affects the interreligious group, young people will approach said conflict understanding that their counterparts are friends.

### **An inclusive society through Political Action**

Recommendations that we can offer to governments, intergovernmental actors and NGOs:

Governments and NGOs have an essential role in ensuring that the ideas of young people are crystallized- from both vision and economic aid that governments will be able to provide and the

motivation and expertise of the NGOs engaged with ecumenical and youth activities.

Young people need to reach goals that add value to their work; if governments plan, for example, to receive projects from young people, or to invite them to commemorations related to faith where a percentage of young people will share the same space with a public official, a leader of a religious community, or a religious leader, this will motivate them to follow a path of great progress for their future, both professionally and within the community.

Here is a case of potentially fruitful activities to work on between governments and institutions represented by their youth.

Success story of *Diversity Network* Argentina: creation of the Laboratory of Ethnic, Cultural and Religious Diversity of the Buenos Aires City Legislative Body within the *Human Rights Directorate* under the auspices of UNESCO Montevideo.

Amidst the pandemic, Diversity Network together with the Human Rights Directorate founded the Diversity Laboratory, a forum where 15 young people of Abrahamic origin (5 Jews, 5 Muslims, and 5 Catholics) participated during a year of meetings with the aim of learning conflict-resolution techniques and in conversations with legislators and human rights-based NGOs, learned about human rights and how to identify their violations. They also shared religious festivities in a virtual way where they shared their knowledge. At the end of the first edition, they submitted a bill to work on religious diversity and prevent cases of ethnic or religious discrimination. And they created work commissions.

As a common goal, the laboratory creates encounters to understand diversity as wealth, training through education and knowledge of

culture and the support of a state organization in this case within the framework of the Buenos Aires City Legislative Body.

This year, the Diversity Laboratory is delivering its second edition, in which we incorporated three 2020 graduates as facilitators. Each facilitator belongs to one of the religions represented in the laboratory.

Institutional video:

[https://www.instagram.com/tv/CIE7mGTFDOR/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CIE7mGTFDOR/?utm_medium=copy_link)

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CCmG27Tp7BZ/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCmG27Tp7BZ/?utm_medium=copy_link)

### **Joint proposal to work on youth, NGOs and governments:**

Drafting a bill with a provision to commemorate the day of youth and their commitment to faith and that this project is carried out by various groups and faiths. In this instance, if each youth group is well organized in its institution, we can discuss the intercultural feature for peacebuilding projects between religions, faith, etc.

Young people will be motivated to have their project approved, since it will involve their ideas and work against any act of discrimination to might have affected them as well.

1. Active listening: Governments can invite young people to talk about cases in which they feel discriminated against and to present projects on the prevention of discrimination.

Governments can hold meetings with NGOs where young people may chat with recognized officials or activists; in this way, young people will be motivated to continue with projects and

to foster the relationship with the institution that provides opportunities for public policy and diplomacy, for example.

2. NGOs can commit to managing opportunities for young people to write articles in magazines and newspapers as well as undertaking actions so that young people are called to participate in forums, seminars granted internships to work in the field of Religion, Faith, diplomacy and youth.

There are endless opportunities for young people to engage with faith institutions and be agents of change by building peaceful communities. Religious institutions have a great responsibility to generate safe and inclusive spaces for youth to be part of the change and the process.

Once we understand that there is great benefit in having young people be leaders today and not of the future, we will prioritize the needs of and exchanges with those who will carry the legacy of peace everywhere.

It is essential to work on education for the peacebuilding by young people, there is no time to wait to become older adults to take on a peaceful and interreligious commitment.

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