



Standing Commission 4: Championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Roundtable Hosted by *Religions for Peace*

16 February 2021

Background

The *Religions for Peace* 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, developed through an inclusive and participatory process and adopted by the World Council on 26 February 2020, contains six strategic goals that provide a clear and collaborative framework for the activities of the entire *Religions for Peace* movement. Each of the goals advance *Religions for Peace's* multi-religious vision of peace, build on its past work and align with one or more of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Five Standing Commissions – corresponding to the first five Strategic Goals – were established to serve as advisory bodies for *Religions for Peace's* work in those respective areas. These Standing Commissions are the mechanism by which *Religions for Peace* leadership may directly collaborate on and guide the future of *R/P* Programmes in their respective areas of focus. The shared vision of the Standing Commission is as a space of knowledge, information, co-creation, persistent guidance, and reflection. Each Standing Commission has representation of leaders with long-standing interest, engagement, and championship in the topic of this space. The Commission acts as the ‘group of elders’ to guide *Religions for Peace's* work in this space. This Standing Commission works towards the goal of Championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion. The composition of this Standing Commission considered different areas of expertise, as well as different regions and religions.

Discussion Points

Prof. Azza Karam asked members of the Standing Commission to reflect on the ways in which this movement may best serve them and their respective areas of work and initiatives, but also the ways in which they may contribute to the work of the Standing Commission: Championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion. Mr. Pietro Bartoli introduced *Religion for Peace's* 2020 activities for this Strategic Priority which are also included in the [Annual Report 2020](#).

Several key themes were identified by many participants. One of these was the importance of holy and sacred sites. Bishop Younan opened the discussion by pointing out the relevance of this issue in Jerusalem and welcomed the revival of the *Religions for Peace* [Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites](#) as one possible response. This point of emphasis was echoed by Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, who pointed out its long-standing nature only now receiving major media attention. Dr. Ana Maria Celis added the importance of collaborating with indigenous peoples for whom the concept of a holy site is very different than the “norm.”

The importance of freedom of belief in relation to freedom of thought was raised as particularly poignant in the world today, especially given the events in France. All members recognized the risk of politicizing the issue of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion and the challenges facing this right in different global

Religions for Peace

contexts. Among the challenges facing this freedom were linguistic and conceptual barriers (which create obstacles for operating on the same wavelength), the shortcomings of childhood education, and a lack of data.

In response to the first point, all participants expressed a shared desire to better amplify each other's and *Religions for Peace's* own work. Dr. Ganoune Diop expressly referred to *Religions for Peace* as a beacon, an example of religions working for peace. Amb. Marie-Therese Pictet-Althann confirmed the importance of *Religions for Peace's* representation in governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental spaces and committed to endorsing it. This commitment to shared information and representation was reiterated by Mr. J Mark Brinkmoeller. The importance of the private sector was also added.

Mr. Knox Thames brought attention to the question of tackling the issue "upstream," through education, which was duly noted by all participants.

The difficulty in working with deficient data was raised by many participants and will continue to be a point of emphasis moving forward.

In conclusion, the importance of global statements was reiterated and approved. There is no substitute for local religious leaders standing up together, and *Religions for Peace's* unique amplification platform was highlighted as a point of pride and great use.

Action Points

- Prof. Karam asks Commission members to send *Religions for Peace* a two-page brief on what they are already actively working on in order to suggest what *Religions for Peace* can add value to it. *Religions for Peace* team will send a template and deadline.
- *Religions for Peace* will evaluate possible actions on the theme of protecting Holy Sites

Annexes: List Participants, Overview

Strategic Priority 4: Championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Introduction

The *Religions for Peace* 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, developed through an inclusive and participatory process and adopted by the World Council on 26 February 2020, contains six strategic goals that provide a clear and collaborative framework for the activities of the entire *Religions for Peace* movement. Each of the goals advance *Religions for Peace*'s multi-religious vision of peace, build on its past work, and align with one or more of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Strategic Plan identified three key methodologies of *Religions for Peace*'s modus operandi: advocacy (including consultations and leveraging the multi-religious leadership voice for shared well-being), building capacities (specifically those required for religious and secular entities to work together, and for multi religious collaboration to take place), and knowledge management (including producing and disseminating relevant multi-religious wisdom, experience and learnings). Six Standing Commissions – one for each of the Strategic Goals – were established to serve as advisory bodies for *Religions for Peace*'s work in those respective areas. This Overview is on the goal of Championing Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion.

Holy sites are of crucial spiritual and cultural significance to billions of people and yet history demonstrates how they are often caught up in political, territorial, and religious disputes, becoming pawns of conflict themselves. Harm to holy sites impacts people's identities, reinforces trauma, and fuels the escalation of violence. To address this, *Religions for Peace* and partners launched [The Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites](#) – a cutting-edge strategy to mitigate interreligious conflict and build peace. Our Interreligious Council (IRC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina implemented a project that systematically reported on attacks on holy sites, issued interfaith public condemnations of violence, and actively engaged other stakeholders such as the police, media, and local political leaders to protect holy sites.

During our 9th World Assembly in 2013, more than 600 global religious representatives from 120 countries endorsed our global, *Welcoming the Other* campaign to stop the conflicts and hostilities that arise from the dehumanization of the “other.” *Welcoming the Other* is about working together, not only to resist threats to human dignity, but also to promote the flourishing of all beings. It is an opportunity to welcome each person as a co-builder, co-nurturer, and co-steward of our shared well-being, to include living in harmony with nature. *Religions for Peace* implemented various “Welcoming the Other” projects across the world to promote social cohesion, inclusivity of the marginalized and oppressed, and full participation in society for minority groups.

During the 10th World Assembly, *Religions for Peace* re-committed to leading by example to instill the respect, mutuality and solidarity that are essential to promote, build and sustain just, harmonious and diverse communities. At the core is a commitment to enable all *Religions for Peace* IRCs to advance a more robust notion of citizenship that acknowledges basic human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in line with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises that, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community

Religions for Peace

with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

2020 Progress

In 2020, *Religions for Peace's* efforts were recognized by the Roosevelt Foundation, which awarded *Religions for Peace* the [2020 Freedom of Worship](#) award in recognition for its proven work as a peacemaker and successful cooperative network of religious leaders.

Advocacy

On 22 September, *Religions for Peace* leaders [sent an open letter](#) to the United Nations Secretary-General expressing grave concern about multiple, repeated, and serious violations of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – freedom of thought, conscience and religion – committed by several Member States of the United Nations, against many religious communities. The leaders urged Member States of the United Nations not only to respect and honour all their religious minorities, but also to take extra precautions and clear measures to support, realise and uphold the rights of all communities of faith.

Religions for Peace leaders [called for calm](#) when news of Hagia Sophia dominated news waves. Our leaders stated that Hagia Sophia is “meant to be shared with all the world” and committed to “the universality of heritage as something that can create peace and respect for all faiths.”

In the wake of terror attacks in Austria and France, our diverse religious leaders stood together to “[Condemning Violence in the Name of Religion – Committing to Building Bridges with Love.](#)”

Knowledge Management (Opinion Pieces & Media)

Following the terror attacks in Austria and France, Prof. Azza Karam featured the stories of Judge Mohammed Abdel Salam, who represents the Grand Imam of Al- Azhar on our governing board and Imam Sayyed Razawi, the Secretary General of the Scottish Ahl al-Bayt Society, and a Trustee of *Religions for Peace*. Both Muslim leaders firmly attest that these atrocities are against what they believe, what they live, and what they preach, which is: peaceful coexistence, reconciliation, lawfulness, and upholding compassion, love, and forgiveness: [Not in Our Name, Never in Our Name: A Conversation with Muslim Faith Leaders Echoing the Wisdom of a Pontiff](#) from [IPS News](#) by Prof. Azza Karam.

Capacity Building (Consultations & Convenings)

Religious communities have a moral obligation to prevent violence and discrimination. For this reason, *Religions for Peace* and interfaith partners launched the Southeast Asia: Advancing Interreligious Dialogue and Freedom of Religions or Belief (SEA-AIR) project to enhance local capacities to combat religious discrimination and prejudice.

SEA-AIR unites six organisations across Southeast Asia, including our Interreligious Councils in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand. As part of the project, 60 action-oriented faith leaders and activists participated in an [interfaith peacebuilding fellowship](#) where they were trained in mediation, communication, peer learning, analysis, and process design. To support their work, 25 fellowship grants were provided this year. To further equip the fellows, *Religions for Peace*, adapted its “Citizenship; Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion of Belief and Protection of Vulnerable Communities”

Religions for Peace

guide that was produced for the Middle East and North Africa regions, for the South East Asian context.

More than 150 religious actors and prominent leaders welcomed the momentous step taken by the representatives of the Christian, Kakai, Shia, Sunni and Yazidi communities in Iraq through the adoption of an Inter-Faith Statement on the Victims and Survivors of ISIL in March 2020. This was convened as part of a virtual conference hosted jointly by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for the Crimes committed by Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD) and *Religions for Peace*. (16 July “[Affirming an Interreligious Response to Supporting Peaceful, Inclusive and Just Societies: Building on a Historic Interfaith Statement on ISIL Accountability in Iraq.](#)”)

Current Priorities

ADVOCACY: *Religions for Peace* will continue to advance a more robust notion of citizenship that acknowledges basic human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in line with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It will work to reduce and eliminate violence and hatred against members of religious communities.

CAPACITY BUILDING: As part of the 2021 Global IRC Development Webinar Series, *Religions for Peace* will host a webinar designed to equip IRCs for increased action in the area of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It will provide safe spaces for reflection on concerns regarding the political instrumentalization of Freedom of Religion and Belief.

Throughout these efforts, *Religions for Peace* intends to engage with and leverage shared learning within the Inter-religious Councils/affiliates of the movement.