

☞ Religions *for* Peace

Side Event to the 29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations
Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 29)

**Faith in Action:
Multi-Religious, Multisectoral &
Intergenerational Collaboration
for a Better Future**

MONDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2024 | 14:30 - 16:00 BAKU
COP29 FAITH PAVILION & LIVESTREAM

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



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Dr. Francis Kuria Kagema,
Secretary General,
Religions for Peace

Dr. Francis Kuria Kagema is the Secretary General of *Religions for Peace* International, Secretary General of the African Council of Religious Leaders – *Religions for Peace* and former Executive Director of Interreligious Council of Kenya (*IRCK-RfP*), a position he has held since 2008.

Dr. Francis Kuria Kagema previously served as Programmes Director and head of the *IRCK-RfP* secretariat for a period of six years. Before joining the *IRCK-RfP*, he worked as the National Coordinator for the Small Business Network, an organisation advocating for small and medium enterprises. He has also worked as a financial analyst at the Nairobi Stock Exchange and as a volunteer with the St. John Ambulance Brigade, where he served for 16 years, retiring in 1998 as Assistant Commissioner, Training and Operations. He holds degrees in veterinary medicine and surgery.



H.E. Judge Mohamed Abdelsalam (*represented by Mr. Mohamed Bahr*)
Secretary General, Muslim Council of Elders;
Co-President, *Religions for Peace*

H.E. Judge Mohamed Abdelsalam served as the former advisor to the Grand Imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar Dr. Ahmed Al Tayeb for over eight years and assisted in drafting the Document on Human Fraternity signed by the Grand Imam and Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi in February 2019. The same year, Pope Francis awarded H.E. Judge Abdelsalam the Order of Pope Pius IX Knight Commander for his services towards spreading tolerance and interfaith dialogue. He is the first Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim to be awarded this accolade. H.E. Judge Abdelsalam represented Al-Azhar, the chief center of Islamic and Arabic learning in the world, in the constitutional assembly charged with drafting a new constitution for Egypt and participated in drafting Al-Azhar documents from 2011- 2018. The Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt awarded him the Medal of the Constitutional Court in recognition of his distinguished representation of the Egyptian judiciary during his time at Al-Azhar and the Constitutional Assembly. The Ministry of Interior of the United Arab Emirates awarded Judge Abdelsalam the Community Service Medal for his commitment and positive impact towards strengthening security in communities. A graduate of Al-Azhar University, H.E. Judge Abdelsalam is a member of the Al-Azhar Center for Interreligious Dialogue.

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Mr. Steve Chiu,

Youth Representative at the United Nations,
Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

Mr. Steve Chiu is the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation's Youth Representative at the United Nations. In alignment with Tzu Chi's work in disaster relief, climate action, education for global citizenship, sustainable development, and gender equality, Steve works to build relationships, share best practices, and develop programmes with other organisations to make tangible impacts on the ground, with the mission of alleviating the suffering of those in need.



Mr. Mohamed Bahr,

Director of Strategic Planning,
Muslim Council of Elders

Mr. Mohamed Bahr's career spans two decades in management consultancy, specialising in corporate strategy, organisational efficiency, transformation, and change management. Throughout his professional career, Mr. Bahr has partnered with leading companies and organisations. Currently, Mr. Bahr works alongside foundations, philanthropists, and NGOs to broaden the impact of his work.



Bhikkhu Vasu Bandhu,

Co-Chair, Faith for Earth Youth Council, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
Member, *Religions for Peace* International Youth Committee

Bhikkhu Vasu Bandhu is a Buddhist Monk at the Dhammapada Sangha; serving as Interfaith Manager for the Arizona Faith Network; on the International Youth Committee of *Religions for Peace*; as Co-Chair on the Faith for Earth Youth Council of the United Nations Environment Programme; as a Global Council Trustee from North America for the United Religions Initiative; and on the Global Youth Network of the Charter for Compassion. He has served the interfaith movement since age 18, collaborating with diverse interfaith organisations including the Parliament of the World's Religions. He is 29 years old; his studies are in Political Science and Social Projects from UnADM; 4 years ago, he migrated from his country of origin, Mexico, to the United States of America to live with his husband, who is Muslim.

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Ms. Merylene Chitharai,
Youth Member,
Religions for Peace South Africa

Ms. Merylene Chitharai serves the *Religions for Peace* Youth Media Team and is currently based in Durban, South Africa. Obtaining her Bachelor of Architecture Studies Degree, she works as a graphic artist, 3d designer and architectural technologist with 13 years of experience in the realm of social and sustainable architecture.

This has been driven by her passion for social and environmental justice and is sustained by her written engagement with newsprint and social media. In addition, her passion for spiritual reformation and community service has been sustained by her affiliation with various organisations namely; the Hindu Youth Network of South Africa, the KZN Inter-Religious Youth Council, the Religions for Peace Global Interfaith Youth Network, The African Interfaith Youth Network, the *Religions for Peace* Interfaith Youth Climate Forum, *Religions for Peace* South Africa and Bhakti Marga – of which she is an active contributor in a number of ways. This includes driving or participating in various charities, promotional and advocacy initiatives, and engaging in topics and projects within the areas of leadership, seva (service), spirituality and religion. She also has travelled to many countries since 2013 serving, networking and building spiritual relations at various *Religions for Peace* Conferences. Since 2009, she has been on many spiritual retreats and pilgrimages with her Satguru, Paramahansa Vishwananda.



Ms. María Laura Vargas Valcárcel
Executive Secretary, *Religions for Peace* Interreligious Council in Peru (IRC Peru);
National Facilitator, Interfaith Rainforest Initiative Peru (IRI Peru)

Ms. María Laura Vargas Valcárcel has served as Executive Secretary of the *Religions for Peace* Interreligious Council of Peru and co-Secretary of the Judeo-Christian Fellowship since 2009. She brings 30 years' experience working with the Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social (CEAS) of the Catholic Church of Peru, 16 of which was as Executive Secretary; following this post, she was asked to assume the area of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Previously she served as Coordinator of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation for the Columban Fathers, a missionary society; as Member of the Executive Committee and Vice President of Pax Christi International; and supported adult literacy programmes in Lima Norte for 17 years. She continues to serve as a member of the Board of Directors of World Vision Peru, as a member of Pax Christi Peru, as head of the human rights team of the El Departamento de Justicia y Solidaridad (DEJUSOL) del Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM)—Secretariado Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Cáritas (SELACC), as a member of the Red Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Pensamiento Social de la Iglesia (REDLAPSI), as a member of the Commission of Presidential Prerogatives as well as Counselor of the Reparation Council within the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. She holds a degree in Theology and a degree in Education with a specialty in social sciences.

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Ms. Cecilia Schirmeister,
Representative to the United Nations
Bahá'í International Community

Ms. Cecilia Schirmeister is a Representative of the Baha'i International Community's UN Office in New York. Her areas of work include youth, human development, and climate change. Cecilia's background spans project management, public affairs, and communications work related to development at both the international and grassroots levels. Most recently, she managed the implementation of the USAID Global Health Supply Chain Programme - Procurement and Supply Management project in Asia and Africa. Prior to that, she spent several years analysing data and learnings generated at the grassroots and institutional levels in countries across the world related to building the capacity to contribute to the well-being of society. Her past research studies supranational response capacity to cross-national challenges amidst the limitations of an us vs. them-bound system, and explores the normative potential of centering the well-being of humanity in migration policy. Cecilia holds a Bachelors in Political Science with a focus on international relations and a Bachelors in French and Francophone Studies.



Ms. Kristine Leonardo,
Programme Officer,
Religions for Peace

Ms. Kristine Leonardo serves as a Programme Officer at *Religions for Peace*, and Treasurer of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations (CRNGO). In her current role, she coordinates *Religions for Peace's* flagship Multi-Religious Humanitarian Fund, as well as its Strategic Priorities in advancing gender equality; and nurturing a sustainable environment. She also serves as the Project Coordinator of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), a United Nations-led programme that promotes the protection of the world's rainforest and the Indigenous Peoples that serve as its guardians. Kristine graduated from Seton Hall University with an M.A. in Diplomacy and International Relations with specialisations in International Organisations, and International Law and Human Rights. Before receiving her M.A., she completed her B.S. in Diplomacy and International Relations, with minors in French and Criminal Justice. Before joining *Religions for Peace*, she served as an Immigration Intern at the International Rescue Committee (IRC), where she coordinated and managed the immigration applications of over 100 asylum-seekers and refugee families, and provided translation and interpretation for several French-speaking clients. Kristine also served as a Peace and Security Fellow at the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, where she followed the work of the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and prepared reports for the Holy See offices in the Vatican on the meetings of various UN agencies, including the 76th High-Level General Debate of the UNGA, UN Security Council, and the Fourth Committee of the UNGA.