

UPF Austria's Faith-Based Organizations and Sustainable Development Goals

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Vienna, Austria -- A conference was held at the United Nations offices with the theme "Faith-Based Organizations and the UN Sustainable Development Goals."

The one-day conference, held at the Vienna International Centre on January 31, 2020, was attended by 200 participants including UN diplomats, religious leaders, NGO representatives and other members of civil society.

Following up on conferences in 2019 of the [Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations](#) in [Vienna](#), New York and [San Francisco](#), the event commemorated World Interfaith Harmony Week. It was supported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), the Austrian NGO Growth4Peace, and the United Nations Correspondents Association-Vienna (UNCAV), as well as UPF and two affiliated organizations: the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) and Youth and Students for Peace (YSP).



The conference began with a welcome from Mr. Peter Haider, president of UPF-Austria. The first session of the conference, "Interfaith Cooperation, Peacebuilding and Crime Prevention," was moderated by organizational development consultant Ms. Heather Wokusch. She observed the increasing importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in areas ranging from international relations to criminology.

[Mr. Jean-Luc Lemahieu](#), director of the UNODC Division of Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, opened his presentation by quoting the speech of HM King Abdullah II of Jordan introducing World Interfaith Harmony Week at the Plenary Session of the 65th UN General Assembly in 2010: "Humanity everywhere is bound together, not only by mutual interests, but by shared commandments to love God and neighbor; to love the good and neighbor." Referring to the Global Study on Homicide 2019, Mr. Lemahieu noted contexts in which homicide is perpetrated and its links to religious extremism. Observing that current developments often reflect "navigating without a compass," he called for multilateralism of "all faiths

working together in inclusive networks with the theme of humanity at the core."

[H.E. Mansoor Ahmad Khan](#), permanent representative of Pakistan to the UN (Vienna) and ambassador to Austria with concurrent accreditation of Slovakia, opened with a 1948 quote from Pakistan's founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah: "You are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed; that has nothing to do with the business of the state." The ambassador provided examples of religious tolerance in contemporary Pakistan, such as the [Kartarpur Corridor](#) between India and Pakistan, and the restoration of Hindu temples. He discussed the linkage of religion and terrorism within the context of the rise of the far right, ending with an appeal for integration and assimilation.



[H.E. Dato' Ganeson Sivagurunathan](#), ambassador of Malaysia to Austria and permanent representative of Malaysia to the United Nations (Vienna), spoke about crime prevention: "Malaysia believes that there is an urgent need for the international community to cooperate more closely in combating hate speech, discrimination and xenophobia, which have inadvertently been widespread through social media platforms." Noting that freedom of religion is guaranteed by Article 11 of Malaysia's Constitution, the ambassador discussed the unique practice of open house traditions during the festive season, especially during Eid al-Fitr, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas. He called for "the majority who are peace-loving and moderate" to "reclaim our rightful place in the center."

[Mag. Martin Pammer](#), formerly the Austrian ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, discussed the work of the Dialogue of Cultures Task Force of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, which he is heading now. As noted by the ministry, the task force aims at "promoting intercultural understanding through education and the exchange of information, the rapprochement between different cultures and religions, the strengthening of intercultural competence and the inclusion of marginalized groups and religions -- nationally as well as internationally." Mr. Pammer called for religion and dialogue to be addressed holistically. Observing that Islam is a part of Austrian society, he referred to current issues such as the head-scarf debate and the vote to close the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID). Noting that religion can be used as a political tool, he called for a more enlightened approach.

The next presentation, "Critical Philosophy and Peacemaking of Religions," which was to have been given by [Professor Dr. Anton Grabner-Haider](#) of the University of Graz, was presented by Tanja Hirschmann. His first observation was that most teachings or moral norms of religions are useful for the individual life and for social situations; religions follow the goal of making and keeping the peace in situations of political conflicts. However, the "dangerous side of religious convictions" was also acknowledged, with the observation that many religions draw a very strong border to different believers or to nonbelievers, the so-called out-group. The conclusion was that "there are many ways to God" and that religious people must engage in "mental disarmament and in political reconciliation between hostile groups."

The vice president of UPF-Austria, [Mag. Elisabeth Cook](#), concluded the first session with an overview of the World Clergy Leadership Conference (WCLC) which had been held in December 2019 in New York. Attended by nearly 1,000 religious leaders and guests from around the world, the WCLC event aimed at uniting races and religions while strengthening marriages and rebuilding families. Ms. Cook was among a delegation of seven Austrians attending the conference. She provided an overview of the peace declaration signing and clergy pledge to work for world peace. Ms. Cook also discussed the "Peace Starts with Me" festival, which was held at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, the following day. Impressed with the passionate approach of the African-American community toward faith and belief, Ms. Cook was one of 20,000 guests witnessing the appeal made to Christians by UPF co-founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon to unite in the spirit of the Gospel.

At a beginning of the second session [Mag. Victoria Lobas](#), the founder of Asanga Yoga, gave an introduction to traditional yoga philosophy and led the audience in a few minutes of meditation. She

quoted Mahatma Gandhi, who famously said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." She explained that Gandhi was telling us that personal and social transformation go hand in hand. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world also would change.

Dr. Afsar Rathor, president of Growth4Peace and a former project manager in the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and other UN organizations, served as moderator of the second session.



As the first speaker [Professor Dr. Zekirija Sejdini](#), head of the Institute of Islamic-Theological Studies at the University of Vienna, spoke about the challenges of Islam in the European context. The growing number of people who have emigrated from different parts of the world inevitably increased the religious and cultural pluralism in Europe and have caused uncertainty in the society. His concluding words were: "The future will not depend on the challenges we face but on the answers we find together."

[Mr. Augustin Nicolescu](#), co-director of the Herbert C. Kelman Institute and program manager at the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, said that while none of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) addresses religion and faith directly, we can identify the crucial role that faith-based organizations may have in fulfilling them. He described his experiences while working in two conflict areas, one in Sri Lanka and the other in Israel and Palestine.



Ms. Mais Mohamad, president of the organization Unlimited Perspectives, said that by fulfilling the UN SDGs we can find concrete solutions to the challenges we face in the world. She explained that a first goal in her organization is to learn coexistence, which means to live in peace, respecting and accepting one another. The best way to live with one another is to know the other's background, culture, history, mentality and philosophy. She stressed that good education and knowledge are necessary to resist stereotypes and prejudice and to acquire awareness, justice, acceptance, human values, equality and human rights.

The last speaker was [Mr. Gottfried Hutter](#), a theologian and psychotherapist who also has studied political science. He focused his speech on a book he published recently titled *Honorable Peace: 100 Years of Middle East Conflict – How Can Lasting Peace Be Secured between the Muslim World and Israel?* He spoke about his dream for peace in the Middle East, which should be an honorable one. He asked how this book differs from most other contributions aiming at a solution to the Middle East conflict, and why he believes that his view can lead to a form of peace that will enable all parties to relax and reconcile? The main difference may be the author's decision to accord its due place to one of the most potent motivating powers in this part of the world, the religions.

As a finale, musician Mr. Jürgen Solis performed the award-winning song "[We Are One](#)" and led the audience in singing along. This composition was named best song at the 2015 Rumi World Music Award in Las Vegas.