

## UPF Geneva, Switzerland's IAPD inaugurated in the Ecumenical Center of Geneva

Heiner Handschin  
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Geneva, Switzerland -- The Geneva/Swiss chapter of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development was inaugurated in the Ecumenical Center of Geneva.

The launch took place during a conference held on September 21, 2018, by Universal Peace Federation (UPF) in close partnership with Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), an affiliated organization, as well as the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance (GIIA) and the Fribourg Peace Forum.

The conference, titled "Toward Interdependence and Mutual Prosperity: The Role of Religious Leaders and Parliamentarians," addressed the cooperation of religious leaders and politicians in creating a world of sustainable peace, prosperity and healthy human development.

Geneva, as a place with a significant history regarding the relationship between the religious and political spheres, was chosen for this conference based on the enthusiastic response of the participants at a formal consultation that took place at the World Council of Churches on May 31. At that occasion it was decided to hold the conference on September 21, the International Day of Peace, and then, in consensus, launch the Geneva/Swiss chapter of IAPD.

### Opening Session

In his welcoming remarks, Mr. Heiner Handschin, the president of UPF-Switzerland, reminded the audience that on this 37th International Day of Peace, one could equally celebrate the 70 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 70 years of the World Council of Churches. He emphasized that today's event would be remembered as another landmark through the launching of the Geneva/Swiss chapter of IAPD. He offered a few thoughts about the importance of Geneva before introducing briefly the panelists of the opening session.

Dr. Katsumi Otsuka, the regional president of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, emphasized the importance of the location as well as the unique conference facilities of the World Council of Churches.

Dr. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, an Anglican cleric and theological scholar who is the executive director of WCC's program for interreligious dialogue and co-operation, extended the greetings and best wishes of WCC's general secretary, the Rev. Dr. Olaf Fykse Tveit. Dr. Rajkumar spoke of the need for greater interreligious harmony in tackling the key issues of the world.

Dr. Iqbal Alimohamed, a former senior UN diplomat serving at the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees during the 1970s and 1980s, presented a short report about his recent attendance of the UPF summit in South Korea related to the IAPD. He encouraged the Geneva branch of IAPD to set up specific strategic goals and objectives, coupled with action plans, and a review process to check how objectives are being met, so that the new organization will indeed be able to make a difference.

## **Session I: The Role of Religion in Protecting Human Rights and Dignity – Toward an Interreligious Council at the United Nations**

Building on a series of nine Model UN Interfaith Youth Council conferences in cooperation with the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance, this session featured a debate among youth representatives of major religions.

The Interfaith Council Secretariat was taken on by Ms. Carolyn Handschin, European president of Women's Federation for World Peace and project coordinator. She gave an overview of the project, tracing back to a proposal that UPF founder Dr. Sun Myung Moon made in 2000 at the UN in New York to create a high-level interreligious council at the heart of the United Nations. It seemed very fitting to have this meeting today at the World Council of Churches, a religious body whose origins interfaced with the early United Nations.

Ms. Handschin introduced the president of the council, the newly appointed Rabbi Kevin De-Carli, the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of Baden, Switzerland. As he skillfully and with compassion led the debate, the seven delegates each gave a five-minute statement explaining the views of their faith on the session theme, "Interfaith Cooperation and the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity – A Vision for an Interreligious Council at the United Nations." Their insights, conviction and solidarity added to persuasive arguments for the need for such a council in solving problems in the world.



## **Session II: Transforming Conflicts and Creating Lasting Peace**

The session chair, UPF-Switzerland Secretary General Chantal Chetelat-Komagata, introduced key goals for the panel.

Dr. Adrian Holderegger, professor emeritus of moral theology and ethics at the University of Fribourg and president of the Fribourg Peace Forum, a think-tank which co-sponsored the conference, presented an academic approach. Posing questions such as "Are religions dangerous?" first he elaborated on the conflict potential of religions and then he showed the unique potential of religions for peacebuilding by offering reconciliation and healing.

Dr. Elmar Kuhn, the dean of world religions at the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, reminded the audience that all religions have a great potential for peacebuilding. However, the important thing is the difference between theory and practice, he said.

Dr. Wissam al-Saliby, who grew up in a post-conflict Lebanon, in an unhealed society where the historical and political narratives of the various communities continued to compete, emphasized the need for mutual understanding and better listening to each other.

## **Session III: Religious Leaders and Parliamentarians as Peacemakers**

The session chair, UPF-Switzerland Vice President Michel Reymond, introduced the session topic: finding lasting solutions to critical challenges of our time involving both skillful politicians and open-minded religious leaders.

Mr. Reymond then extended greetings to all participants on behalf of Hon. Yves Nidegger, a member of the Swiss National Council, who couldn't participate due to sudden pressing activities in the parliament.

Dr. Rifa'at Lenzin, the president of the interfaith group Iras Cotis, Switzerland, gave an overview of her organization's work in an increasingly multireligious and multicultural environment. As a female Muslim scholar, she showed a great awareness of the challenges between religious concepts and political pragmatism.

Hon. Patricia Lalonde, a member of the European Parliament since 2017 representing the Group Alliance of Liberals and Democrats of Europe, came to Geneva to demonstrate her support of the efforts of civil society. She strongly encouraged civil society and religious leaders to exert a greater influence on public affairs, even as she herself took public office recently with the motivation to help solve issues and effectively contribute to solutions in trouble spots like Yemen, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan.

As the last speaker of the session, Rev. Dr. William A. McComish, dean emeritus of the Geneva St. Peter's Cathedral and president of the Geneva Spiritual Appeal, indicated that it shouldn't be forgotten that democracy had its roots in Christianity and that church and state are both vital partners that need to continue working together, as the Geneva example seemed to show.



#### **Session IV: Interreligious Cooperation as a Major Factor for Sustainable Peace in the World**

The fourth session encouraged faith-based organizations to cooperate beyond national, religious and political affiliations to develop comprehensive strategies for peace and development.

The session chair, Dr. Dieter Schmidt, a medical doctor and the Central Europe regional president of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an affiliated organization, introduced the first speaker, Mr. Ivo Sasek, the pastor, founder and president of the Organic Christian Generation.

Mr. Sasek gave a compelling discourse about some observations in nature that reflect harmonious cooperation, according to the "swarm intelligence" prevalent in all facets of our natural universe. He stated that we should learn and follow the natural example in order to create sustainable peace and harmony in the world.

Dr. Astrid Stuckelberger, a professor, researcher and public health expert at the University of Geneva and University of Lausanne, emphasized that interreligious cooperation was the most neglected reality of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). She concluded that the trend is irrefutable; there is an absolute need for bringing religion, faiths and spirituality into global policy.

Dr. Arun Pabari, the president of the National Council of the Sathya Sai Organization in Switzerland, stated that in his work of values education with children, the results emphasize the need for input of religions and faiths. Sustainable peace begins with children learning peace in their daily life.

The final speaker, Rabbi Kevin De-Carli of the Jewish community of Baden, showed the tragedy of interreligious dialogue leading to interreligious conflicts. He emphasized the great need for new role models for better mutual understanding and our undeniable interdependence, so as to allow a true and responsible interreligious cooperation for the sake of sustainable peace and human development.



#### **Session V: Closing Session and Launching of IAPD in Geneva**

The closing session was chaired by Ms. Carolyn Handschin, European president of Women's Federation for World Peace and the worldwide director for UPF's Offices of UN Relations. She asked the four speakers to offer final remarks, suggestions for the way forward, as well as concrete action steps.

The first speaker, Dr. Michael Balcomb, the regional chair of FFWPU for Europe and the Middle East, conveyed the vision and the greetings of the founder of IAPD, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, emphasizing the very important location in Geneva as one of the historical centers of Christianity and home of the offices of the World Council of Churches.

Dr. Amiira Neff, a social activist and former member of the city council of Montreux, testified to the difficulty of a Swiss with a multicultural background and the need for IAPD as a means to go beyond bias related to religious, racial and political affiliation.

Dr. Elmar Kuhn of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts expressed his vision and hope for IAPD to trigger a learning process for respect and tolerance of others, for cooperation and empathy of the religious denominations in Europe. He especially expressed his hope for the Geneva/Swiss chapter of IAPD to become a beacon of light for a world in need of lasting peace, based on interaction with various international organizations, including the UN Human Rights Council.

Finally the president of UPF-Switzerland, Mr. Heiner Handschin, presented the declaration for the launching of IAPD in Geneva and encouraged all to become active members of IAPD by signing on to the newly launched initiative. As first action steps, he suggested finding an office, launching a website and expanding connections with various local and international partners.

After some musical presentations offered by Jayhan (Julia Handschin), a singer, composer and YouTuber, the final session ended and the participants continued networking at the WCC Restaurant.