

## World Interfaith Harmony Week Observed in Nigeria

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Abuja, Nigeria—Representatives of Nigeria’s religious traditions were among more than 120 participants of a conference held in honor of World Interfaith Harmony Week 2017.

UPF-Nigeria, in collaboration with the United Religions Initiative-West Africa, organized a “Special Conference of Religious Educators, Leaders and Organizations on Interreligious Peace.” The conference was held on February 4 at the National Merit Award House in Abuja’s Maitama district.

Beginning with the interfaith invocation, representatives of Christianity, Islam, Bahá’í, Krishna movement and Unificationism offered prayers for peace and success of the conference as well as for religious groups in Nigeria to work together to save the nation.

Dr. George Ikpot, the UPF-Nigeria director of international affairs, gave the welcome address, which emphasized the significance of the event and the dedication of 2017 by UPF-Nigeria as National Year for Interreligious Harmony and Cooperation. Ambassador Babatunde Adegbesan, the UPF-Nigeria director of partnership, gave the chairman’s opening remarks, calling for interreligious dialogue and actions and an appeal to all stakeholders to work together to bring a religious impact on national policies in Nigeria “as our increasing religious organizations should lead to decreasing criminality and social ills.”

The panel presentations were given by representatives of the Krishna movement, Christianity, Islamic Movement of Nigeria, Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Nigeria, Africa Clergy Leadership Conference and United Religions Initiative. UPF-Nigeria Secretary General Dr. Raphael Ogar Oko gave the keynote address, “Architecture for Interreligious Harmony and Cooperation,” explaining that “we need an interreligious ideology, interreligious citizens and interreligious environment to be able to arrive at the needed interreligious culture, structure and infrastructure for interreligious peace in Nigeria.”

The presentations were followed by the Interfaith Bridge of Peace ceremony during which participants from different religious groups embraced each other and pledged never to condone or take part in any form of interreligious violence but to work together, transcending the borders of religions and denominations.

The conference participants affirmed that they are “interreligious citizens” whose duty is to increase the number of Nigerians in the realm of interreligious citizenship. They proclaimed Nigeria as a multi-religious nation that should strive to become an interreligious nation by 2020 and not be classified as a secular nation that denies the existence of the Divine Creator whom all religious groups acknowledge.

The participants endorsed the UPF-Nigeria and URI-West Africa commitment of dedicating 2017 to the promotion of interreligious harmony and cooperation in Nigeria as a response to overcoming the religious challenges facing their nation.

They supported the call for the establishment of a National Assembly Committee on Interreligious Affairs and a Federal Ministry of Interreligious Affairs, the introduction of interreligious studies in schools, the establishment of an Interreligious Worship Center in Abuja and the devotion of 10 percent of the annual budget to religious matters in Nigeria. The participants representing the different religious groups in Nigeria affirmed that there is One Divine Creator of all people and that all human beings originated from One Creator and are therefore brothers and sisters who should live in peace on earth as a condition to rest in peace in the great beyond.



As a follow-up to the conference, UPF-Nigeria and URI-West Africa were mandated to create an Interfaith Study Committee on Interreligious Affairs to engage critical stakeholders, especially scholars of religious studies in educational institutions, on strategies for empowering religious organizations and promoting interreligious cooperation.

The Study Committee on Interreligious Affairs is a representative group of religious and faith-based educators, leaders and organizations as well as institutions and agencies committed to working together to develop and promote policies and programs for interreligious harmony and cooperation in Nigeria. It is open to religious people from the various religious traditions of the world.

Already about ten scholars from different educational institutions have written to join the study committee, in addition to other participants at the conference:

Professor Jacob Kehinde Ayantayo, professor of religious ethics, sociology of religion, interreligious conflicts and peace studies, University of Ibadan  
Emmanuel Osewe Akubor, PhD, Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife  
Helen Oyekanmi, head of the Religious Education Department, Baptist College of Theology, Oyo  
Philip A. Akinwande, priest at the Anglican Diocese of Lagos  
Dr. Peter Ropo Awoniyi of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso  
Oni Deborah Oluwapelumi, PhD, student of sociology of religion, University of Ibadan, Oshomoh  
Titus Ojo, PhD, student of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan  
Rev. Dr. Peter Awojobi, UMCA Theological College, Ilorin  
Ukeachusim Chidinma Precious of the Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka  
Professor Lateef Mobolaji Adetona, PhD in Islamic (contemporary) studies and head of the Department of Religions and Peace Studies, Lagos State University.

The study committee will develop guidelines for working toward an interreligious ideology that will inspire the development of an interreligious code of conduct for all religions in Nigeria, an interreligious curriculum of education and an interreligious constitution for Nigeria. The study committee will examine the UPF founders' interreligious vision in order to develop a "new expression of religious education for all Nigerians" in view of the fact that Nigerians have more challenges in the expression of religions than in the intention of religions.



At the closing session a number of distinguished Nigerians from different religious groups were appointed as Ambassadors for Peace dedicated to the promotion of interreligious affairs:

Hon. Elisha Buba Yero of the URI  
 Hajiya Gwamma Jaafaru, president of the Prison Officers Wives Association  
 Alhaji Isyaku Umar (Dan Amanar Daura)  
 Sabo Abubakar Mamman  
 Mmanti Umoh  
 Saint Okechukwu Olise  
 Elizabeth Olise  
 Ivi Stanley Chukwuemeka  
 Stephen Ikenna Cyril  
 Ighiwiyisi Roland Osas  
 Egwu Alphonsus Tooche  
 Chidera Ahanonu Samuel  
 Amos Ayodele Akinmulewo  
 Dr. Aderemi Olusegun  
 Okeke Fabian Tooche  
 Engr. Abba Ibrahim Makintami  
 Samuel E. Okoh

The conference organizers are hopeful that through the follow-up work of the Study Committee on Interreligious Affairs and the Interreligious Ambassadors for Peace, the several religious challenges facing Nigeria will be addressed in professional ways. Follow-up meetings are being planned to promote the architecture for interreligious harmony and cooperation among core stakeholders. Working sessions of the study committee as well as interreligious pilgrimages to religious places and holy sites are being discussed. The study committee will send letters to the National Assembly and the Federal Executive Council on the need for a National Assembly Committee on Interreligious Affairs and a Federal Ministry for Interreligious Affairs, both endorsed at the conference.