

UPF Europe and Middle East News: Soccer for Peace Revived in San Marino and Middle East Interfaith Webinar

Jacques Marion
September 13, 2026



Highlights

UPF Israel and San Marino Revive "Soccer for Peace"



San Marino, 23–29 August 2026 - An Israeli-Palestinian youth delegation revived the tradition of "Soccer for Peace:" in San Marino.

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IAPD Hosts Webinar on "Peace in the Middle East: The Contribution of Religions"



The webinar on September 3, 2026, addressed the necessity of track-two diplomacy and religious peacebuilding in light of ongoing regional conflicts.

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Peace Road

Peace Road Event Held in Switzerland



The three-generational Peace Road event took place on a sunny Saturday, August 22, 2026.

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Ambassadors for Peace

UPF France Examines the Mission and Responsibility of Ambassadors for Peace



The meeting was held at the Paris headquarters of UPF on September 5, 2026, marking the beginning of a new season of activities for the French network.

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Sport

UPF Israel and San Marino Revive "Soccer for Peace"

Written by: Hod Ben Zvi, Chair, UPF Israel

29 August 2026



the Ministry of Tourism (Photo©FPF/Filippo Pruccoli).

The *Soccer for Peace* initiative was originally conceived as a joint venture between three UPF chapters: Italy, Israel, and San Marino. Its core concept is bringing Jewish and Arab children together for a week of friendly football matches, recreation, and shared adventures in Italy and San Marino. The program creates a unique space for youth to build genuine friendships and foster a peaceful dialogue between themselves and with local children in the host nation.

The inaugural project took place in Turin in 2015, followed by annual editions in the Republic of San Marino (RSM) from 2016 through 2019. The initiative was subsequently paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the regional war. Finally, after dedicated efforts by partners across all regions, the project was revived this year. Today, San Marino has become renowned in Israel precisely for this pioneering initiative.

Preparation and Delegation Structure

Prior to departure, a joint orientation meeting took place at Givat Haviva, bringing together Jewish and Arab parents and youth to establish trust, address logistics, and distribute UPF sports kit.

The 22-person delegation comprised equal numbers of Jewish and Arab participants: nine Jewish children and nine Muslim children aged 12–13, along with two adult mentors from each community. The leadership team supporting the youth included football coaches Yazdi and Wasim, civics teacher Zakaria Mahameed, "Kicking Out Violence in Sports" project manager Roei, and UPF Israel Chair Hod Ben Zvi.

A Journey of Athletics, Culture, and Human Connection

Traveling from Tel Aviv to Rome and continuing by bus to San Marino, the delegation spent an intensive and meaningful week together. The structured itinerary combined sports, dialogue, and cultural discovery:

- **Daily Training & Tournament:** Daily two-hour football sessions at the San Marino Football Federation (FSGC) central pitch culminated in a friendly match against the San Marino Academy U14 team. On the pitch, the 18 youths played together wearing the same jersey, demonstrating how sports can build bridges before formal treaties are



signed.

- **Evening Dialogue & Bonding:** Evening sessions focused on personal reflection and mutual understanding, allowing the children's natural warmth to surface away from the heavy atmosphere of regional conflict.
- **Excursions & Recreation:** The group enjoyed guided tours of historic San Marino, a day trip to Rimini, swimming, and bowling.

Government Reception and Media Coverage

The initiative received widespread attention and institutional backing:

- **Audience with Heads of State:** On the final day, the delegation was honored with an official audience with the Captains Regent (Heads of State of San Marino) at the Parliament Building. During the exchange of warm greetings and official reports, Hod Ben Zvi, Chair of UPF Israel, expressed deep gratitude on behalf of the delegation, highlighting a central teaching of UPF Co-Founder Dr. Hak Ja Han: *"To achieve lasting peace, we must replace the logic of power with the logic of love."*

The Captains Regent responded with great enthusiasm and encouraging words. The meeting concluded with inspiring reflections by Member of Parliament Hon. Gerardo Giovagnoli, who played a key role in securing government approval and sponsorship.

- **National Media Feature (see below):** San Marino's national broadcaster, RTV, covered the delegation extensively. In television interviews, UPF representatives emphasized that true peace relies on genuine human relationships. As noted during the RTV coverage: *"Unless agreements are based on genuine human relationships between people, they cannot last... We have to shake the box in a positive way so that their hearts can unite."*

Institutional Gratitude and Looking Ahead

We extend our deepest gratitude to UPF San Marino, led by President Giorgio Gasperoni and Chief Organizer David Gasperoni, as well as the San Marino Football Federation (FSGC), the Ministry of Industry and Sport, and the Ministry of Tourism for their generous sponsorship.

A special vote of thanks goes to the international and regional organizations whose generous financial and organizational contributions made this project possible: UPF International and various local chapters.

From Israel, we also express deep appreciation to the parents, the Givat Haviva Institute, and the "Boatim" association.

Following the delegation's safe return, follow-up gatherings are being organized for participants and their families to continue building on these newly formed bonds locally.

Media reports on the "Soccer for Peace" program:





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UPF ITALY · SPECIAL NEWSLETTER · SEPTEMBER 2026

Soccer for Peace

In San Marino, eighteen boys from the Holy Land shared a week of sport, dialogue and everyday life



Young people from the Holy Land with the San Marino Academy players during the 2026 edition of Soccer for Peace.

Before peace can become an agreement, it must become a human experience.

This idea lies at the heart of this edition of Soccer for Peace. From 23 to 29 August 2026, eighteen boys from the Holy Land had the opportunity to spend a week together in San Marino: training, playing, sharing meals, visiting places and getting to know one another through everyday life.

They are aged 13 to 14: six Jewish boys, six Palestinian Muslims and six Palestinian Christians. They bring different backgrounds and experiences. The project gave them time and opportunities to meet through a shared passion for football and the ordinary moments of living together.

The pitch: finding common ground



A moment from the friendly match against San Marino Academy U14 in Domagnano.

Training sessions and the friendly match in Domagnano against San Marino Academy U14 gave the week a shared rhythm. On the pitch, players need to find a teammate, pass the ball, coordinate, deal with a mistake and carry on playing.

These simple actions express the initiative's educational purpose: doing something together, with shared rules and a goal to which everyone can contribute. Meeting young Sammarinese players extended the experience to peers in the host country.

Getting to know each other beyond the game



Sharing everyday life is part of the experience, alongside sport.

The week extended beyond training: times for dialogue, visits, recreational activities and shared meals offered further opportunities to be together.

This aspect is less visible than a match, but it is essential to the project. Time spent at the table or in a shared activity allows young people to meet teammates beyond their role on the pitch, listen to them and become more familiar with them.

The value of these days also lies in the conditions created for a relationship to begin, or to find new room to grow.

Ili and Muhammad: a friendship that continues



Ili and Muhammad on the pitch in San Marino: another step in a friendship that grew through football.

In the television interview shared after the trip, Ili and Muhammad describe a friendship that began before their time in San Marino. At first, Muhammad did not speak Hebrew: they used a little English and Google Translate to understand each other. Over time, Muhammad learned Hebrew and Ili some Arabic. Their families also got to know one another; Muhammad attended his friend's Bar Mitzvah.

San Marino was another step in their friendship. In the interview, Ili confirms that he scored against the local team, and Muhammad describes jumping on him to celebrate.

The programme leader also recalls that the two wanted to travel together: neither was willing to go without the other. A relationship nurtured over time, finding new opportunities to be lived.

Back home: a family's perspective



A conversation among the group leaders who support the boys throughout their experience.

What remains when you return home?

In the testimonies collected after the return, Hilal, a parent of one of the participants, describes the trip as an experience that went far beyond football. He speaks of maturity, independence, friendship and teamwork; his son came home with meaningful memories, greater self-confidence and motivation.

This is a personal perspective, which cannot by itself represent everyone's experience. Yet it offers something valuable: the account of a parent reunited with his son after that week, recognising something the journey had left with him.

San Marino: a welcome made possible together



The delegation at Palazzo Pubblico for the closing meeting with the Captains Regent.

San Marino provided a setting for this experience, supported by cooperation among institutions, sporting bodies and the organisations involved in the project. The project is promoted and organised by **UPF San Marino as a joint initiative with UPF Israel**, under the patronage of the **Secretariat of State for Foreign Affairs**, the **Secretariat of State for Tourism** and the **Secretariat of State for Industry and Sport**, in cooperation with the **San Marino Football Federation (FSGC)** for the sporting and technical aspects of the programme, and with the involvement of the institutional and operational partners supporting the initiative.

The closing meeting at Palazzo Pubblico with the Captains Regent gave public recognition to the boys' experience. Welcoming them to the seat of the country's institutions meant acknowledging their presence and the value of the encounter they had shared.

For a project like this, hospitality takes shape through shared responsibilities: preparing the stay, accompanying the young people, providing spaces and activities, and sustaining the educational work.

An experience to take home



The group during the first day of training.

At the end of the week, the boys returned to their families and towns. The difficulties and divisions in the places they come from remain. The lasting effects of such an experience take time and can be understood by following how the relationships develop.

In San Marino, however, they had concrete opportunities to share sport and everyday life. Ili and Muhammad's story, and one family's perspective after the return, help convey the human significance of that opportunity.

The task now is to nurture what these encounters can generate: mutual understanding, trust and the wish to meet again. It is in this spirit that UPF Italy shares the story of the 2026 edition of Soccer for Peace.

Before peace can become an agreement, it must become a human experience.

Watch the San Marino RTV reports

Three reports sharing the sights and voices of the experience:

- [Introducing the initiative: From Israel to San Marino in the name of peace](#)
- [On the pitch: Football for peace in Domagnano - the friendly match with San Marino Academy U14](#)
- [At Palazzo Pubblico: Young athletes from the Holy Land meet the Captains Regent](#)

Photo credits: Filippo Pruccoli (match and meeting with the Captains Regent); youth group leaders (hostel, portrait of Ili and Muhammad, and photograph of the group leaders).



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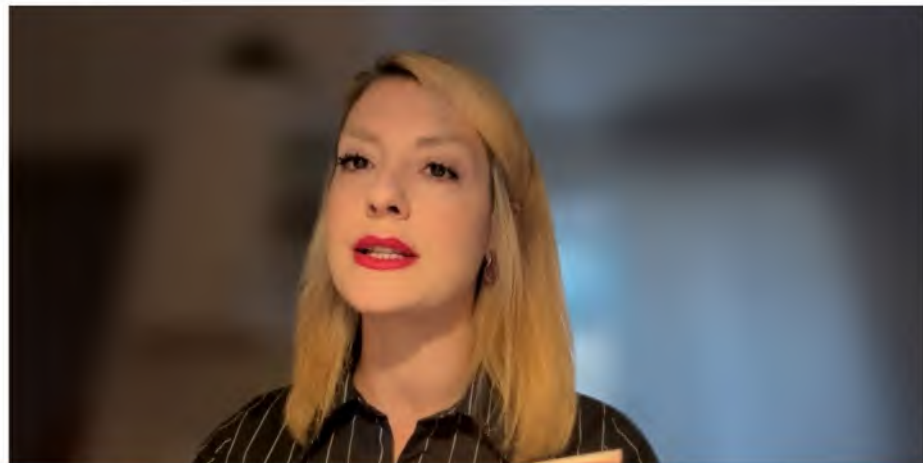
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IAPD Hosts Webinar on "Peace in the Middle East: The Contribution of Religions"

Written by: Alan Sillitoe, UPF Europe and Middle East

03 September 2026



Dr. Androniki Barla, Orthodox theologian and canon lawyer, Austria.

Click on the names below the photos for the bios

Introduction

On September 3, 2026, UPF Europe and Middle East, together with the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), convened an international webinar titled "Peace in the Middle East: The Contribution of Religions." The speakers addressed the urgent necessity of track-two diplomacy and religious peacebuilding in light of ongoing regional conflicts. Recognizing that formal political mechanisms often fail to address deep-seated human and social wounds, four distinguished religious leaders and scholars gathered to evaluate how faith traditions can cultivate moral responsibility, prevent dehumanization, foster forgiveness, and establish solid foundations for sustainable peace.



[Mr. Jacques Marion](#)

(Bio)

Moderator: Mr. Jacques Marion, President, UPF Europe & Middle East

Mr. Jacques Marion opened the webinar by addressing the severe human cost of the ongoing Middle East conflicts. Emphasizing that political negotiations alone cannot secure lasting peace, he called for complementary track-two diplomacy. He prompted the panelists to explore how religions and faith leaders can provide unique moral guidance, foster trust, enable forgiveness, and drive tangible interreligious progress toward regional reconciliation.



Dr. Androniki Barla, Orthodox theologian and canon lawyer, Austria

Dr. Androniki Barla asserted that religion cannot achieve peace merely by preaching romantic ideals, but by shaping human conscience before politics dictates decisions. She warned against

Session 3: The Role and Relevance of Religion in Building Inclusive, Peaceful and Prosperous Societies

World Interfaith Harmony Week Observed in Upper Austria

European IAPD Office Opens in Vienna

Interfaith Breakfast Focuses on Importance of 'Motherliness'



[Dr. Androniki Barla](#)
(Bio [↗](#))

using faith to legitimize fear, violence, and sacred political agendas. Religion's primary task is resisting the psychological dehumanization of adversaries and affirming universal human dignity unconditionally. Crucially, communities must stop using historical trauma as permanent moral exemption; while suffering explains actions, it never justifies atrocities. Peace demands genuine justice without becoming revenge, combined with moral consistency—applying a single standard that unconditionally condemns civilian killings, terrorism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and racism regardless of perpetrator or victim. Practical leadership requires religious figures (i) to guard language against incitement, (ii) to foster human encounters across divides, and (iii) to display the moral courage to challenge their own constituencies, proving that memory need not turn into hatred nor security require another's insecurity.

[Read Dr. Androniki Barla's full intervention](#)



[Dr. Mohammad Habash](#)
(Bio [↗](#))

Dr. Mohammad Habash, Chairman, Human Fraternity Center; Associate Professor, Abu Dhabi University, UAE

Note: Dr Habash reported on a recent conference in Syria, where the challenge is to overcome decades of resentment: *"On August 18th we successfully organized an important conference in Damascus on 'Civil Peace and National Fraternity'. It was sponsored by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, with the participation of 150 Syrian leaders, including representatives from ministries and 20 members of the Syrian People's Assembly."*

Dr. Mohammad Habash highlighted religion's dual potential to incite conflict or build peace, emphasizing that sacred texts across traditions contain multiple interpretations. Reflecting on Syria's tragic conflict—which claimed over 600,000 lives and displaced millions under authoritarian rule—he noted that while fighters ended the revolution, establishing a stable state requires a profound shift from hatred to reconciliation. Through the Human Fraternity Center's peace initiative in Damascus, religious leaders from all eighteen Syrian denominations gathered to champion mercy and forgiveness. He introduced the "Stand of Reality" initiative featuring three levels: the Stand of Dignity for uninvolved citizens, the Stand of Apology for non-violent supporters of the previous regime, and the Stand of Recognition for wrongdoers seeking legal grace. Grounded in Islamic principles and prophetic precedent, Dr. Habash stressed that while legal justice belongs to courts, religious leaders bear the vital duty of preaching forgiveness and hope.

[Read the full transcription of Dr. Mohammad Habash's intervention](#)



[Dr. Afsar Rathor](#)
(Bio [↗](#))

Dr. Afsar Rathor, Vice President, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations; former UN diplomat

Drawing on 30 years of UN peacekeeping experience in conflict zones including Bosnia, Rwanda, Angola, and Mozambique, Dr. Afsar Rathor emphasized that peace is created when people see each other differently. Recalling wisdom from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, he argued that faith must be mobilized to unite communities when political dialogue stalls. While religion cannot replace formal diplomacy, international law, or state negotiations, it offers essential moral authority, grassroots networks, and societal trust. Faith leaders must humanize adversaries, counter religious manipulation, act as trusted bridge-builders, and foster reconciliation. Citing interfaith contributions in Angola and recent diplomatic facilitation in Islamabad, Dr. Rathor urged a transition from symbolic declarations to concrete interfaith action. Practical joint initiatives—such as combined community visits, youth anti-hate programs, and permanent regional early-warning networks—can prepare the ground for lasting peace, demonstrating that while politics negotiates treaties, only people make peace sustainable.

[Read the full transcription of Dr. Afsar Rathor's intervention](#)



[Father Joseph Saghbini](#)
(Bio [↗](#))

Father Joseph Saghbini, Archimandrite of the Greek Melkite Catholic Church, Lebanon

Father Joseph Saghbini emphasized the grave responsibility of religious leaders whose words carry power to move people toward either war or peace. In the Middle East, where faith is deeply woven into identity and politics, leaders must oppose political manipulation and selective scripture readings that fuel nationalism and hatred. Calling leaders to be "artisans of peace," he advocated for purifying curricula, establishing permanent interreligious councils, protecting human rights, and engaging youth before stereotypes harden. Living in multi-confessional South Lebanon, he attested to daily Christian-Muslim coexistence, noting that true living together requires respecting pluralism without coercion or demanding the other's disappearance. Faith must promote tolerance, forgiveness, and humanitarian solidarity. Ultimately, changing minds and hearts at the grassroots transforms communities and states. Peace becomes possible when justice supersedes humiliation, forgiveness proves stronger than vengeance, and religious leaders cultivate conscience rather than fear.

[Read Father Joseph Saghbini's full intervention](#)

Q&A Session

During the Q&A moderated by Mr. Jacques Marion, panelists explored practical mechanisms for interreligious peacebuilding. Dr. Barla highlighted track-two diplomacy's role in enforcing a single moral standard through careful language and self-criticism. Dr. Habash addressed the tension between justice and forgiveness, arguing that while

victims retain rights to legal redress, religious leaders must promote reconciliation to break cycles of revenge. Dr. Rathor illustrated how grassroots interfaith councils successfully mitigated conflict in Liberia and Rwanda, advocating for tailored regional mechanisms across the Middle East. Father Saghbini detailed Lebanon's existing interreligious structures and daily Christian-Muslim collaboration, emphasizing "living together" over mere coexistence. In final reflections, speakers urged establishing permanent local interfaith peace councils, separating faith from political exploitation, supporting grassroots peace initiatives, and supporting a two-state solution guaranteeing dignity, freedom, and human rights for both Israelis and Palestinians.



Closing Remarks: Mr. David Fraser Harris, Secretary General, UPF Middle East and North Africa

In his closing remarks, Mr. David Fraser Harris expressed profound gratitude to the panelists, praising their concrete vision as embodiments of UPF's founding principles. Reflecting on UPF founder Sun Myung Moon's legacy—including his 1990 Cairo address and proposals for an interreligious council at the UN—he emphasized that global peace depends on harmonizing political statesmanship with religious wisdom. Reframing the theme as "the contribution of Middle East religions to world peace," he cited historical milestones like the Amman Message, A Common Word, World Interfaith Harmony Week, and the Human Fraternity Document, affirming that light and hope endure amidst regional suffering.

[Mr. David Fraser Harris](#) (Bio )

[Read Mr. David Fraser Harris' closing remarks](#)



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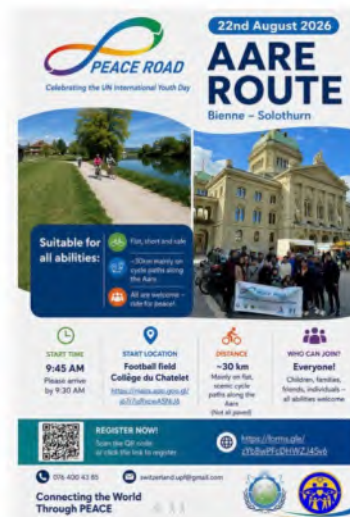
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Sport

Peace Road Event Held in Switzerland

Written by: Chantal Chételat Komagata, Secretary General, UPF Switzerland

22 August 2026



The three-generational Peace Road event took place on a sunny Saturday, August 22, 2026. Simultaneously celebrating International Youth Day, the 60 km round trip connected Biel and Solothurn, following the canalized Aare, one of the Rhine's tributaries, through beautiful countryside.

One of the UPF Ambassadors for Peace that took part was accompanied by his grandchild. Two fathers came with their children. Together, they formed a group of different ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds, building a microcosm of UPF co-founder Sun Myung Moon's Peace Road vision of connecting people around the world. The group, ranging in age from 7 to 72, first stopped at an observation tower overlooking the Aare, a haven of peace and natural beauty.

They then continued their journey, passing the stork nests on the rooftops of the medieval village of Altreu, before finally reaching Solothurn for lunch. There, they visited the famous Baroque Cathedral of St. Ursus and the beautifully decorated Jesuit Church.

On the return journey, everyone cycled at their own pace. The day became a true experience of supporting one another throughout the long journey, helping each other along the way, even fixing a flat tire, while enjoying the beauty of nature and reflecting on humanity's striving for love, beauty, and goodness. The aches and pains of cycling were soon forgotten in the joy of fulfilling our common vision of one Family under God, bound together by heart and love.



YOUTH

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UPF France Examines the Mission and Responsibility of Ambassadors for Peace

Written by: Jacques Marion, President, UPF Europe and the Middle East

05 September 2026



Mr. Alhadje Aly Garba Kounta, a member of the Permanent Delegation of Mali to UNESCO

On Saturday, September 5, 2026, a discussion meeting devoted to the mission and responsibility of Ambassadors for Peace was held at the Paris headquarters of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF). The meeting marked the beginning of a new season of activities for the French network, with a renewed commitment to strengthening their engagement in promoting peace, dialogue, and cooperation.

Mr. Patrick Jouan, Vice President of UPF France, warmly welcomed the participants, including several new guests, before introducing the main speaker, Mr. Jacques Marion, President of UPF France, Europe and the Middle East.

The Foundations of the Mission of Ambassadors for Peace

Mr. Marion began by recalling the major developments that, following the end of the Cold War, led to the launch of the Ambassadors for Peace network in 2001, at a time when UPF was still known as the "Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace." He particularly recalled a speech delivered by the founders at United Nations Headquarters in New York in 2000. On that occasion, they proposed the establishment of an Interreligious Council within the United Nations, intended to complement the General Assembly of national political representatives with a broader approach to the conditions necessary for establishing lasting peace.

He then presented the context in which the Ambassadors for Peace network was launched in 2001, notably in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. At an international conference held in New York, the founder, Dr. Sun Myung Moon, outlined four levels of action considered necessary for building world peace: promoting an ethic of the heart as the foundation of universal values; strengthening the family as the basic unit of a peaceful society; developing interfaith dialogue in order to foster an awareness of our common belonging to humanity; and, finally, strengthening the role of the United Nations in seeking to transcend conflicts and build peace.

A Vision Based on Universal Values

Mr. Marion then presented several fundamental elements of the UPF vision that underpin this approach. In particular,

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Observed in Lyon, France
French Forum Focuses on
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French Participants Review
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French Interfaith Forum
Discusses the Afterlife



he recalled three ideals that inspire its commitment: Love Heaven, Love Humanity, and Love the Nation. He also highlighted three principles regarded as essential to building a peaceful society: interdependence, mutual prosperity, and universal values.

Finally, he emphasized the importance of cultivating peace with a parental heart—one capable of rising above divisions, seeking reconciliation, and relating to others with a sense of responsibility and benevolence. This approach was illustrated through the example of several major peacemakers of the twentieth century, including Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, each of whom worked with deep personal commitment to overcoming ethnic, racial, or religious divisions.

Ambassadors for Peace Share Their Perspectives

Following this presentation, three Ambassadors for Peace shared their reflections on UPF activities, their perspectives, and their recommendations for continuing and expanding interfaith work in France.

The speakers were Dr. Soraya Ayouch, Doctor of Clinical Psychopathology and researcher at Paris-Diderot University; Mr. Michel Raoust, President of the French Committee of Scientologists Against Discrimination; and Mr. Alhadje Aly Garba Kounta, a member of the Permanent Delegation of Mali to UNESCO.

Their contributions highlighted the diversity of experiences and perspectives represented within the network, as well as the importance of continuing initiatives that promote dialogue and cooperation among different religious and cultural traditions.

An open discussion with all the participants then provided an opportunity to address a range of issues related to conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue, and the role that Ambassadors for Peace can play on the ground.

The September 5 meeting thus provided an important opportunity for reflection, dialogue, and renewed commitment. It reaffirmed the mission of Ambassadors for Peace and opened a new chapter in the development of the French network, with a determination to strengthen initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue, cooperation, and peacebuilding within each community.

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