

UPF Europe and Middle East UN in Geneva Conference: Welcome and Session 1

Yvo Bruffaerts
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No More Wars, Can We?

En finir avec les guerres, vraiment ?

Welcome and opening remarks by the organizers:

- **M. Jacques MARION**, chairman UPF Europe and the Middle East
- **Ms. Carolyn HANDSCHIN**, WFWPI Vice-President

Session 1: A faith-based approach to lasting Peace through reconciliation.
Une approche fondée sur la foi pour une paix durable par la réconciliation.

In 2000, UPF's Founders have proposed including the wisdom and capacity of the World's Religions for holistic thought and action, this would enhance the focus on higher-level values within the U.N. and raise its effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate to create lasting world peace.

Session Chair: **Ms. Karen BYBEE**, Representative of LDS Charities to United Nations Offices, Geneva

- **Rev. Dr. Jerry PILLAY**, General Secretary, the World Council of Churches, Geneva
- **M. Heiner W. HANDSCHIN**, IAPD Europe and the Middle East
- **Ms. Srruthi Lekha RAAJA ELANGO**, Deputy Director WFWP Office for UN Relations, Geneva

Logos: UN WOMEN, NGO CSW, GIIA, Fribourg Peace Forum, World Council of Churches

Mr. Jacques Marion, Chairman, UPF Europe and the Middle East said that this conference, held at the United Nations, addresses the urgent need for peace amidst ongoing conflicts. It focuses on the pivotal roles of religious leaders and women in peacebuilding. And yet, despite all efforts made, wars persist. Great peacemakers, such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, have shown that conflicts can be resolved by drawing spiritual power from faith rooted in the heart and guided by ethics.

History is not moving toward the end of religion, instead it proves that religious convictions are deeply rooted and often more enduring than political affiliation. Therefore, in 2000, the founders of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) proposed a bicameral UN structure, including an Interreligious Council, which could complement and support political leaders to prevent and solve conflicts. Recent conflicts, like those in Ukraine and Gaza, underscore their religious underpinnings.

Moreover, there can be no peace without the crucial contribution of women, despite their underrepresentation. This conference has gathered esteemed leaders to address these pressing issues.

Ms. Carolyn Handschin, President NGO-Committee on the Status of Women, Geneva said that the rallying cry "NO MORE WAR" epitomized the Women's Peace Movement following WWI. While its aim remains unfulfilled, women demonstrated remarkable unity, courage, and strategic thinking. Progress was made, heroines defined, with advancements like increased access to higher education and greater participation in public leadership roles.

Just after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, WFWPI and IAFLP invited a small group of very prominent women leaders from the UN, EU and governments to an urgent meeting. "No Peace Without Women", became our slogan going forward, stating our own commitment to ending war, and the demand to be accepted as full partners. As a consequence, major events organized on this theme have been met with enthusiasm and practical outcomes. Each one of us is needed in the peace process. Peace leadership must be bottom up and top down, reinforcing in a circular manner.

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Session 1

Ms. Karen Bybee, representative of LDS Charities to United Nations Offices, Geneva, chaired the meeting.

Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay, General Secretary, the World Council of Churches, Geneva, said that faced with wars and conflicts, many political leaders, fostering a culture of aggression, tend to believe that

violence is the answer to our problems, while drifting away from seeking peaceful dialogue.

Ongoing tensions in Ukraine and Russia, along with the Israel-Palestine conflict since 1967, dominate headlines. Yet, many other global conflicts receive little notice, despite their human toll. Western powers prioritize certain conflicts, leaving over 45 ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa often overlooked.

There are at least five factors contributing to conflict: information, values, interest, relationship, and structural conflicts. Major root causes include political, economic, and social inequalities, extreme poverty, poor governance, unemployment, environmental degradation, and cultural tensions. Religious conflicts often stem from socio-economic and political tensions rather than solely religious differences.

Is the absence of wars attainable? From a faith perspective, the obligation to pursue peace is paramount, as it aligns with the belief that God calls individuals to be agents of peace, justice, and stability for all humanity and the planet.

At the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2022, held in Germany, WCC's member churches addressed today's perilous state of the world and adopted a statement on "*The Things That Make For Peace: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Unity*". They condemned escalating polarization, militarization, and the misuse of religion to justify violence. The Assembly affirmed the Christian duty to pursue dialogue, mutual understanding, and cooperation rather than exclusion and confrontation. They rejected division and committed to addressing threats to peace, justice, and the environment through inclusive approaches, emphasizing investments in human security, climate justice, poverty alleviation, sustainable development, and reducing inequality.

Peace extends beyond the mere absence of conflict; it encompasses wholeness, reconciliation, and healing. The World Council of Churches advocates for a "Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity", recognizing humanity's interconnectedness in God's world. We must acknowledge our role as stewards of the planet, prioritizing initiatives that support life for all beings, not just ourselves or our own groups.

If there are to be no more wars and for peace to prevail we need to

1. Challenge powers and structures that incite war by engaging in 'prophetic witnessing' and speaking truth to power. This is a call for repentance, a complete change of heart, mind, and behaviour.
2. Recognize that peace is inseparable from justice and advocate for economic, gender, climate, and digital justice.
3. Promote healing and reconciliation and address the issues of widespread trauma, pain, and suffering. Reconciliation, vital for peace, isn't just about religious groups mediating conflicts involving others, but also about resolving internal and external religious tensions. To achieve reconciliation, there must be a shift in values towards prioritizing others' well-being over self-interest.
4. Make an integrated approach to address complex global challenges like those in Ukraine, Sudan, Israel, and Palestine. This requires tackling economic, political, spiritual, emotional, and psychological issues. A deficit of morals and values contributes to conflicts and wars.
5. Make work of collaboration with NGOs, people of various faiths, and even those with no faith, which is essential for creating a better world.

To conclude, Dr Pillay quoted Isaiah 11:6-9 to point out that all things are possible with God. It is a call for us to keep working for peace especially when there is no peace.

Mr. Heiner Handschin, IAPD Europe and the Middle East, quoted among others, John F. Kennedy: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing," to highlight the importance of decisive action in a time of violent confrontation and injustice.

Religious leaders bear the responsibility of guiding their communities and should be exemplars of compassion and justice. Their influence extends beyond their congregations, calling them to address global suffering and injustices. However, despite their potential to contribute significantly to formal peace processes, there are few examples of successful inclusion of religious actors in a track one process. A great example for this more inclusive strategy was South Africa where a bloodbath could be avoided thanks to the inclusion of the churches.

Nations, governments, and the UN must embrace a more inclusive peace strategy. This entails harnessing

the potential of religious leaders and actors who are committed to serving humanity. They can complement the practical expertise of political and social leaders with their wisdom and moral authority.

Perhaps it is time for the UN to evolve into a bicameral institution, recognizing the value of diverse and wise voices of the great religions in shaping a peaceful world. At the Assembly 2000, an event organized by the predecessor of UPF at the United Nations in New York, the founders of UPF, Rev. Dr. Moon and Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, proposed the establishment of an Interreligious Council as a spiritual Upper House to the General Assembly to address global concerns and promote peace. Dr. Moon emphasized the importance of bringing in religious and spiritual leaders who have a proven record in transcending national or denominational interests for the greater good of humanity.

Additionally, Mr. Handschin, father of seven, highlighted the familial aspect of peacebuilding, drawing in the important role of parents fostering peace and conflict resolution in the family. Religious leaders, viewing God as a universal parent, understand more than anyone such a parental perspective among our large human family, and advocate for reconciliation and the wellbeing of all, mirroring the love and compassion seen in figures like Gandhi and Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa.

Ms. Srruthi Lekha Raaja Elango, Deputy Director WFP Office for UN Relations, Geneva, said that variations in our standards of peace, particularly when one is judged more harshly than another, serve as the initial spark for conflicts. She illustrated this with a personal experience. In Germany, the concept of peace is deeply ingrained in laws like "Ruhezzeiten," which regulate noise levels to ensure peaceful nights and Sundays. As an immigrant from India, adapting to these strict standards has been challenging, highlighting the cultural differences in understanding peace. However, just a few hours away in regions plagued by conflict, the standards of peace drastically differ. While minor noise violations can lead to legal repercussions in Germany, the accountability for grave violations such as bombing innocent civilians remains elusive on a global scale. This stark contrast underscores the inconsistency and inequality in our global standards of peace and justice. Top of Form

We must stop normalizing the different standards of peace and act as seriously and inclusively as possible. Despite the noble aspirations of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, research conducted by Ms. Srruthi has revealed that states and actors often fail to uphold their responsibility to protect, due to differing standards of peace. This discrepancy is evident in how NATO states prioritize intervention based on proximity and self-interest, displaying double standards in their approach to peacekeeping. Only when we treat others as we wish to be treated, without hypocrisy or double standards, can true peace be achieved.

Some takeaways from the QandA session:

Hafid Ouairi, Director, Fondation pour l'Entre-Connaissance, Geneva, said that his foundation is facing daily devastation from ongoing issues, with young students feeling unheard by the authorities. Despite discussing peace initiatives, our language, he said, seems alien to them. Immediate action is crucial, given the dire challenges, such as providing medical care for children from conflict zones like Gaza. As global citizens, Mr Ouairi wonders when we will prioritize peace over perpetual war preparations?

Reverend Jerry Pillay responded by emphasizing the importance of valuing the contributions of young people, highlighting their role in driving social change and challenging injustices like apartheid in his home country South Africa. Young people today are often at the forefront of protests and movements for change, advocating for human rights and inclusivity. The speaker urges society to listen to young people, acknowledging their capacity to teach valuable lessons in tolerance, diversity, and dialogue.

Regarding youth mobilization against war, especially now with Gaza, Ms. Srruti reflected on the stark difference in perspective between those directly affected by conflict and those who are not. She mentioned her work with the WFWPI, which organized conferences in 2021 with young people from Israel and Palestine who had never met each other to negotiate and mediate the conflict. It was important to involve also young and strongly motivated people from outside the conflict, who felt a responsibility to do something.