WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK 2012

COMMON GROUND FOR THE COMMON GOOD
Member States and Civil Society in the spirit of UN Resolution A/65/5

The United Nations General Assembly Hall
Tuesday, February 7, 2012 • 10:00 am to 1:00 pm

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser
President, 66th Session of the General Assembly

In cooperation with the
NGO COMMUNITY AT THE UNITED NATIONS
Recalling with appreciation various global, regional and subregional initiatives on mutual understanding and interfaith harmony including the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, and the initiative “A Common Word”,

Recognizing the imperative need for dialogue among different faiths and religions in enhancing mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people,

Encourages all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during that week, based on love of God and love of one’s neighbour or on love of the good and love of one’s neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions;

Reaffirms that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace;

Proclaims the first week of February of every year the World Interfaith Harmony Week between all religions, faiths and beliefs;

Requests the Secretary-General to keep the General Assembly informed of the implementation of the present resolution.

Recalling its resolutions 53/243 of 13 September 1999 on the declaration and programme of action relating to a culture of peace, 57/6 of 4 November 2002 concerning the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, 58/128 of 19 December 2003 on the promotion of religious and cultural understanding, harmony and cooperation, 64/14 of 10 November 2009 on the Alliance of Civilizations, 64/81 of 7 December 2009 on the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace and 64/164 of 18 December 2009 on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief,

Recognizing that the moral imperatives of all religions, convictions and beliefs call for peace, tolerance and mutual understanding,

Reaffirms that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace;

Proclaims the first week of February of every year the World Interfaith Harmony Week between all religions, faiths and beliefs;

Requests the Secretary-General to keep the General Assembly informed of the implementation of the present resolution.

The General Assembly President went on to note that the United Nations was itself established in pursuit of universal values such as peace, freedom, human rights, dignity, and the oneness of humanity, which are also espoused by many of the world’s religions.

Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro urged the interfaith community to speak out against extremism, advance tolerance, and stand firm for social justice, dignity, and mutual understanding. “Although faith is the glue that often bonds communities and cultures around the world, it is too often used as an excuse to emphasize differences and deepen divisions,” she said. “Only by finding common cause in mutual respect for shared spiritual and moral values can we hope for harmony among nations and peoples.”
COMMON GROUND FOR THE COMMON GOOD

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE
UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY NEW YORK, NY FEBRUARY 7, 2012

Madam Deputy Secretary-General,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege to address you today in observance of World Interfaith Harmony Week.

First, I would like to offer special thanks to his Majesty, King Abdullah of Jordan for his initiative for interfaith harmony, and for the successful adoption of the Resolution 65/5 in November 2010, proclaiming the first week of February every year the - World Interfaith Harmony Week -at the United Nations.

Let me also commend Member States for adopting in October 2010 the resolution that proposed World Interfaith Harmony Week as an annual event.

In doing so, Member States underscored the centrality of interfaith cooperation as an important condition for building a culture of peace.

Billions of people around the world identify themselves as believers. One is hard-pressed to find any society, culture or civilization which has not been shaped to some extent by religious values and practices.

In today’s interconnected yet divided world, it is more important than ever to draw on religion’s potential in the promotion of peace and stability.

The theme for today’s program is Common Ground for the Common Good.

Each faith has its unique identity, traditions, and practices.

At the same time, we recognize and celebrate the values that are shared across religious traditions. These common principles form a common ground that unites us in our rich diversity.

During World Interfaith Harmony Week, we not only affirm our own traditions, but reflect on the qualities and values of the traditions of others. It is this spirit of mutual respect and cooperation that will afford us firm building blocks for the establishment of the culture of peace at all levels.

In many instances, religious organizations provide care and basic services to the world’s vulnerable communities. Their efforts have long pre-dated the establishment of the culture of peace at all levels.

For this reason, it is important that the United Nations acknowledges the social and moral significance of faith.

For the United Nations itself was built on the quest for universal values such as peace, freedom, human rights, dignity, and the oneness of humanity. These principles have been translated by Member States into the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Here in this General Assembly Hall, where nations gather at a common table of dialogue, issues of faith have rarely been discussed in any systematic way.

Recently, however, there has been a greater trend toward dialogue with religious and interfaith organizations at the United Nations. I believe this dialogue should be encouraged.

For there is not only a common ground that binds faithful traditions together, but also a common ground on which religions and the United Nations stand, sharing values and principles.

This common ground includes respect for human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; affirmation of the equal value of all human beings; the importance of compassion and service to others; and the universal aspiration for peace.

Faith-based organizations have worked in partnership with the United Nations, often in areas of great risk or hardship. Just as the broader NGO community has been a loyal and effective partner and ally to Member States, faith-based organizations play a valuable role in advancing the UN’s goals.

With this understanding, I will convene on March 22 a one-day interactive thematic debate on “Fostering cross-cultural understanding for building peaceful and inclusive societies”.

This debate will draw on the fruitful discussions at the Fourth Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, held in Doha in December 2011.

The event will be organized in partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations Secretariat.

During the meeting, we will also discuss the role of religions and religious organizations in enhancing dialogue and understanding, with participation from different parts of the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To build world peace, we must first find peace within ourselves.

As former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold rightly said “Unless there is a spiritual renaissance, the world will know no peace.”

The continuing and varied challenges that we encounter in our work can be better addressed if we take inspiration from the spiritual values in our common endeavors.

Dear friends, let us work together to promote respect for diversity, pluralism, justice, equality, regardless of religion, gender, race or ethnicity.

I applaud your presence here for this special occasion. As members of the human family, we stand on common ground. From that common ground, let us work together for a world at peace.

Thank you.
THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

The first group of speakers addressed the theme of the event, the search for “Common Ground for the Common Good.” H.E. Archbishop Francis Assisi Chullikatt, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, said that the Pope and Church leaders had repeatedly called on all believers to reject religiously-motivated violence. Yet the solution is not, as some would advocate, the rejection of religion itself, since “the denial of God has led to much cruelty and a degree of violence that knows no bounds.”

Monica Willard, President of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, said that interfaith dialogue was already playing an important role in bringing peace. “Interfaith harmony is alive and well. It is carried out daily by people of faith throughout the world,” she said. But it isn’t publicized widely. “We need to have institutional ways to share the fine work that is being done.”

One of the founding principles of World Interfaith Harmony Week is that religious leaders should take the time to teach their communities about the ways in which God is present in faiths other than their own. In this spirit, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, founder of the Cordoba Initiative, quoted not from the Qur’an but from the Bible: “As Jesus taught, all the commandments of God are enfolded into the two major commandments, love God and love the neighbor,” he said. “The real battle front is not between religions but between all the moderates of all faiths and all the extremists in all faith traditions. Therefore, we must empower moderate voices of religion.”

Bhai Mohinder Singh, a Sikh who made the long trip from Birmingham in the United Kingdom to attend the event, said that although global issues require global solutions and structures to implement them, the role of compassion and forgiveness cannot be overlooked. “Where there is forgiveness, there is God himself.”

Prof. M. Din Syamsuddin, from Indonesia, said religions should not be misused and abused to justify violence. Rabbi David Rosen, American Jewish Committee, said that religious leaders “have the capacity either to make the situation all the more intractable, or to make it all the more soluble by creating a context of greater mutual respect.” Ignoring religion encourages extremist elements to take center stage. Therefore, we must empower the “religiously responsible voices.”

Dr. Marc Scheuer, Director, Secretariat of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, and Dr. William F. Vendley, Secretary General of Religions for Peace, both stressed the value of diversity and inclusiveness. “The world’s religions are different. These differences are profoundly defining,” said Vendley. However, he identified a basis for multi-religious cooperation: the shared conviction that “honoring the Divine is directly linked to honoring and protecting the inviolable dignity of every person.” He applauded United Nations agencies that are engaged in concrete projects with religious communities.

Acharya Shri Shrivatsa Goswami from India commented that Hinduism’s pride is that it celebrates diversity, which makes dialogue possible. At the same time, there is less division between the religious and secular spheres of life. “There is no department of life that can be divorced from religion,” he said, quoting Mahatma Gandhi.
“Why should the UN engage with faith communities?” asked Dr. Azza Karam of the United Nations Population Fund. “The fact is that 40 percent of basic health care is provided by faith-based communities, and in conflict zones it is as high as 70 percent. Although the UN and faith-based organizations are not the same, we need to be sensitive to the impact of religion.”

Bill Canny, Catholic Relief Services, also testified to the vast scope of faith-based responses to disaster, health and education, noting that although these efforts were in no way tied to acceptance of any religious belief, it was important to recognize the existence and importance of spiritual and psychological needs following crises. “The spiritual dimension must be recognized,” he said. “We ask the UN and other organizations to give us space to minister to these spiritual needs.”

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One of the highlights of the program was a moving performance by the Children’s Theater Company. One by one, bright young children—the youngest only five years old—confidently recited “Peacemaker’s quotes,” drawn from the scriptures of all religions, and from more recent sources such as Einstein, Gandhi, and King. Their finale song, “One,” brought the entire audience to its feet for a standing ovation for the power of youth.

“Faith can be a strong ally of the United Nations,” said Katherine Marshall of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, USA. “Although the United Nations is not a faith institution, it is nevertheless a product of all the world’s faiths and the universal human longing for peace.”

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H.E. Mrs. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations, invited all the participants to continue their investment and engagement, including an invitation to visit her country for the upcoming Rio+20 conference in June. “We need to balance material and human development with protection of the environment,” she said. “Civil society, including religious societies and institutions, have an important role to play. Let us strengthen and renew multilateralism in hopes that it will lead to broader efforts for sustainability.”

The program was brought to a close by an “interfaith tree ceremony” symbolizing the commitment of all faiths and traditions to the future of the planet and the work of the United Nations. One by one, representatives of eleven faith traditions poured water representing wisdom and healing onto the roots of a tree symbolizing the entire human family. The music of saxophonist Paul Winter weaved throughout the ceremony.

“What we have achieved here today is significant,” said President Al-Nasser in his concluding remarks. “Let each of us assume the task of interfaith harmony as our personal responsibility, for as was so clearly demonstrated here today, the fruits of religious dialogue and understanding offer the hope of a new era of peace for all humanity.”

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Tree Ceremony
Participants

Christianity
Sr. Joan Kirby
Religious of the Sacred Heart & Temple of Understanding

Islam
Sheikh Omar S. Abu Namous
Islamic Cultural Center of New York

Hinduism
Swamini Sri Lalitambika Devi
Lalitamba Mandiram

Buddhism
Hiro Sakurai
Soka Gakkai International

Indigenous
Jacqueline Wolf Tice
Chickamauga Cherokee

Sikhism
Satkiran Kaur Khalsa
Dharma Worldwide

Judaism
Judith M. Hertz
Union for Reform Judaism

Baha’i
Carl Murrell
Baha’is of the United States

Jainism
Vaishali Shah
International Mahavira Jain Mission

Shinto
Rev. Masafumi Nakanishi
International Shinto Association

Zoroastrianism
Homi Gandhi
Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America

Organized by
The Office of the President of the 66th UN General Assembly
Special Coordinator for the Third Committee and Civil Society

With Special Thanks to the
Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations

In Cooperation with
Representatives of the

NGO Community at the United Nations
Bahá’í International Community
Caritas
CIVICUS
NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief
NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns
Religions for Peace
Salvation Army
Sisters of Charity Federation
Temple of Understanding
United Religions Initiative
Universal Peace Federation
World Peace Prayer Society

With the Support of the
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