Largest Worldwide Alliance of Religious Communities

Religions for Peace (RfP) is the largest worldwide alliance of religious communities. The global Religions for Peace network consists of close to 100 national member associations (referred to as “Interfaith Councils”) in almost as many countries, six regional interfaith committees, as well as the Global Women of Faith women’s network and a global interfaith youth network. A World Council, whose members consist of leading religious leaders from all over the globe, is responsible for implementing the decisions between the world assemblies that take place every six years.

RfP, whose secretariat is located in New York, is organized at the global, regional and local level, which provides a platform for collective action at various levels of the religious communities represented. RfP works in cooperation with international organizations and governments. RfP has been accredited as a non-governmental organization with the United Nations since 1973. Its main focus areas lie in conflict transformation, the promotion of fair and harmonious societies, sustainable human development, environmental protection and the improvement of well-being.

General Secretary Religions for Peace is Dr. William F. Vendley. Bishop Gunnar Stålsett, Oslo, is one of the honorary presidents of the organization as well as head of the program committee of the 10th World Assembly.

Peacemaker for Almost 50 Years

Under the impact of the Second World War and the nuclear threat during the Cold War, in 1961 representatives of various world religions initiated preparations for a “summit meeting” of religious representatives. Their aim was to mobilize the followers of as many religions as possible to engage in joint peace initiatives. The first „global conference“ took place in October 1970 in Kyōto and resulted in the formal founding of Religions for Peace. Another eight world conferences were held at intervals of around five years in various locations: Leuven, Princeton, Nairobi, Melbourne, Rome, Amman, Kyōto and recently 2013 in Vienna. Furthermore, a number of branch organizations were established at the international, national and local level.

Since their founding, the RfP have played the role of mediator in a number of global crises caused by conflict and war such as Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ethiopia, Eretria, Kenya, Burundi, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, South Africa, Sri...
Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, Myanmar, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, Syria as well as crises following natural catastrophes in Haiti, Nepal and Japan.

Special attention was given to RfP for its mediation between the conflicting parties in Bosnia Herzegovina and for the General Secretary William F. Vendley’s successful efforts following the Dayton Peace Agreement. In 1996, RfP organized a first meeting among the four most important religious leaders of Bosnia since the outbreak of the war. Six months later, this meeting culminated in a declaration in which Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Islamic and Jewish officials agreed upon a joint moral commitment as well establishing an interfaith council. To date, this cooperation among religions has played and continues to play an exemplary role for many other peace efforts undertaken by RfP.

The RfP’s current work in Myanmar has also caught the attention of international media. Against the background of local conflicts and violence, which tarnish Myanmar’s prospects for peace and development, RfP has created a unique interfaith mechanism incorporating various stakeholders to facilitate dialog and action: The RfP Advisory Forum and its Standing Commissions on National Reconciliation and Peace in Myanmar. RfP and its affiliated RfP Myanmar, have reacted to the urgent need for a safe space where people can meet, enter into dialog with one another and reach a consensus on required action. RfP has brought together hundreds of important stakeholders in order to address issues such as education, legal equality and responsibility for all ethnic groups, the betterment of women and youth, as well as identity, diversity and common challenges in the Rakhine state. This interfaith project is supported by the Government of Myanmar as well as the United Nations and over 20 additional countries.

**Vision and Methods: Religious Communities Cooperate Effectively for Peace**

The RfP has set itself the mission of promoting common action among the world’s religious communities in favor of peace while also preserving and respecting religious identities. In addition to fair and harmonious societies, inclusive and sustainable development and environmental protection, RfP particularly encourages religious communities all over the world in their efforts to transform violent conflict and bring about peace. Specifically, RfP establishes and expands interfaith councils at the local, national, regional and global level and supports religious communities to create leading cooperatives whose aim is to advance the peace process. The following principles apply to these efforts: The respect of religious differences, actions on the basis of deeply entrenched joint values, the preservation of identity, the respect for religious communities’ disparate organizational structures as well the commitment to connecting and supporting interfaith actions at the local, national, regional and global level.

The methods developed by RfP for joint action is unique, action-oriented and open for creative developments. It supports religious communities to identify connections or references between their capacities for action and specific challenges such as violent threats to the peace.
This method is simple and yet powerful. If applied, it reveals large, often hidden or untapped potential for action, which can be harnessed by each religious community. Moreover, it demonstrates the unique advantages of interfaith cooperation as well as those areas in which capacities for effective interfaith action still need to be developed. In tangible terms, this enables RfP to analyze specific problems such as violent conflicts, conduct a stocktaking of religious resources and highlight the additional benefits of a cooperation. On this basis, it is possible to identify the need for action, assign tasks and identify areas in which capacities central to joint action need to be developed.

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