Representatives of different faith communities founded Religions for Peace 50 years ago. Their goal: To establish peace across all confessional boundaries. A look back shows just how much the challenges have changed since then.

The history of Religions for Peace stretches way back to the 1960s. It was an eventful decade, and a threatening one: The Cold War had divided the world into friend and foe and the two superpowers were fighting proxy wars in Asia in addition to aiming their nuclear weapons at the major cities of their enemy. Even though memories of World War II were still painfully fresh, many believed that a new war – one which could end in nuclear annihilation – was a realistic possibility. At the same time, it was also a period of political and social upheaval. In the United States, thousands were protesting against racial segregation and the Vietnam War, while in Africa, numerous countries were freeing themselves from colonial rule. And across the globe – in Europe, North America and Asia – spiritual leaders were beginning to look for new answers to the world’s crises.

“Independently of each other, religious communities and some of their leaders began focusing on the idea that global challenges demanded a global alliance of the different religions,” says the American theologian William Vendley, the long-time Secretary General of Religions for Peace. In the U.S. a small group of religious leaders set out to campaign in different faith communities around the world for an interreligious conference aimed at peace. This sowed the seeds for Religions for Peace across confessional boundaries?

“The people who gathered in Kyoto came from the Soviet Bloc, from the West and from neutralized countries,” says Vendley. “They had different religious and political backgrounds. But they were determined to work together to protect the family of humanity from the threat of nuclear annihilation.”

At this first conference in Japan, the delegates founded an international nongovernmental organization headquartered in New York: Religions for Peace. In the ensuing years, it grew continuously and expanded its activities. Since then, a congress has been held roughly every five years in a variety of different locations: Princeton and Nairobi, Melbourne and Rome, Amman and Vienna. The executive committee of the organization and the World Council, which includes leading representatives of all religious communities, are responsible for implementing the resolutions made at these world assemblies.

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After numerous meetings, he was able to bring leaders of the four religious communities together at the same table. These initial meetings, which took place away from the public eye, ultimately gave birth to the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which continues its work today. “That initiated the second phase of Religions for Peace,” says Vendley. “The mobilization of religious communities for concrete conflict resolution and peace-making.”

Today, Religions for Peace is active in 70 countries. Numerous branch organizations on the international, national and local levels focus on a broad array of issues, from environmental protection to the fight against HIV/AIDS to women’s rights and conflict resolution. Members of Religions for Peace help out after natural disasters, mobilize of religious communities for concrete conflict resolution and peace-making.

In recent years, the organization has focused more on involving women and young people in its activities. In 2001, female delegates founded the Religions for Peace Global Women’s Network, which includes over 1,000 women’s religious organizations around the world. In Sierra Leone, women from the network helped negotiate a peaceful end to the civil war that had raged in the country from 1991 to 2002. “It is a huge step forward that Religions for Peace has recognized the importance of women,” says Kusha Nowa, a board member of Religions for Peace in Japan. “There is such diversity among people and the differences between men and women are symbolic of that. As religious leaders, we want to establish harmony in this diversity.”

Youth, too, who are likewise shut out of important decision-making processes in many places, are given a meaningful role by the organization. The Religions for Peace Global Youth Network is made up of six regional, interreligious youth networks from Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and North America. Each organization has its own independent leadership but is also part of the global Religions for Peace network. Currently, Religions for Peace is seeking to promote interreligious dialogue and reconciliation in Myanmar, where in 2017, 700,000 members of the Muslim Rohingya minority were forced to flee military violence to neighboring Bangladesh. The organization is using the same recipe that has already led to success in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in other crisis countries. “When a religious community is facing difficulties, we look for antidotes in their own medicine cabinets,” says Secretary General Vendley. “When we travel to Myanmar, we bring along leading Buddhist personalities from Sri Lanka and Cambodia who enjoy great respect in Myanmar. These respected leaders are able to help local communities recognize their own peaceful roots and to understand that it is Buddhist to take part in interreligious dialogue.”

Religions for Peace also seeks to combat extremism in its own ranks. Among those on the front lines is Professor Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah of Mauritania, who teaches Islamic Studies at King Abdullah University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In 2014, Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah issued a fatwa, a religious ruling, against the so-called “Islamist State,” and condemned its brutality in a proclamation rooted in theology.

“Religious communities learn slowly and they are full of contradictions, as are we all,” says Vendley. “But they are united in the conviction that the well-being of each individual person is linked to the well-being of others. I think that even nonreligious people will be happy to see the religious communities of this world forming an alliance to promote common welfare. And that is the focus of the coming 10th World Assembly in Lindau: The welfare of the family of humanity.”

The theme of the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace is “Caring for Our Common Future: Advancing Shared Well-Being.” What is the idea behind that motto? The theme addresses two major questions facing our times. First, it is about concern for our common future. We want to emphasize that there can only be a future for all people, and not just for a few. Second, we would like to highlight the moral and spiritual side of “well-being,” of common welfare. Politically, the term refers to material prosperity, but it also has an existential dimension that touches on nonmaterial elements such as self-worth, human dignity and respect.

One of the most important issues on the global agenda is the protection of the environment. What can interreligious initiatives like Religions for Peace contribute to the debate? In all religions, there is a fact-based understanding of the climate crisis and a deep reflection on the sanctity of nature. During the negotiations of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, representatives of all important religions were present and spoke with a single voice. More than any other present-day issue, and perhaps any issue in history, the climate crisis has brought together authorities, scholars and followers of all religions.

How can this interfaith consensus be translated into action? Two years ago, Religions for Peace launched the Rainforest Initiative, which brings together religious authorities, indigenous peoples, academic institutions and governments. We got started in Colombia and Peru and are currently developing projects in Brazil, Congo and Indonesia. It is an extremely dynamic program in which faith and science, religious communities and indigenous peoples, national governments and the United Nations are all striving to protect our rainforests, the lungs of the world.

An additional issue that fuels controversy in many places is the immigration of people of other faiths. In this context, religion appears to divide people more than it unites them. The current situation is dramatic. In some countries, national and religious identities are being abused to spark conflict and raise new walls. The biggest question that is currently being asked in many European countries is: How can we, the most privileged continent in the world, keep migrants and asylum-seekers away? In the moral court of history, this attitude will be difficult to defend. I hope that the 10th World Assembly will be able to find a clear, principled voice calling for respect for people of other faiths and origins and for a fair solution to the migration question.

To finish off, let’s take a look into the future: What challenges do you think Religions for Peace should address next? Poverty remains an important issue. An additional key issue is the role of women in society and women’s rights. In a spiritual, values-based dialogue, representatives of all religions say that women and men are equal when it comes to human dignity. But in practice, religions apply this conviction quite differently. That is why we have to continue this important dialogue with great respect and humility.

Interview by Marcella Eng Hansen

Serbian Orthodox, Muslims and Jews. “For the initial meetings, I always brought along a spiritual authority from Religions for Peace of the same faith to convince the religious community of this world forming an alliance to promote common wel- fare. And that is the focus of the coming 10th World Assembly in Lindau: The welfare of the family of humanity.”

Gunnar Stålsett, born in 1935, is a Lutheran theologian and was the Bishop of Oslo from 1998 to 2005. Today, he is the Honorary President of the World Council of Religions for Peace. We spoke with him about the organization’s contributions to the greatest challenges facing humanity.

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