

**Summary Report of Launch of Global Peace Initiative of Women
Religious and Spiritual Leaders
Geneva, October 6-9, 2002**

The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders was conceived and organized by an international group of women religious leaders who attended the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders that was launched at the United Nations in New York in September 2000. In that august gathering they felt compelled to create a global forum where women from the different faith traditions could come together to develop concrete steps toward peace. About 500 delegates from over 70 countries registered and participated in the launch event in Geneva in October 2002. These delegates were joined by approximately 50 women from the local community. Included in the gathering were nuns, ministers, bishops, rabbis, swaminis, peace workers, scholars, researchers, educators, experts in religious law and many others.

The main objective of the Initiative was to build a broad-based support network among women leaders for peace building, poverty reduction and social reconstruction activities. Thus, invitations were extended to women from business, government and public life who are committed to finding a shared spiritual vision for the global community.

The specific outcomes from the Geneva Meeting include development of the following projects:

- **Task Force on Building the Inner Foundations for Peace**
- **Task Force on Women, Religious Law and Customary Practice**
- **Women's Partnership for Peace in the Middle East**
- **Women's Community Building in Afghanistan**
- **Conference on Spirituality and Poverty Reduction –2003**
- **Business Council For Peace**

Strong delegations of women came from numerous areas of tension, conflict and post-conflict. Among the participants were a delegation of seven women from Afghanistan including a lecturer in *Sharia* Law from Kabul University and a judge in *Sharia* Law. The Afghan delegation also included two women ministers. The delegation from Pakistan included a renowned woman justice on the Supreme Court bench and a member of the President's Council on Development. Princess Rattana Devi Norodom of Cambodia,

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who is devoted to rebuilding the Buddhist community in her country, also participated. A strong delegation participated from Thailand, bearing a letter from the Prime Minister, His Excellency Thaksin Shinawatra stating the Royal Government of Thailand's enthusiastic support for the peace efforts of women religious leaders and the on-going activities launched under our Initiative.

Participants in the Global Peace Initiative convened one day before the official opening on October 7th for a day of meditation, reflection and prayers for peace. Several hundred delegates participated in this six-hour span of spiritual activity. Prayers were offered from the following traditions: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Shinto, Taoist, Zoroastrian, and various indigenous traditions. This coming together in prayer served to set the tone for the following days of intensive addresses and working sessions, and demonstrated that the world's faiths can share spiritual expressions and experiences to create a sense of harmony and kinship.

The opening day at the *Palais des Nations* consisted of addresses around four themes: building the inner foundations for peace; women and leadership; moving beyond dialogue into programs of social action; and the ability of women to foster social transformation. During the following two days, working sessions expanded on these themes and also focused on women and religious law, addressing tensions between tradition and contemporary life.

Building the Inner Foundations for Peace

One of the outcomes of the meetings was to draw attention to the possibility of utilizing on a global scale the spiritual exercise of prayer, which is shared by all religious traditions. The group recommended that the United Nations Day of Peace, September 21st, also become a Day of Global Prayer, when churches, mosques and temples around the world organize special prayer sessions for peace. There was much discussion on how to develop the inner qualities that enable one to turn fear and dislike of differences into respect and appreciation for diversity. A recommendation was made that this be developed as part of peace-building curricula and that peace education be a mandatory

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component of all conflict negotiations. A task force will continue to study and expand this theme.

Women and Religious Law: Building Confidence & Self Esteem

During working sessions on women and religious law, there was much discussion on how religious law was being interpreted and the need for women to gain a more prominent role in the study and exercise of the law. The role of women as defined in the religious traditions as well as in the cultural and social practices affects the self esteem of women and thus their ability or even will to function as equal members of society. Delegates acknowledged that women from all religious and cultural traditions and from all parts of the world regardless of educational, economic or social stature are likely to encounter issues of self-confidence and self esteem. This ultimately affects the wellbeing of the young and the of family. Thus special effort must be made to address not just the outer, physical and material conditions of women (i.e. access to healthcare, food, shelter and education) but also their inner spiritual well being and health. Women religious and spiritual leaders can be a model for such achievement and could help bolster the self esteem of women from all cultures.

There was a call to condemn all forms of barbaric and outdated practices and punishments used against women. Discussants acknowledged that while there are instances of decreeing such punishments as stoning in various parts of the world, and it was rarely carried out, yet it has intimidating and terrifying effect on women. The consensus was that the texts of all religions leave room for interpretation and it is critical that women engage more actively in understanding the nuances of the law. A task force will be formed to engage more deeply in the issue of women and religious law and practice in context of the contemporary world, with the idea of publishing statements, position papers, articles or a book in the future regarding specific aspects of these laws. A primary goal will be to enable the religious traditions to facilitate the cultivation of greater self-confidence and self esteem among women.

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Women, Reconciliation and Healing

Many delegates believe that women have a special capacity to move beyond politics and resolve differences through nonviolent means. They attribute this ability to the experience of compromise and sharing, which women have long brought to the family structure. They proposed that women are better listeners and can have deep empathy for the other, despite the divisions of religion, politics, race, or ethnicity. In sessions on economic and spiritual healing in regions of conflict, women from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Israel, Palestine, Rwanda and South Africa told of the suffering in their region and efforts for reconciliation. It was clear that the cessation of military action and efforts to rebuild economically could not by themselves bring healing. These must be coupled with a spiritual renewal to ease the trauma of loss. This can best be achieved when the religious institutions work collaboratively, and women religious and spiritual leaders are given a special role to play because of their ability to empathize.

In our meeting, women from both business and religion came together to develop specific projects in Rwanda, the Middle East and Afghanistan where women could play an active role in rebuilding and healing. They agreed to work in cooperation with UNIFEM. In Rwanda, women business leaders from the US will help market internationally Peace Baskets made by women who suffered losses in the genocide. A portion of these proceeds will go into the establishment of a Global Peace Fund for Women, which will be administered by the women religious leaders who co-chair the Global Peace Initiative.

In Afghanistan, women business leaders agreed to help fund a Women's Center in Kabul, which will provide job training as well as activities to promote women's self esteem, under the direction of the co-chairs of the Global Peace Initiative.

Women delegates from India and Pakistan agreed to organize an exchange visit to each other's country where they would engage in tree planting as a symbolic gesture for peace. They also agreed to explore the exchange and marketing of handicrafts made by village women in each other's countries.

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Jewish American business women proposed organizing a meeting with Palestinian businesswomen, to be joined by Israeli businesswomen as well as women from neighboring Arab countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt to explore providing business support to Palestinian women. This would take the form of internships and other types of exchange programs, outlets to international markets, management and financial training, grants, loans, etc. This would come under the direction of three co-chairs – Reverend Joan Brown Campbell, Blu Greenberg and Dr. Saleha Abedin - so there would be a spiritual framework for this business activity, and it would be organized in cooperation with UNIFEM. There was an agreement to begin organizing this program immediately so that the first meeting can take place within the next three to four months. It would be a small meeting of about 40 businesswomen who show a significant commitment to their faith tradition, as well as some women from religion. The goal is to demonstrate the deep concern and caring that many Christian, Jewish and Muslim women feel over the current stalemate and the commitment to begin healing the wounds and pain experienced by so many in that region.

Women, Spirituality and Social Transformation

Special sessions were held on how to bring one's inner spiritual resources into the world to alleviate poverty and suffering. Dr. Kamla Chowdry, one of the Co-Chairs of the Global Peace Initiative, has begun research on the effectiveness of spiritual organizations in reducing poverty, compared with efforts of other international organizations. She has worked with the United Nations, The World Bank and The Ford Foundation on developing initial material and is seeking a much broader study in this field.

Based on statistics that show a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots, she suggested this issue has new urgency for religious communities. She proposed undertaking a series of case studies of successful endeavors of religious organizations where poverty reduction can be measured, and using these as models to be replicated. She asked that we organize a conference in one year on Spirituality and Poverty Reduction to highlight the impact of these successful scenarios and explore how to expand such initiatives. She offered to set up meetings with The World Bank, Ford Foundation and the United Nations Development Program to begin planning.

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Business Council For Peace

To strengthen the support base for women religious leaders, the Global Peace Initiative invited businesswomen from North America, Europe and Asia to participate. About 70 businesswomen attended, a number of whom helped sponsor religious delegates. The businesswomen decided to form a Business Council For Peace, which would work under the guidance of the women religious leaders and help develop and fund projects to assist women in regions of conflict and post-conflict. This Council would coordinate with UNIFEM in such regions to ensure that its activities support and expand programs already in place. It would also work with UNIFEM to identify women's efforts to build businesses and would support such efforts, working in conjunction with local women religious leaders.

The Next Generation

Women, regardless of whether or not they are mothers, are focused on the well-being of the young. Thus, the Global Peace Initiative organized a sector called "Voices of the Next Generation," where a dozen young people (in their early and mid twenties) from regions of tension, conflict or post-conflict came together to share their experiences and create their vision for the future of our world. They came from Bosnia, Egypt, India, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Pakistan and Rwanda. The group was sponsored by a Shinto-based Japanese spiritual organization that also offered to host a follow-up meeting of the group in 2003 in either Japan or the United States. A special focus for the youth was the environment. We also announced the organization of a Youth Summit to be held in Africa in 2004 to draw together several thousand future leaders from the faith traditions to explore developing a shared spiritual framework for addressing the pressing social and environmental problems that confronts their generation.

Conclusions

The positive response to the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders was overwhelming. In the very moving closing session, delegates and participants gave testimonials as to how transforming this experience was for them as

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they discovered the power of a shared commitment to faith in removing the seemingly impossible obstacles in the way of a better and a more peaceful world. They offered continuing commitment and involvement and urged the organizers to carry on the noble objectives of the initiative.

In the days following the Initiative, we continued to receive hundreds of e-mails expressing how women felt the experience to be a transforming one. We attribute this in part to the extent to which spiritual practice was incorporated into the program, but to a greater degree to the historic nature of the Initiative. Never before have women religious figures from all the major faith traditions come together in a strong demonstration of faith, commitment and leadership and found so much in common! That was indeed empowering.

Based on this response, the Co-chairs for the Global Peace Initiative of Religious and Spiritual Leaders would remain as a coherent body, one of the direct outcomes of the Millennium World Peace Summit, and the Co-chairs would continue as the body's leadership. The organizing body will convene such a gathering every two to three years to evaluate and expand its work. In the intervening period, specific projects, some of which were outlined above, would be organized that combined economic development for women with the building of self esteem and the formation of a shared spiritual framework for greater collaboration and partnership among the religions in order to achieve our declared objectives. The Co-chairs will reach out to women leaders in their respective faith traditions to strengthen and expand the delegations for future activities. A date would be set early next year for the second convening of the Global Peace Initiative. The Initiative clearly filled a need for women from various faith traditions to come together to explore how they can collectively bring the wisdom from their faiths to help address global problems. The Initiative also clearly demonstrated how powerful and effective the women's response could be if their spiritual qualities of compassion and caring are harnessed to serve the most pressing problems of our times which would help create the climate for peace - the most urgent need of our times!.

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The assembled delegates affirmed the attached Geneva Declaration of Women For Social Harmony, Peace and Justice.