

Formation of World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders

Report of Steering Committee Meeting and Plan for Initial Meeting of Council

Objectives of Steering Committee Meeting

One of the stated goals of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders that took place at the United Nations in August 2000 was to set in motion the process for the formation of a World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. This Council will be a permanent body and function as a resource for the Secretary-General and the United Nations in their efforts to build a lasting peace.

The growth in interfaith activity over the last decade leading up to the Summit has already laid much of the groundwork for such a Council. The unique role of the World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders is to forge an alliance of religious and spiritual leaders with the United Nations, an ideal forum in which to address world problems. The outcome of the Summit was the signing of a *Commitment to Global Peace*, in which religious leaders accepted religious diversity, condemned all violence perpetrated in the name of religion, and committed themselves to fostering mutual respect among their communities. These principles will be the foundation for the Council.

During the World Peace Summit, numerous small group meetings were held to discuss the process for establishing a World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. It was agreed that a Steering Committee should be established to think through the mission, structure and activities of this Council.

On October 22-24, 2001, with the support of the Better World Fund, approximately twenty-five religious and spiritual leaders from the major faith traditions and many regions of the world came together at the Rockefeller Brothers Conference Center in Pocantico Hills, New York. Because the meeting came upon the heels of the devastating events of September 11th, tragically perpetrated by religious extremists, a number of the Steering Committee members from the Middle East and Asia could not join the meeting in person but did participate by telephone.

The objectives of the Steering Committee meeting were to:

- Assess the need for a World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders;
- Explore how a Council would be structured and funded;
- Discuss how the Council could respond to the current world crisis; and
- Determine next steps.

Need for a World Council

Currently, no organizational body exists where religious leaders from the major faith traditions can come together to provide guidance to the human community on critical issues. Today, as they have for centuries, religious voices speak out individually, each addressing their own religious community. There is no means for issuing joint statements to demonstrate the convergence of the religious traditions on key matters.

While these voices often express similar ideas and values, they tend to reach only the adherents of their respective faiths. Stronger collaboration by the religious leadership would positively impact the global community.

There was consensus among the Steering Committee that world circumstances in the one year since the Summit – the increase in violence in the Middle East and the terror attacks of September 11 – have heightened the need and readiness of religious communities for a World Council, which could provide a stimulus for greater cooperation.

A main function of the Council would be *to build a community of world religions* to serve as a model and guide for the nations and peoples of the world.

Mission of the Council

The Steering Committee identified four major thrusts for the Council:

- Fostering the universal values intrinsic to all religions.
- Upholding and celebrating religious and ethnic diversity by cultivating an attitude of mutual respect.
- Employing the moral power of religion to address major social and environmental challenges.
- Encouraging times of world prayer and meditation to aid in the transformation in global consciousness toward greater unity

Post-September 11th, religious leaders recognize the need to move beyond what they have done in the past and to create a new entity that will serve the entire world community with a new vision that includes an acceptance of others. Isolated religious communities will no longer be able to achieve this larger human goal on their own. The mandate is to see all faiths as part of one family. The need is to transform religious points of view from an exclusive to inclusive way of thinking. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in a recent conversation, “We need to redefine our theologies for the modern age.” While it may not yet be clear what this “redefining” entails, the movement emerging from the Summit, and

quicken by the events of September 11, is toward a refocusing on what the religions have in common, rather than how they differ.

This refocusing will enable religious communities to engage with each other in a way that promotes harmony rather than division. An easing of religious tensions will provide the human community with a greater capacity to address the true problems of our era.

The formation of a community of world religions will be the essential mission of a newly created World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. Its activities will be geared toward building cooperation at the highest level across all faith traditions. The Council will provide opportunities for the world's religious leaders to come together on a regular basis to address critical issues. Ultimately, it will help create a shift in the thinking and behavior of people, and aid in fostering greater acceptance of other traditions and a new sense of shared global responsibility.

Religious leaders have a unique asset – their spiritual resources. An important function of the Council will entail fostering spiritual practices on a global scale – such as world prayers in times of crisis.

The mission of the World Council is as follows:

The World Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders aims to serve as a model and guide for the creation of a community of world religions. It seeks to inspire women and men of all faiths in the pursuit of peace and mutual understanding. It will undertake initiatives to provide the spiritual resources of the world's religious traditions to assist the United Nations and its agencies in the prevention, resolution and healing of conflicts, and in addressing global social and environmental problems. By promoting the practice of the universal human values shared by all religious traditions, and by uniting the human community for times of world prayer and meditation, the Council seeks to aid in developing the inner qualities and external conditions needed for the creation of a more peaceful, just and sustainable world society.

Council Structure

The Steering Committee acknowledged a dual role for the Council – one focused on inner transformation for the improvement of the world, and another that addresses the external conditions leading to conflict and injustice.

The Council will need to include religious leaders from the contemplative traditions with knowledge of how to bring about inner change, as well as those committed to conflict resolution and programs of social action.

It was agreed that the Summit Secretariat will select the interim co-chairs to help set up the initial meeting of the Council. As each religious tradition includes a range of denominations,

the interim co-chairs should have the backing of their religious tradition. They will help nominate religious leaders for participation on the Council. At the initial meeting of the Council, co-chairs for the first two-year term will be selected.

Criteria for participation includes a commitment to the global interreligious work of the Council, the degree of authority wielded by their position within the religious world, and their ability to contribute to the contemplative or peacebuilding/social action goals of the Council. Some may not hold positions of senior authority within their religious tradition (i.e., as will be the case with most women), but their spiritual achievements may warrant a position on the Council.

The Council will initially consist of approximately 50-75 religious leaders, representing the major faith traditions as well as indigenous traditions, and all regions of the world.

A small Group of Experts will be created, which will include internationally recognized scholars of religion. This group will help draft the Charter for the Council.

An Advisory Board of 12 to 15 business, government and thought leaders will also be selected to help create the bridge between religion, government and the financial community. This board will help raise the funds to implement the programs of the Council. An operating budget would be developed once the Council gets underway.

Responding to World Situation

A key question was asked during the meeting of the Steering Committee regarding how the Council, if it were already established, could respond to the events of September 11th. A number of recommendations were made, ranging from organizing world prayers, to issuing public statements, to taking out advertisements disavowing any connection between Islam and the terrorist activities. One participant mentioned that communications would be an important function of the Council.

For the Council to be effective, it will need a strong communications platform. The purpose of the Council is to raise the voices of religious leaders – in some degree of unison. This would be the function of the Secretariat of the Council, which would serve as a coordinating body among the Council members, to ensure that strong public statements are issued in response to critical events.

Another response of the Council to the current world situation could be to put together a task force to visit Afghanistan and identify a few key religious leaders from the region to work with the Council as part of the international community. Just as political leaders are reaching out to Afghanistan's new government, religious leaders will now have a body through which to function on a global platform.

Next Steps – Meeting of Council at United Nations in Bangkok

Due to concern over growing religious tensions in Asia, it was suggested that the first meeting of the Council take place in Asia. Since the headquarters of the United Nations in Asia is in Bangkok, it was agreed that we would seek to have this first Council meeting at the United Nations ESCAP facility in Bangkok. Meetings were held with UN officials in Bangkok after the October meeting of the Steering Committee, and they welcomed the idea of holding the Council meeting there. Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Bangkok has agreed to serve as a co-host. The Summit Secretariat will work with the UN and the university to organize all the logistics of the 3-day meeting. The basic goal is to develop better understanding of the underlying causes for the religious tension in different parts of Asia and how the religions can address these causes.

The dates selected for the first meeting of the Council are June 12-14, 2002. The interim co-chairs are helping with the selection of religious leaders to this first meeting of the Council. Invitation letters will go out in February. The Experts Group will help prepare the Charter for the Council and aid in the development of background material for the agenda.

The Summit Secretariat will work with the co-chairs and Steering Committee members in the development of the list of invitees for the first Council meeting and in the preparation of the meeting program.