

## IAPD Geneva, Switzerland: Empowering Youth for Peace through Interreligious Cooperation

Heiner Handschin  
September 22, 2020



Geneva, Switzerland -- The Europe and Middle East branch of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a project of the Universal Peace Federation, hosted with key partners a two-day conference titled "Empowering Youth for Peace through Interreligious Cooperation, Education and Humanitarian Action."

The conference was held on September 21 and 22, 2020, combining in-person and online meetings.

The first day of the conference, September 21, commemorated the 39th UN International Day of Peace by hosting an Interfaith Learning Workshop with the cooperation of six faith communities in Geneva. The second day, September 22, featured a webinar with two distinct sessions.



### September 21, 2020: Interfaith Learning Workshop

A roundtable of faith leaders convened in UPF's Office for UN Relations in Geneva. In addition, an audience of around 300 youth participants from all over Europe and the Middle East participated through Internet technology.

The roundtable was co-chaired by Heiner Handschin, the coordinator of IAPD for Europe and the Middle East, and Carolyn Handschin, president for Europe of Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), an organization that is affiliated with UPF.

The participants addressed the topic of educating youth for peace from the perspective of their religious traditions. In expressing their views, they conveyed a model of faith leaders appreciating each other and

cooperating for the sake of peace.

The panel was followed by an extended discussion and interaction with youth representatives of different backgrounds who attended the roundtable via the Internet. Of the several hundred participants following the debate online, a selected group of youth delegates addressed the panelists with questions and comments. There was a keen interest from both sides to interact, and the whole roundtable and webinar developed into a lively debate.



#### **The faith communities and their representatives:**

Lutheran Protestantism, World Council of Churches: Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn, professor at College Bogis-Bossey and the Ecumenical Institute of the WCC

Catholic Parish of Geneva, Notre Dame Basilica: Monsignor Pierre Farine, bishop (emeritus)

Sufi Alawiyya Brotherhood: Sheikh Khaled Bentounès

Islamic Cultural Foundation (Grand Mosque) Geneva: Mohamed Levrak, deputy director

Foundation of Knowledge: Hafid Ouadiri, director

Liberal Jewish Community of Geneva, GIL: Rabbi François Garai

Sikh Gurudwara: Bachittar Ughra Singh

Through cooperation with the Geneva Spiritual Appeal and with the endorsement of the Rev. Dr. William A. McComish, dean emeritus of St. Peter's Cathedral of Geneva, this gathering came about in partnership with the World Council of Churches, whose current general secretary, Rev. Dr. Ioan Sauca, mandated Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn, a Lutheran professor of ecumenical theology at the WCC's College Bogis-Bossey, near Geneva, to take part in the roundtable. The Rev. McComish was unable to participate because of his health.

After opening remarks by the organizers, Rabbi François Garai, as president of the Geneva Spiritual Appeal, described briefly the unique spirit of Geneva, which welcomes people of different faiths, creeds and cultures. He compared Geneva with an umbrella that embraces a large variety of people living in this quite small place. Through the crash of Swissair Flight 111 in 1998, many people in the Geneva community lost friends and family. Because of this, the wider community of Geneva, under the leadership of the faith leaders, came together to unite in mourning, but also to rise above the differences and create a climate of deep dialogue and friendship among the various faiths. The faith leaders created a charter emphasizing that religions should never be misused for political purposes or to discriminate against others. This step created a camaraderie among the different faith communities, and a bond of trust and cooperation was established.

Bishop Pierre Farine of the Roman Catholic Church of Geneva defined peace not as a quiet river in a beautiful landscape but rather as a state of mind that needs to be built through a conscious effort. The peaceful coexistence of people of different worldviews and faiths likewise must be built patiently and consistently, he said. For Bishop Farine, the same challenge is met by the small child who reconciles with his friend in the playground and the world leader who negotiates peace with other world leaders. "We have this point in common, that we are all in need of being educated for peace and we are, at the same time, all educators for peace. We are responsible for any peaceful outcome and shouldn't wait for others to do it."

Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn of the World Council of Churches focused on the topic of empowering youth for peace. Referring to a United Nations resolution on peace and security which focused on youth as agents of peace, Dr. Sinn called young people "pathfinders for peace" and said we underestimate their potential

for peace. We often consider youth to be trouble-makers, because they can be angry because of social injustices and the destruction of the environment. Youth can very easily create new networks and have the ability to go beyond institutions. She stated: "We don't need to get rid of institutions, but we need to go beyond institutions."

She emphasized that youth should be included in all government structures and activities, and that youth should be given the best possible education, including interreligious education. "Sometimes we think we have to protect them from getting in touch with others. This is wrong," she said.



From her experience as a professor, she emphasized that the sense of urgency that young people feel can be a driving force for policy change and can highlight new priorities. In a media-driven age there is a need to embrace otherness. Diversity should be embraced, she said. Dr. Sinn closed her presentation with a call for an intergenerational approach and an intercultural effort to bring about change.

Hafid Ouardiri, a former spokesman of the Grand Mosque in Geneva and director of the Foundation of Knowledge, explained that he was told by his grandfather at a very young age that peace was an important pre-condition for human development. When he moved to France as a student, he lived a difficult reality of being part of an ill-loved minority. At the same time, he understood that peace and social justice cannot be separated from each other. He was also confronted with a society that judged one another based on possessions, origins, ethnicity and religion.

Moving to Geneva let him discover different horizons and an open mind, demonstrated by the spirit of togetherness of Geneva. He closed his presentation by emphasizing the need for all of us to be involved in improving the society we live in, beyond differences in faith and creed, and to help young people by working with them and taking seriously their concerns and issues.

Mohamed Levvak, the deputy director of the Islamic Cultural Foundation and the Grand Mosque of Geneva, addressed especially the youth of Switzerland, Europe and the world. Unfortunately, he said, there is a widespread misunderstanding about the precious value of Islam and faith in general, and we are living in a world where the religions of others are sometimes demonized. He thanked IAPD for this meeting and emphasized the strong commitment of the Islamic community of Geneva to embrace diversity and a multicultural and multifaith society.

Unable to travel to Geneva, Sheikh Khaled Bentounès, spiritual leader of the Sufi Alawiyya Brotherhood with more than 100,000 followers throughout the world, joined virtually from southern France. Sheikh Bentounès thanked the organizers for the invitation to the roundtable and welcomed the topic of empowering youth for peace. He stated that peace is not just an absence of war but a state of mind, an energy that can become contagious. A peaceful person is a person who is prosperous because he rallies people around him with the same state of mind, he said.

Peace within myself is the first priority, he said, followed by peace with others and finally also with our environment. Our earthly environment takes care of all our needs, and therefore we also must care for our environment. We need to transform our way of dealing with all things of the world and should transfer this knowledge to our young people especially.

The sheikh said that his movement has especially associated with organizations like the Scouts movement

in order to promote a constructive and positive culture of peace. He expressed his hope for cooperation with Geneva through the Geneva Spiritual Appeal, IAPD and other likeminded associations. He said he sees Geneva as a place of nourishment for a culture of peace and expressed his strong desire to cooperate and to contribute with the partners present.

The last contributor, Bachittar Ughra Singh, co-founder and vice president of the Sikh Gurudwara Temple of Geneva, stated that Sikhism is a minority faith here in Geneva and expressed his gratitude to be able to join this gathering. He stressed that his religion places great emphasis on respect for women and respect for diversity as well as the human rights of all. Youth need to be taught these values of spirituality, generosity and hospitality toward others, he said.



The roundtable participants agreed that we owe it to the future leaders of society to build on all the good foundations established and allow them to make improvements in order to build a peaceful and just society and world. They emphasized that especially religious leaders have to focus more strongly on youth, by offering support in a time when so many difficult influences are leaving young people disenfranchised and without the means to cope with the contemporary reality.

The questions raised by the six youth delegates, under the wise leadership of the young Rabbi Kevin De-Carli, representing hundreds of youth connected online, showed the keen interest of young people in religion and spirituality but also some skepticism about institutionalized religion that they often see as narrow-minded and blinded by self-interest.

The faith leaders of the roundtable responded very eloquently, echoing many good points of the youth delegates and showing a deep understanding of their constructive criticism. The session ended after a lively interaction of 90 minutes with short statements from each of the faith leaders, giving rise to hope for a continuation of this kind of intergenerational conference in the very near future.

IAPD of Europe and the Middle East would like to thank all the partners involved for the fruitful cooperation which made such an impressive meeting possible; indeed, the door is now open to greater youth empowerment with the active participation of Geneva's faith communities.

### **September 22, 2020: Opening Session**

The Opening Session of the second day started with welcoming remarks from Jacques Marion, president of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, who spoke about Geneva's well-known role not only as a microcosm of the world, with the presence of the UN and many international organizations, but also as a city of refuge. He stressed that the message of altruistic love as a means to solve conflicts especially resonates with youth, who have the idealism and the potential to contribute to a better world.

He then introduced the Rev. Dr. Ioan Sauca, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, who described this conference as very timely. Despite the pain and panic resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, we need a hopeful message and to come together to build a peaceful world, he said. The word "shalom" implies more than solving a conflict, he said; it means a restorative and holistic approach in which all people of faith realize their interconnectedness in order to serve and heal the suffering world.

One of the biggest challenges is the underrepresentation of youth and the underuse of young people's potential, Dr. Sauca said. It is high time for faith communities to include youth in peace efforts, he said, because their energy and idealism can be instrumental in realizing lasting peace in the world.

In his welcoming remarks, Dr. Katsumi Otsuka, the chair of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, encouraged key stakeholders to form lasting partnerships, and he promised that UPF will support this kind of effort. Interdenominational and international cooperation is needed in this time of the COVID-19

pandemic, he said. Young people's active participation and energy will certainly be instrumental in bringing about change in the world.

Carolyn Handschin, the director of the WFWPI Offices for UN Relations, moderated the discussion on the role and importance of youth in society. The session looked at creating a stable culture of peace through education and the integration of youth into every facet of society: religion, culture, politics, economy, development, policy-making and decision-making. The following speakers contributed from their different perspectives.

Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, a Shia-Islamic leader, Ghana and the United Kingdom

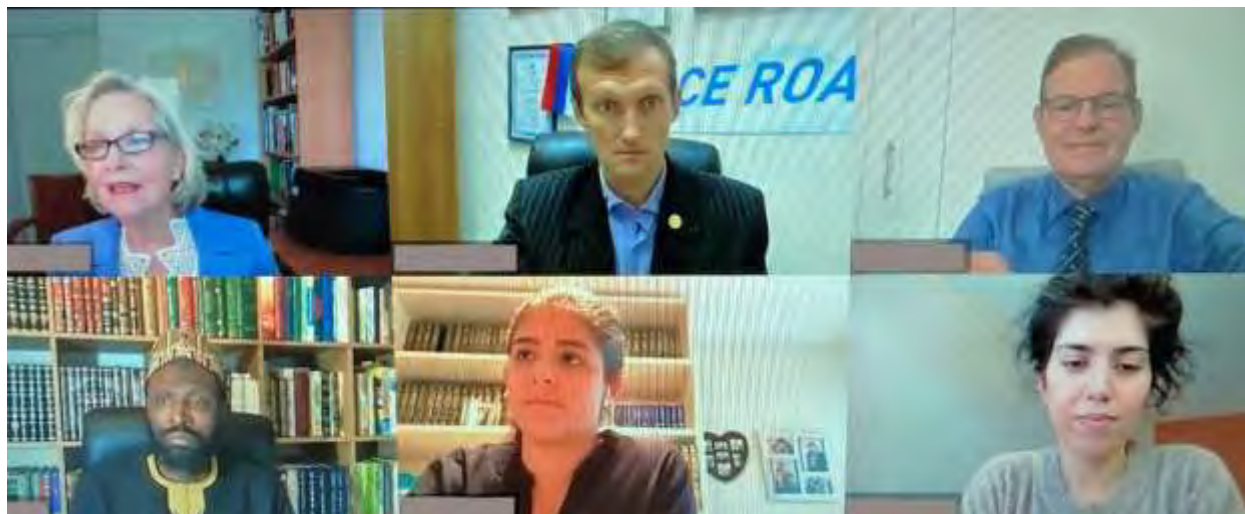
Dr. Claude Béglé, CEO of SymbioSwiss Sàrl, member of National Parliament (2015-2019), Switzerland

Liora Abergel, Likrat Project, Jewish community of Switzerland

Laleh Ashrafi, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Geneva

Dmitry Samko, head of UPF in Moscow, Russia

Mrs. Handschin opened the session by giving a short overview of the previous day's event and putting into context the upcoming webinar. She stated that, based on the September 21 meeting and the very lively interaction between the Geneva faith leaders and the youth representatives, "We are encouraged and hopeful that things can become very constructive and promising when there is intergenerational cooperation."



She introduced the session and debate around the role of youth in society and what could be the benefits of youth empowerment. To answer this question, the factors to be considered were perspectives from government, religion, international organizations and various representatives of civil society.

Sheikh Nuru Mohammed addressed the role of youth in today's society. Describing the three stages of human life -- childhood, youth and old age -- he characterized youth as the most sensitive stage, because it is when people are led either to positivity or negativity, depending on how they are raised.

The period of youth is the age of productivity, Sheikh Mohammed said. The importance of youth in our current society can be seen in terms of creativity and productivity. Youth are quick in decision-making, with no hesitation. We need quick decision-makers, he said, and we should give them opportunities. Another quality of youth is the ability to adapt quickly to changes.

Sheikh Mohammed mentioned that Islam compares the heart of youth to fertile soil: Whenever you plant something, it will grow quickly. Youth can move mountains when given the opportunity to do so, he said. He stressed that we elders shouldn't judge from our perspectives because the current time is different from "our day."

Dr. Claude Béglé, a renowned CEO of large international corporations and experienced politician from Switzerland, stressed the need for youth to be given economic and social perspectives, but also aspirations. Aspirations can be either positive or negative. Youth can be mobilized for ideals; there is malleability, but there is a certain fragility at the same time. The Green movement is something like a new religion.

Dr. Béglé said his wide range of experience as a peace negotiator in the Swiss foreign service helped him understand that when youth go astray and fall into traps of radicalization and violence, education is often

missing. Youth without perspectives can be manipulated more easily, due to a lack of purpose in life, he said. Young people need positive core values, a sense of purpose, and respect for others and their perspectives. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation are necessary, as members of different faiths work together heart to heart to tackle common issues.

Liora Abergel, representing the Likrad project of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and a student of political science, introduced Likrad as a project of outreach and interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish youth in Swiss society. Young people understand the need for pride in one's origins, religion, culture and traditions. In Likrad, young people are educated to become Likratinos, whom we might call youth ambassadors, to address especially teenagers, with the classroom as the stage. Exchange on this level is more sustainable than a theoretical lesson from a teacher. Likratinos want to spread tolerance and exchange with other youths. It has become less "cool" to hate other faiths and traditions. Standing up for tolerance and respect for each other is a good way to empower youth, Ms. Abergel said. The teenagers of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. Therefore, it is important to exchange ideas beyond barriers and work together for peaceful coexistence.

Laleh Ashrafi, an intern at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Geneva, stated that youth and peace can lead to different dimensions: One can go to more political levels and the other more to community and national levels. On the political level things go very slowly, but on the national and community levels there quickly can be tangible results. Youth are known for their potential as agents for change, but there are still many barriers.

One such barrier is "othering," in which society sees youth as a source of violence and terrorism. Because of the threat of manipulation to radical agendas, political and religious leaders tend to hold young people back in order to avoid negative outcomes. This leads to a growing frustration among the younger generation, who feel, "We are not heard."

Although people are at least partially responsible for their decisions, Ms. Ashrafi said, greater efforts should be made to give youth the tools to be valuable contributors. Especially among religious leaders, there are sometimes gaps and misunderstandings that can cause confusion, even desperation, among young people. There is a growing attitude among young people to be tolerant toward different faiths, cultures, traditions and races. Policy-makers and decision-makers need to be reminded to focus more on empowering young people to take on responsible roles in society.

As the last speaker, Dmitry Samko, the president of UPF in Moscow, Russia, expressed his belief that there is often a big gap between decision-makers and young people. Young people are underrepresented in current society, he said. In order for young people to get involved, there has to be trust. He described the Peace Road initiative of UPF as an activity that the young generation can easily embrace: Running or cycling for peace is easy, and all young people can participate.

The young generation receives a lot of teaching in schools, he said, and sometimes it is like "propaganda" and the teachers desire to create a certain outcome. Because of this, young people are not so confident anymore, and they usually act differently once presented with a concrete project. The Peace Road initiative is very inoffensive and at the same time can be easily monitored. It inspires young people to take up some concrete action for a noble cause, opening up people's minds for a positive vision and perspectives. Sports and sports-like projects for peace can really motivate youth.

Mr. Samko mentioned that with the Peace Road project, Russian youth even managed to go into North Korea and inspire people there for a future world of peace without borders.

The presentations were followed by an interactive question-and-answer session. One of the questions was about how religions can do more to empower youth. Sheikh Mohammed emphasized the need to mentor youth and to give them tools so that they can do something positive. "Encourage them to take initiative, and give them the opportunity and space to do something constructive!" he said.

To the question about economic issues that prevent the empowerment of young people, Dr. Béglé said that indeed economic difficulty is a great obstacle to youth empowerment. Frustration about the lack of a basic income can lead to radicalization. One of the problems of developing countries that prevents youth from being empowered is the dire economic situation. People are tempted to believe in migration to "the rich countries."

Intergenerational and interreligious cooperation is needed for youth empowerment, so that things can substantially change, Dr. Béglé said. Peace efforts can be made by religious leaders, but the opportunities offered can be best applied by young people themselves. An economic system that is viable is like a bright star for young people to look up to.

To the question about youth disengagement, Liora Abigel of the Likrad project said there are not enough platforms for youth to bring in their potential and ideas. She mentioned that her Likrad project is one way

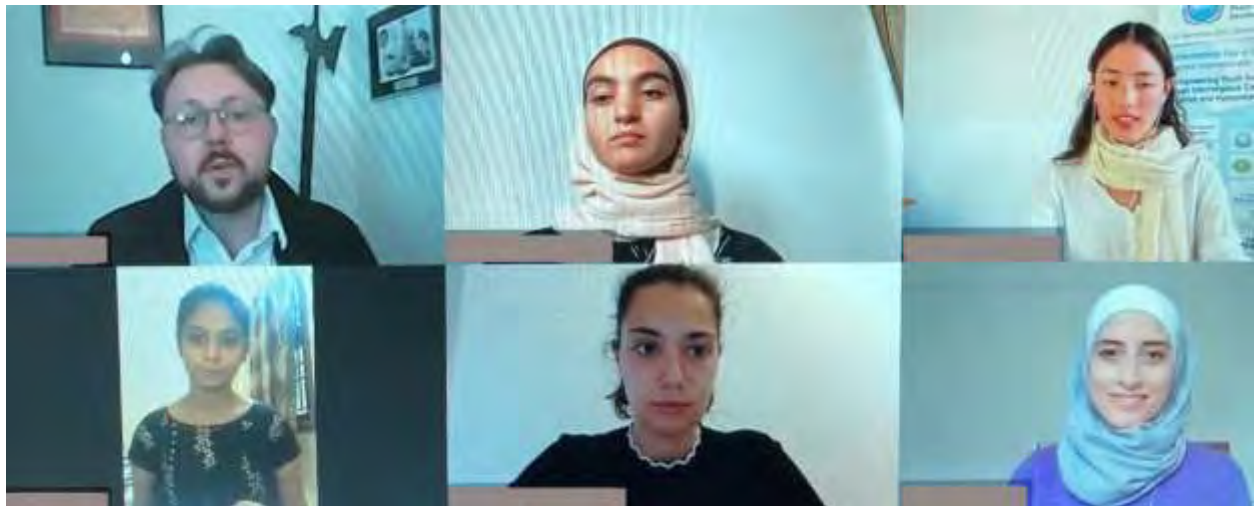
to empower youth to be engaged in general issues.

To the question of what international organizations could do to empower youth, Laleh Ashrafi responded that they are creating youth initiatives and programs in partnership with civil society. Also, by creating internships for young people, international organizations can stimulate capacity building and awareness on how youth can create their own successful projects.

Asked about government support of the project, Mr. Samko replied that Russian authorities at various levels have reacted very positively and supportively toward the Peace Road initiative.

In response to the question about what IAPD could do to more effectively serve the cause of world peace and human development, there were a number of suggestions, among them, notably, to teach youth tolerance combined with passion. Another suggestion was that IAPD could help to form interfaith youth councils for peace to stimulate positive exchanges and harmony among local faith communities.

The session ended after a lively discussion in which session chair Carolyn Handschin quoted the founder of WFP, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon: "The world cannot change through political changes alone, the world changes when people change."



## **September 22, 2020: Session II**

This was a special session on "Empowering Youth for Peace through Interreligious Cooperation, Education and Humanitarian Action." It was also the 12th assembly of the Interfaith Youth Council.

The moderator was Rabbi Kevin De-Carli, the president of the Interfaith Youth Council of the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance. The speakers were:

Mélanie Komagata, International Association of Youth and Students for Peace, Switzerland

Srruthi Lekha Raaja Elango from India, a UN representative of WFPW-Geneva

Nida-Errahmen Ajmi, a representative of Islam

Ranim Asfahani, Edinburgh, Scotland

Aischa Hamdi-Pacha, a representative of the interfaith organization Iras Cotis

## **Question-and-answer session**

As a special feature, a Model UN Interfaith Youth Panel was convened with the UN and submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations as part of a global call for youth initiatives to its Sustainable Development Goals Action Zone Project.

This was the 12th session of the Model UN Interfaith Youth Council session since its founding in 2008. This time the Interfaith Youth Council of the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance (GIIA) brought together youth of five faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Unificationism. The youth delegates presented their perspectives based on the main title and the UN SDG Action Zone Project requirements.

The first point mentioned was the importance of good role models for youth through the positive and empowering influence of parents and siblings. This reinforced the value and importance of a good family environment for children.

Another crucial point was the need for youth to have dreams and, through intergenerational cooperation, to be able to pursue those dreams. Role models in society for good leadership should be promoted, as in these difficult times we cannot count on all families to be good mentors. Empowering youth for peace cannot be neglected and has to be sustainable. Also, only exemplary peace leadership can really empower youth to become engaged for peace, and youth will require practical tools and examples of peace leadership through concrete (humanitarian) action.

Another presenter stressed the point that youth need opportunities, space and trust to feel confident and empowered. Among youth, the situation of migrants, especially the children who were born in Europe but whose parents originate from a non-European, non-Christian culture and tradition, is very challenging.

The testimony of one of the presenters, a young woman from an Islamic background, born in Switzerland but growing up in her strict family environment, was very touching. She described her experience of being a soldier in the Swiss military as a great challenge, firstly, because of being a young woman and secondly being a woman of Arabic origin with an Islamic family background. In an increasingly multicultural society, there is a need for appropriate measures to guide and help youth in these specific circumstances.

A good education can make a huge difference in empowering young people. Youth from different cultures, ethnicities, and religions should be mentored properly so that they can make a unique contribution to the whole of society. Differences should be considered as a plus. Almost all felt that educational programs for global citizenship would help young people to cope well with the current reality.

Sports were mentioned as a means to create bonds among youth from different backgrounds. There is a need for religious and political leaders in society to look at young people with new eyes: as agents for change!

Several panelists expressed that this new multicultural reality for a country like Switzerland cannot be ignored. It is important for society to face the challenge of diversity and to find new ways to live together. If this isn't done, there will be parallel societies and a fracture of the social fabric that could lead to tensions in the long run. Some panelists expressed their resolve and engagement to reduce prejudice and tensions by getting to know each other better.

The panelists decided to collect the conclusions from the various presentations and to formulate a common statement and resolution that will be published later.

To close the conference, Heiner W. Handschin, the coordinator of IAPD for Europe and the Middle East, invited two representatives of the organizing partners to offer closing remarks.

Dr. Michael Balcomb, the president for Europe and the Middle East of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), another organization that is affiliated with UPF, expressed his appreciation and gratitude to the speakers for their great efforts and contributions.

Youth are instrumental in bringing about peace and human development, he said. Dr. Balcomb emphasized that "Peace starts with me" -- with each of us. There are two important sides to any peace-making effort, he said: One is to strive for justice with the determination to correct what is wrong; the other is compassion and the readiness to embrace people with the goal to encourage change.

The founders of UPF and FFWPU, the Rev. and Mrs. Moon, embody these two qualities as a couple, Dr. Balcomb said, and we can understand that both sides of parental nature, though different, are equally important.

Dr. Tageldin Hamad, the head of IAPD International and the vice president of UPF International, congratulated the panel and speakers for all the good presentations. He emphasized the need for youth to sit at the table of decision-making and to take charge of shaping the future of our world.

Youth surely can learn from the vision of the great religions so that wise decisions can be made, he said. Religions again can become relevant in creating a world of lasting peace.

Interreligious dialogue is important, Dr. Hamad said, but more important is that "we go beyond dialogue and work together to tackle the urgent concerns in the current world."

(Below is the link to the video transcripts of all the sessions.)

[www.facebook.com/upf.europe/videos/357683032257035](http://www.facebook.com/upf.europe/videos/357683032257035)