

Oceania holds the Pacific Christian Leadership Conference (PCLC)

Masaichi Hori
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On February 28, 2023, the Pacific Christian Leadership Conference (PCLC) organized the Conference on Religious Freedom, titled "Religious Freedom: The Bedrock of a Good Society." The event welcomed participants from 26 nations across Asia Pacific, including Japan, USA, Canada, Iran, and Thailand, among others.

The conference gathered religious leaders, educators, civic society, youth leaders, peace activists, and experts, with a total of 57 on-site participants and 781 online attendees through Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube.

The opening session was moderated by Rev. Gregory Stone, Secretary General of PCLC Executive Committee, and featured a short PCLC video, and a praise song by the ACE Singing Bishops from the Philippines. Archbishop Elias Soria, President of the Asian Clergy Leadership Conference and IAPD Philippines, served as the master of ceremony, while Rev. Father Roberto V. San Diego, the Episcopal Vicar for Religious of the St. Francis of Assisi Parish from Manda

Rev. Masaichi Hori, Chairman of the PCLC Executive Committee, delivered the opening remarks, emphasizing that religious freedom is not only at stake in totalitarian states but also in Christian and democratic nations. A video on the International Religious Summit held in Washington DC last January 31 to February 1, 2023, was also presented during the conference.

Twelve esteemed speakers presented their thoughts on the conference theme, "Religious Freedom: The Bedrock of a Good Society." H.E.

Johnson Toribiong, Former President of the Republic of Palau, discussed how leaders should take action in their capacity to advocate and defend religious liberty in their nations. Mr. Thomas P. McDevitt, Chairman of the Washington Times, USA, emphasized the importance of reinforcing the call for religious freedom, fighting for freedom of speech, media, conscience, and faith, and working together to move the world as the body of Christ. Other speakers included Dr. Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow, CATO Institute, Washington DC, USA; Mr. Jonathan Ayling, Chief Executive, Free Speech Union, New Zealand; Most Rev. Antonio J. Ledesma, Archbishop- Emeritus of Cagayan de Oro, Philippines; and Mrs. Wendy Francis, National Director for Politics, Australian Christian Lobby.

In between the sessions, Lanao del Norte Interfaith Council Music Ministry from the Philippines and One

Heart from Solomon Islands performed, captivating the hearts of the participants.

Msgr. Joseph Lalo, a Priest from the Eastern Catholic Church, moderated the second session of the conference, with speakers such as Cardinal Kelvin Felix, Cardinal Emeritus of Castries, Roman Catholic Church; Rev. Ursula McLackland, Regional Coordinator, Inter-religious Association for Peace and Development; Rev. Fr. Edgardo De Jesus, Roman Catholic Priest, Diocese of Bulacan, Philippines; Dr. Con Kafataris, President and Founder, Australian Christian Alliance; Bishop Rene Ballenas, President, Association of Christian Evangelist International, USA; and Rev. Meilanny Risamasu, Co-Founder, Youth Pastor's Community, Indonesia.

Dr. Robert S. Kittel, Co-Chairman of PCLC Executive Committee, led the call to action, which highlighted the persecution of the Unification Church in Japan. Dr. Kittel emphasized that Unification Church members in Japan continue to face extreme persecution and discrimination, violating their fundamental right to freedom of religion. He called on the audience to sign a declaration of support for the statement on religious freedom, aimed at protecting the basic rights of all religious groups to practice their religion without fear of persecution or discrimination. The declaration was signed by 93 online participants while 22 did it onsite.

Dr. Kittel's call to action emphasized the importance of promoting religious freedom and tolerance, urging people to stand up against persecution and discrimination of any kind. By taking this simple action, the audience had the opportunity to express their solidarity with the Unification Church and other religious groups facing similar challenges. Overall, Dr. Kittel's message served as a powerful reminder that protecting the freedom of religion is not just a matter of individual choice but an essential component of a just and equitable society. Through action, people can work towards creating a more inclusive and tolerant world where everyone's fundamental rights are respected and protected.

After the signing ceremony, group photos were taken, followed by a closing prayer led by Msgr. Isagani Fabito, a priest from the Iglesia Filipina Independiente in the Philippines and Senior Adviser of PCLC. The event ended with cheers of "Eog Mansei" and a closing performance by the HJ Youth Band.

The PCLC comprises 17 nations, including Australia, Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tuvalu, Tonga, and Vanuatu.