

## UPF Austria's Interfaith Conference Celebrates World Interfaith Harmony Week

Peter Haider  
February 10, 2022



Vienna, Austria - UPF-Austria and affiliated organizations celebrated World Interfaith Harmony Week with an interfaith conference.

The Austrian branches of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), and Youth and Students for Peace (YSP) joined UPF in organizing an interfaith conference on February 10, 2022. Contributions to the conference were given both in person at the UPF Peace Embassy and partly through video feeds.

Rev. Arthur Nzekwu of the Celestial Church of Christ opened the conference with a prayer and a brief introduction of his denomination, followed by a musical performance by flautist James Strauss. Moderator Elisabeth Cook, the president of FFWPU-Austria, then turned the floor over to Peter Haider, president of UPF-Austria.



Mr. Haider elaborated on the background of World Interfaith Harmony Week: In 2010, King Abdullah II of Jordan proposed this initiative, which is based on the pioneering work of the Common Word project launched by Muslim scholars in 2007 in response to Pope Benedict XVI's comments that appeared to criticize Islam. The Common Ground project was meant to show the common ground among monotheistic religions. It later was developed to include all religions and all people.

Every year from 2013 to 2020, UPF-Austria commemorated World Interfaith Harmony Week by holding a big conference at the United Nations offices in Vienna, inviting 150 to 200 participants to discuss current topics. The theme of the last conference was "Faith-Based Organizations and the UN Sustainable Development Goals."



The spirit of Interfaith Harmony Week and the Common Word project is summarized in the following statement from the UPF International website: "This age of globalization needs enlightened people in each faith who can examine their sacred writings and traditions and identify the aspects that can benefit all humanity as well as those that preserve each religion's identity. The UN designated the first week of February every year as World Interfaith Harmony Week. UPF calls on people of faith to honor the Divine indwelling in a way that encourages understanding, respect, and cooperation among people of all faiths for the well-being of our communities and peace in the world."

Professor Dr. Mohamed Bassam Kabbani of the University of Vienna explained more about the Common Word project, saying that in response to the pope's comments, 38 initiators from the Islamic world began the "Good Will Project." It has spread and has been taken over by a Muslim center that includes the king of Jordan. These 38 have been joined by 138 notable figures. The common and unifying factor of the religions is described in the Koran in Sura No. 5, which reports about the Last Supper of Jesus, namely the belief in the one God and the belief in the love of neighbor.

Dr. Kabbani emphasized that every evening the Prophet reaffirmed his belief that all people are children of God, as they are descended from one father and one mother. In Muslim understanding, it is believed that Allah made people different and they should remain so. We have the task that we compete among ourselves to be better children of God. Differences in culture, skin color, religion are described by the Koran as an enrichment and a proof of God.

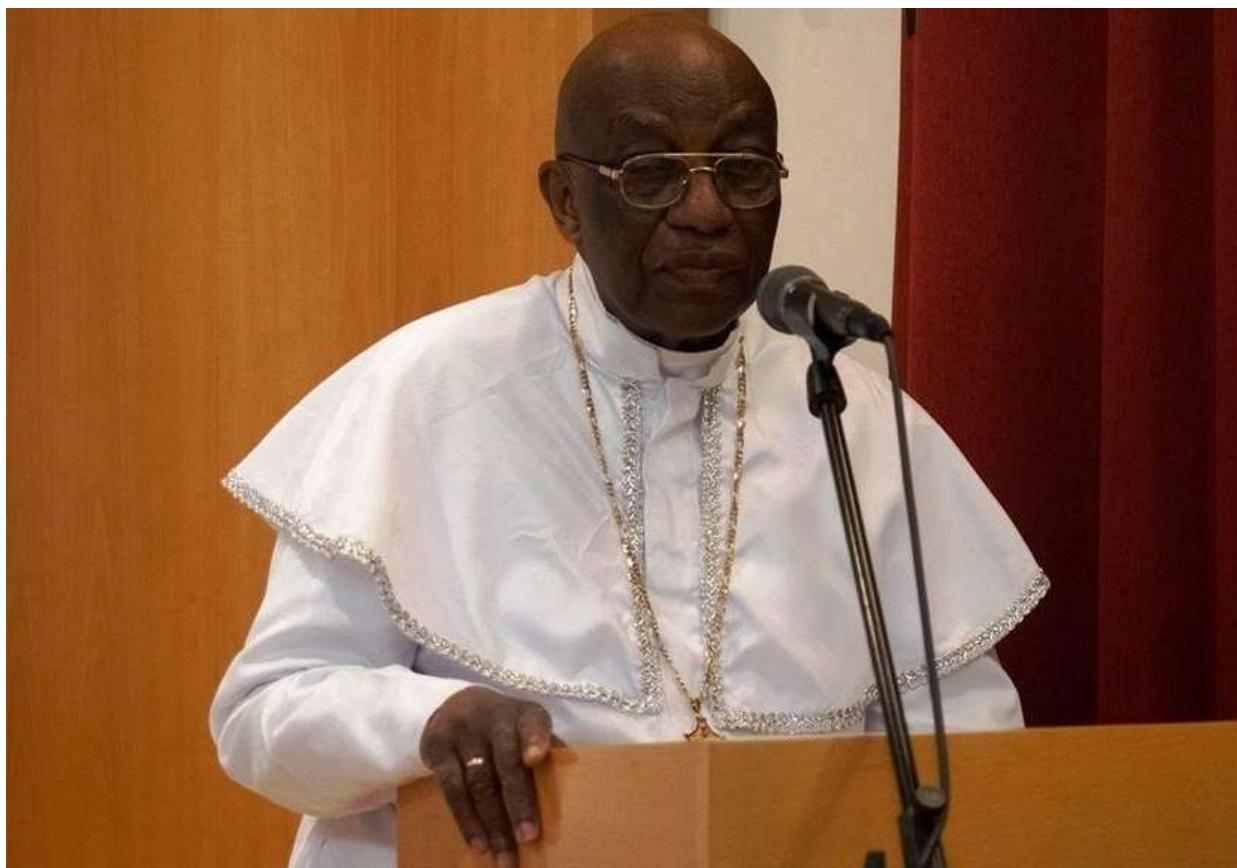
Today we see in a special way that we humans are all in the same boat, Dr. Kabbani said. We have experienced this through the pandemic. We all are affected by the problems of the world, be it climate change, acts of war, or famine. Dialogue must be practiced in many ways, training in dialogue with Christianity, Judaism and other initiatives.

The first task is to get to know each other. The second task is to understand: How does the other think? We need to talk to the religious representatives themselves, not about them. Dr. Kabbani sees the third task of dialogue as showing understanding for the other religion and perhaps even learning from each other.

Two video messages followed. At the beginning of his message, Pastor Markus Gerold of the Protestant Parish A.B. Steyr quoted the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng: "There can be no world peace

without religious peace." Peace always creates a tension between religion and politics, because "world peace" is also a political goal. Religion is an expression of how I want to shape society, and thus it touches the field of politics. Reverend Gerold reflected on how far one should endure this tension or whether one should remain purely with the spiritual.

With regard to interreligious dialogue, Reverend Gerold sees the task of a church leader as helping believers to develop appreciation for those of other faiths and to facilitate dialogue at eye level with those of other faiths. He would like to see much more dialogue in everyday life. We should not only take advantage of the opportunity for dialogue at conferences, he said, but practice it in many small situations that eventually will come together to form a larger whole. "Peace does not mean absence of war, but presence of love," he said. In this sense, "Let us do many small things!"



The second video message came from Father Richard Reinisch, a monk in the Benedictine Abbey of Göttweig. He lives in a Catholic monastery, having had a late vocation. After working as a mechanical engineer, he traveled to many continents. He spent several years in China and recorded his experiences in his book *Christianity in China*. He experiences his own religion and faith through daily prayer five times a day and through social work visiting prisoners. These two areas are a living interface between inside and outside, he said. In a prison one cannot proselytize, but only talk and sympathize. In his life he has learned to respect people of different cultures and to perceive them as an enrichment.

The next lecture came from Swami Atmavidyananda Giri, vice president of the Kriya Yoga Institute. He, too, worked as a mechanical engineer before his spiritual career, but already was prepared for the spiritual path by his parents. From the perspective of Kriya Yoga, he said, there is one God who is omnipresent and whom we all are meant to love. Religions are seen as different flowers in God's garden.

All scriptures affirm that God is the Creator of all living beings, and therefore we should be one, he said. Each religion has principles that are consistent with other religions, and some teachings that differ from others. The differences concern the way the religion is practiced and the culture from which it comes. The problem is that people cannot accept these differences. A yoga master summed it up like this: People peel a banana, throw away the banana, and keep the banana peel. We should share our teachings and principles and discuss them, he said.

A video message from Max Valtingojer of the New Apostolic Church in Innsbruck followed. Already in his childhood he was taught Christian values. He was ordained as a deacon and later as a priest. Since then, he has been working voluntarily as a priest in pastoral care, religious education, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.

The love we receive from Christ motivates us to act mercifully and hospitably, to love even the enemy, he said. This is not easy. But in view of Jesus Christ, it is possible. Paul says, "Let all your things be done in love!" The love of God is poured out in our hearts. Thus, acting in love is a matter of the heart. Mr. Valtingojer concluded with a quote from Mother Teresa. Often people feel taken advantage of when they

help, but "If you love until it hurts, there can be no more pain. Only more love." (Mother Teresa)

The last contribution came from Bishop Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, the leader and co-founder of Ordination Ministries for Women. It is a personal concern of hers that we should walk hand in hand on a great, wide road. What is it worth if we think only of our own religion and our own greatness? God is much greater than what we can understand or what is contained in our tradition. If we have decided to live for God, to believe in God, then we also must respect our neighbor. The commandment of love is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.



Another important thought is that if my religion preaches something that harms the other, it would not be a good religion, she said. It is always better to have the welfare of others in mind than to harm others for the sake of religion.

There are many offenses in our church's past, she said. It is a big burden I carry with me, but "Make peace with your past." I am responsible for how I live my faith, she said. We are responsible with each other for our earth. I thank all those who walk hand in hand with me on the path of seeking God, and I ask for God's blessing, she concluded.

Closing words came from the speakers:

Dr. Kabbani: "It is possible to make peace and shape society together. Religions also can be abused. But it is always the human being who is responsible."

Swami Atmavidyananda Giri: "I'm happy that we are making effort in our society to create a beautiful family in this world. Let's share our ideas and create a beautiful environment of peace and harmony."

UPF-Austria President Peter Haider concluded with the thought that we are spiritual beings. "Religions are meant to cultivate and nurture the human spirit," he said. "When we share our spirituality with each other, we get more than from just one group or religious community. I hope that we have succeeded in doing that today."