

HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership Newsletter: 49th Annual Commencement

Thomas G. Walsh  
June 17, 2025



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Congratulations to the Class of 2025!

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## Dr. Sakena Yacoobi's Commencement Address

"It is you that is going to make this world a beautiful place. It is you that is going to transform lives. It is you that is going to bring peace."

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## President's Address at the 49th Commencement

"Peace, as our graduates know, is understood very comprehensively or holistically. At its core, peace is an ideal that describes a set of relationships; our relationship with God, our relationship with humanity, and relationship with the natural world, our environment."

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## Student Luncheon at HJI

Prior to Commencement, a student luncheon was to celebrate the completion of a fruitful Spring semester, and to honor those participating in the graduation ceremony.

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## Congratulations to the Class of 2025!



On Saturday, May 31, 2025, HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership (HJI) held its 49th Commencement in New York City to celebrate the class of 2025.



Special remarks were offered by Rev. Demian Dunkley, FFWPU Continental Director, North America, and Member of the HJI Board of Trustees. "I believe we came here, to this great school, to go deeper and dive deeper into our own sense of purpose and to show up boldly, courageously, and surrender to a higher will."



In recognition for her exemplary leadership and advocacy for peace, the Doctor of Humane Letters was awarded to Dr. Saken Yacoobi, Educator and Founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning, and former recipient of the Sunhak Peace Prize. Afterwards, Dr. Yacoobi delivered the commencement address.

Dr. Yacoobi shared words of encouragement and inspiration:

"It is you that is going to make this world a beautiful place. It is you that is going to transform lives. It is you that is going to bring peace...Let me tell you, peace is something that we can all bring together collectively. As an individual, no one can bring peace. We can bring peace in a nation, and in the world, just if we all work together side by side."

She continued "Your religion is a pillar that you can hold on to and it will make you continuously



grow and learn. God is the only one that can help you to achieve your success. And for that purpose, again, Mother Moon and Father Moon gave us a great concept. They said that ‘we are all one family.’”



Dr. Yacoobi also touched on the challenges her organizations have faced and their victories. “They counted on us to hold their hand because we promised we were going to help. So we said yes. We developed a curriculum and we set up University Meraj. Meraj means getting to the highest point, reaching to God with knowledge, being humble, and being wise.”

Dr. Yacoobi concluded, “I am sure with your education, that was very thoughtfully developed, you can do many, many things in this world...I wish you all the best and I will constantly congratulate you from the bottom of my heart.”



Dr. Thomas Walsh, and Prabhu (Graduate)



Dr. Thomas Walsh



Dr. Thomas Walsh, Megumi Tona (Graduate), Dr. Sakena Yacoobi

The class of 2025 was represented by 21 graduates. In his congratulatory remarks, Dr. Thomas Walsh, President, stated “Our HJI mission is reflected in our name, one that highlights our commitment to peace and public leadership. Peace, as our graduates know, is understood very comprehensively or holistically. At its core, peace is an ideal that describes a set of relationships; our relationship with God, our relationship with humanity, and relationship with the natural world, our environment.”

After sharing upcoming developments for HJI, Dr. Walsh stated “As our Founders understood so well, religion, spirituality and faith are absolutely essential for peace. This principle underlies so much of what we do at HJI...Keep the fire burning for your alma mater. Be confident that all of us here at HJI stand ready to continue to support you. Please maintain your commitment to serving the wider world, creating peace through principled public leadership.”



Ms. Sancha Samara Ogden Christian



Dr. Katarina Connery



Dr. Mika Deshotel

The class of 2025 graduate responses were delivered by Ms. Sancha Samara Ogden Christian, representing students in the master degree programs, as well as Dr. Katarina Connery and Dr. Mika Deshotel on behalf of the Doctor of Ministry recipients.



Ten students were inducted into Theta Alpha Kappa, the national honor society for the field of religious studies, by Dr. Thomas Ward, Director of the Peace Studies Program.



Dr. Shota Iwasaki, Distinguished Service Award Recipient



Rev. Barbara Robertson, Public Leadership Award Recipient

Dr. Shota Iwasaki was presented with the Distinguished Service Award. The Public Leadership Award was presented to Rev. Barbara Robertson.

Congratulations to the class of 2025!

Watch the recording [here](#). Additional photos can be viewed [here](#).



#### DMin Graduate Dissertations:

Ken Alexander – *The Reintegration of Ex-Offenders in Society: The Collaboration of Community and Faith-Based Organizations Focusing on Transitioning from Prison to Work to Society*

Katarina Connery – *In Her Image: Effect of a Personal Relationship with Heavenly Mother on Self-Worth in Motherhood*

Mika Deshotel – *Unified Voices: Exploring Intergenerational Collaboration in a Unificationist Worship Model*

Alice Fleisher – *Spiritual Life Formation and Growth Education for Young Adults within FFWPU-USA Opportunities and Limitations*

Shota Iwasaki – *Building a Community-Oriented Church through Beautification Projects: A Case Study of the Application and Practice of Service Learning as a Catalyst for Community Development*

Alhassan Kamagtey – *Muslim Marital Counseling: Views, Perceptions and Experience of Yankasa Muslim Community in The Bronx, NY, USA*

Magnus Larsson – *The 90-Degree Leader: Bridging Faith and Reason for Meaningful Relations and Personal Growth*

Ron Pappalardo – *The God Effect: Exploring the Long-Term Influences of Elicited Mystical Experiences*

#### MA Theses:

Mitch Dixon – *The Suffering God: Exploring Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology*

Mary Marshall-Moriarty – *A New Paradigm for the Relationship between Human Beings and the Natural Environment: From Divergent Influences to Integration and Harmony, and the Contribution of Dr. Sun Myung Moon and Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon*

Wassa Traore – *Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Case Study: Liberia*



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## Dr. Sakena Yacoobi's Commencement Address



*Dr. Sakena Yacoobi was the recipient of an Honorary Doctorate during HJI's 2025 Commencement Ceremonies held on May 23<sup>rd</sup> at 4 West 43<sup>rd</sup> St. Dr. Yacoobi is the Educator and Founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning, and former recipient of the Sunhak Peace Prize.*

*What follows is the Commencement Address of Dr. Yacoobi.*

First of all I would like to thank some special people, Dr. Reverend Moon and Mother Moon, because if they were not there, none of us would be here. I really appreciate their efforts and their leadership. Second, I would like to thank another special individual who has touched my life and who has changed my life, Dr. Walsh, the president of this university. Also, I would like to thank all of the board of the trustees, every one of the academic professors, colleagues and above all, all of you graduates. Thank you for all your hard work and your efforts, and I congratulate you for 2025.

It is you that is going to make this world a beautiful place. It is you that is going to transform lives. It is you that is going to bring peace.



Let me tell you, peace is something that we can all bring together collectively. As an individual, no one can bring peace. We can bring peace in a nation, and in the world, just if we all work together side by side, without prejudice, without resentment, without thinking of our different religions, or different ethnic groups. Through our religions, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or whoever we are, script has taught us that every religion has something in common- To be good, to be a good human being, and to reach out to each other. I really want to tell you one thing about this university. The people who are here, and the founders of this university, are an excellent role model for us. As a role model, you can do so many things in this world.

I just want to tell you a little bit about my program. If I could change 14 million people's minds. If I



could change 2 million children and mother's lives, while I am a very little individual, can you imagine what you could do? You are highly educated. You have a master's degree or are receiving a doctorate degree. This degree is putting more responsibility on your shoulder. Yes, it's wonderful to graduate, but the more education we get the more responsibility we have. We have ethical responsibility, we have moral responsibility, we have family responsibility, and we have citizenship responsibilities. These are the responsibilities that are on our shoulders to carry for the people of the next generation.

As Mother Moon told us, we are all one family. We are under God's one family. We are all sisters and brothers, and we have responsibility for each other—to reach out and to help each other.

When I started working in Pakistan in the refugee camp, a lot of people asked why I chose education. I said, "I'm an educationalist." I believe that education must be a special curriculum developed for different cultures, ethnicities, and peoples. If we adjust our curriculum according to one's culture, religion, nation, and status, that will help people to transform. We want to include critical thinking in curriculums. Critical thinking is a very serious tool that makes us think and ask questions—Who am I? Why am I here? For what purpose did God create me?

What am I supposed to do in this world? These are questions that make a person whole.



Dr. Sakena Yacoobi with Members of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Franco Famularo and Rev. Demian Dunkley

Dr. Walsh and one of our colleagues said that we are taking a holistic approach. Yes, a holistic approach means that we are studying human beings from all directions. When we talk about all directions, what we mean is education, health, poverty, and status. Nothing is wrong with being rich, and nothing is wrong with wellbeing. But how are we using that money? How are we going to change a country with what we make?

When I started talking to Mother Moon I learned a lot from her. Dr. Reverend Moon and Mother Moon were not greedy individuals. They were thinking about the whole world. They admit that their mission is for you and I to have a better life, for you and I to be a bridge between the poor and the rich. That shows you that Mother Moon and Reverend Moon really had a fantastic mission. Now it's up to us if we are going to accomplish that.

They didn't tell us it's going to be easy, and I am not going to tell you it's going to be easy. You, graduates, know that studying and getting this degree wasn't easy, but you have a long way ahead to go. You will face many challenges as a leader. As somebody who is going to work with the public, God chose you to be patient, to have wisdom, and to continuously go after your objective. And our objective is to make a difference, to be a good human being, and work on the concept of humanity.

I really appreciate you being here and you getting this degree, but I would really like to say first of all, thank you to every one of your family for supporting you and to help you to get here. Because again, if we don't have the family together, if we don't have the support of family, if we don't have the encouragement from the family, it would be very hard to accomplish what we are after. Thank you to all the families for being there.

Also remember the pillar is to have your religion. Your religion is a pillar that you can hold on to and it will make you continuously grow and learn. God is the only one that can help you to achieve your success. And for that purpose, again, Mother Moon and Father Moon gave us a great concept. They



said that “we are all one family.” Family is a very important part of our lives and religions. God can help us to be supportive of each other, to reach out our hand to the other one who is unreachable.

Today in the world there is war everywhere. In my country it has been 45 years since the war in Afghanistan. You all know what's going on in Afghanistan. You all know that women of Afghanistan are living in a person sort of. They cannot go outside, raise their voice, or go to university. They cannot learn. And you imagine if a mother is not educated, how can their children be educated? A mother is the main source of a family unit. A mother is the one that will support their children, and help their children to grow. And if the mother is not educated, those children have a broken wing. They don't have a strong enough wing to stand up. So we all suffer from that in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, we were sort of flexible. People ask how I manage to work in Afghanistan right now. I really believe that God is helping us. God wants us there as a role model for all our young generation. Yes, life is tough. Yes, we have to take risks, but we are there. We created TV Meraj, an international station. We said, “okay, all our schools are closed, all our universities are closed. All the professors have to go home, especially women. What are we going to do? Young people, what should they do?” We decided to use our media. That is the flexibility that I'm talking about. When things get tough, you get tougher. And getting tougher means that you create something to reach your goal. And we created TV Meraj to broadcast all the curriculum from first grade through 12th grade.



We got thousands of letters from people asking us to start a university, but they don't know how tough it is to raise funds. They don't know how tough it is to survive as an organization. But you know what, they count on us. They counted on us to hold their hand because we promised we were going to help. So we said yes. We developed a curriculum and we set up University Meraj. Meraj means getting to the highest point, reaching to God with knowledge, being humble, and being wise. Right now we have four departments functioning from that university. We have students, young women, sitting home and learning those curriculums. And we got letters from Europe, from the Middle East, from the United States, that those who left Afghanistan are taking those classes from far away.

So you can see that it's not easy, but it's something that we can work on. I am sure with your education, that was very thoughtfully developed, you can do many, many things in this world.

I wish you all the best and I will constantly congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. I want you to be very happy, start strong, and keep going. Don't look back, just go forward. You will reach your point, and with God's will, you will be successful.

Thank you very much.

Congratulations again!



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## President's Address at the 49th Commencement



*Thomas G. Walsh, Ph.D., President, HJI*

Trustees, Faculty, Staff, Graduates, Family, Friends and Alumni!!!

Thank you all for being here today for the 49<sup>th</sup> commencement ceremony of HJI.

Congratulations once again to our Class of 2025 graduates, the 49<sup>th</sup> graduating class for this great institution.

The 49<sup>th</sup> Commencement Ceremony marks a milestone in the 50 year history since the founding of our institution by our True Parents in September of 1975. This was only a few years after they had first come to this country to carry out their ministry. Their decision was bold, decisive, and visionary. There was no guarantee of success. But it has paid great dividends over the years, not only for the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, but for the wider society and world. For this reason, we are ever grateful for the foresight, guidance and support of our Founders.



I also want to congratulate, once again, my dear friend, Dr. Sakeena Yacoobi. She has delivered a remarkable commencement address.

I have had the pleasure of knowing her since she became a Sunhak Peace Prize Laureate in 2016. As we have witnessed, she is a woman of remarkable courage and strength, driven by a moral and spiritual passion for education, and for improving the lives of women and girls, especially in her native country of Afghanistan.

Thank you for being here with us today, Dr. Yacoobi. You are always an inspiration. I know that Holy Mother Han has great love and respect for you and your important work.

I also thank our FFWPU USA President, Rev. Demian Dunkley, for being with us today. Without the generous support of FFWPU USA for over five decades, HJI could never have fulfilled its mission. Please also convey to Holy Mother Han our deepest appreciation.



All of us at HJI value our partnership with FFWPU USA, and we are committed to providing the highest quality education for our students who come from all across the world, helping them develop the skills that allow them to become transformational leaders in ministries and careers that serve the public good.

With this in mind we are especially proud of our alumni who, following their time of studies at HJI, have gone on to take leading positions of profound importance to the advancement of the vision of our Founders to build a world of universal and lasting peace; a world in which we all live together cooperatively and in harmony, as one family under God.

Our HJI mission is reflected in our name, one that highlights our commitment to peace and public leadership. Peace, as our graduates know, is understood very comprehensively or holistically. At its core, peace is an ideal that describes a set of relationships; our relationship with God, our relationship with humanity, and relationship with the natural world, our environment.

The HJ in our name refers to hyo-jeong, a Korean word indicating a virtue or way or life that respects, honors and reveres God, humanity and the environment. Within our tradition it may be understood as an essential virtue, a quality of character that is the sine qua non of peace.



As we enter this 50th anniversary of our institution's founding, we are looking ahead, envisioning our next 50 years, including the aspiration that one day this institution will grow to become not only a premier center of graduate education, but also a leading university, one that draws students from across the world, offering many programs and professional schools that serve the wider world, including a world class Divinity School.

While we understand that institutions of higher education are facing a variety of challenges at this time—some demographic, some political, and some economic—I believe HJI is poised to face and overcome those challenges, while also taking advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead, demonstrating foresight and resilience.

This summer, thanks to the support of FFWPU, HJI will move from its present location here at 43<sup>rd</sup> St to a fantastic new space at 481 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of the New Yorker, just across the street from Madison Square Garden, Penn Station, the Moynihan Train Station and Hudson Yards. Our broader neighborhood includes the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, the United Nations, Lincoln Center, Columbia University, NYU, Fordham University, Union Theological Seminary, and historic religious sites such as the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (1892), Trinity Church (1698), St. Patrick's Cathedral (1879), Riverside Church (1926), and many historical Synagogues, Mosques, and Temples.

We expect HJI to flourish in its new environs.

Soon after graduation, HJI will inaugurate its first issue of the International Journal for Peace and Public Leadership, and its first two volumes to be published by HJI Press.

In early August, HJI, together with FFWPU USA will convene an international conference addressing the root causes of threats to religious freedom.







Recently the Board of Trustees approved a new Strategic Plan for HJI, one which places emphasis on increased collaboration with FFWPU, the strengthening of HJI's wider profile, increased emphasis on partnerships, and stronger outreach to alumni.

In closing, let me say a word or two about religion and peace.

Often we hear that religion is a primary source or cause of conflict in our world. Since the time of the religious wars in Europe, ending with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1564, it has been assumed or taken for granted that religious discourse should be bracketed or distanced from nation state governance and diplomatic relations. Secularization, meanwhile, has been a popular thesis of modernity, predicting that religion would gradually wither away as human beings became smarter and more scientific, shedding holdovers from a primitive past.

Religion and faith, however, have proven to be stickier and more resilient than political or economic ideologies. Moreover, its record seems to be less violent than that of materialistic and totalitarian systems of recent centuries. Religion was often falsely scapegoated.

As our Founders understood so well, religion, spirituality and faith are absolutely essential for peace. This principle underlies so much of what we do at HJI.

Our faith-based foundations are not only at the core of HJI; such foundations are necessary if we are to move beyond the current era of great power politics, and beyond a new Cold War that appears very near to becoming a Hot War era. Likewise if we are to move beyond an era of decadent secularization and polarization, an age, regrettably, where mutual hate replaces mutual respect. Our world must rediscover its roots, drawing on the truths that have been taught throughout the ages by our religions, and found in their scriptures. That is the vision of our Founders and indeed the hope of all ages; a hope that one day we will all find the peace that the Vedas, the Torah, the Gospels, the Koran have called us to embrace.



My dear graduates, the principles of peace that ground us here at HJI are essential if we are to move from our current state of discord, conflict and violence to a world of universal and lasting peace.

Graduates, please carry that vision with you as you go out to the world.

Keep the fire burning for your alma mater. Be confident that all of us here at HJI stand ready to continue to support you. Please maintain your commitment to serving the wider world, creating peace through principled public leadership.

God bless you all.



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## Student Luncheon at HJI



*by Associate Dean Mika Deshotel*

Prior to the 49th HJI Commencement activities, held on Saturday, May 31, 2025, 17 currently enrolled students, along with some spouses, gathered in the Oak Room at the 4W 43rd campus for an informal celebration luncheon. The purpose of the luncheon was to celebrate the completion of a fruitful Spring semester, as well as honor the students who were planning to graduate later that afternoon. Each student introduced themselves and Mika Deshotel, Associate Dean of Student Life, officially welcomed everyone. She shared about having had the honor of reading through some of the 2025 DMin dissertation summaries on the car ride to the City, and how moved she was by the hard work and dedication of each student. This spurred a natural conversation within the gathering, around Masters' student theses, doctoral dissertations, and other current research students were engaging in, creating an environment of energy, awe and pride for HJI and the institution's contribution to wider society. Students concluded the simple gathering more connected to one another and excited to support their fellow colleagues walking in the procession at graduation.

Congratulations to all of the graduates of 2025! We are so proud of you!!

Also, stay tuned for a special edition of the HJI Newsletter featuring the 2025 DMin dissertation summaries!



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