

# Celebrating Five Years



of the KAICIID International Fellows Programme

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Original title:  
Celebrating Five Years of the KAICIID International Fellows Programme

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Published in 2020 by Human Development Forum  
6 Friar Lane, Leicester, LE1 5RA, United Kingdom  
[www.humandevforum.org](http://www.humandevforum.org)



Typeset in Minion and Raleway  
Printed and bound by Gomer Press  
Llandysul Enterprise Park, Llandysul, Ceredigion, SA44 4JL, United Kingdom



KAICIID DIALOGUE CENTRE



## About KAICIID

**T**he International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) is an international organization with the mission of promoting dialogue to help people to understand and respect different religions and cultures.

The Centre works to promote diversity and understanding and to strengthen social cohesion. It is the first intergovernmental organization that teams up policymakers and religious representatives to encourage dialogue between people who may never meet or enjoy mutual trust, and to talk through their problems, especially if there is a cultural or religious issue at stake.

By promoting dialogue, the Centre helps communities to build peace and harmonious societies. To achieve this, the Centre fosters cooperation between diverse religious communities to close the divisions created when religion is manipulated to engender fear and hatred.

Our vision is a world in which there is respect, understanding and cooperation among people; justice, peace and reconciliation; and an end to the abuse of religion to justify repression, violence and conflict.



## Foreword

In 2015, we launched the KAICIID International Fellows Programme (KIFP), bringing together religious leaders and faith actors, with a vision to create a world in which religious dignity and respect for difference overcome intolerance and violence. Since then, there have been 382 KAICIID Fellows across six international cohorts, representing the Bahá'í and Druze faiths, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism and Yazidism.

The year 2020 marks five years since the programme began, bringing robust content, camaraderie and capacity building events to participants. Starting with a single international cohort in 2015, the

programme added a second cohort for South and Southeast Asia in 2016, an Arab region cohort in 2017 and an African cohort in 2018. In 2019, we introduced a dedicated European cohort, demonstrating our ongoing commitment to reaching every corner of the globe.

We believe that building cohesive, pluralistic communities is key to creating a future in which everyone understands that our shared humanity is far more important than our differences. In this book, you will learn about remarkable individuals who are at the forefront of co-creating just such a world. Among them are religious leaders, community workers, academics, policymakers and conflict managers who are working tirelessly to create impact in their communities.

You will read about efforts to bring religious pluralism to monoreligious education systems, the de-escalation of violence caused by hate speech, the creation of healing environments for traumatised communities, efforts to attain religious equity for minority religions, and the mission to carve out a formal place for faith communities at the discussion table in pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

As the number of KIFP alumni continues to swell, several countries have begun to build local chapters of the Fellows network. These chapters value the Fellows alumni for

the breadth of their collaboration, especially in terms of the implementation of design projects with a localised impact. As a result, networks in India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and across the Arab region are forming to create ongoing solutions that are as culturally relevant as they are theoretically sound.

More than simply facilitating a learning hub, the Centre is proud to be a partner in, and supporter of, the Fellows' vital work, both during the programme and after graduation. On behalf of KAICIID, I thank them for their vigorous endeavour and continuous devotion to applying interreligious dialogue principles in transforming their communities. We look forward to many more years of fruitful partnership.

Faisal Bin Muaammar  
KAICIID Secretary General



“Fellows are selected from important institutions throughout the world and on the basis of their willingness and ability to be a force for change with their societies”



## About the Fellows programme

Historically, programmes aimed at stakeholders from religious communities have either been inconsistently offered, or they have been limited in reach to just a few countries. At the same time that the scholarship and practice of interreligious dialogue (IRD) principles have evolved, the need for these principles to be put into practice on a global scale has spread. KAICIID recognises the growing need to make dialogue principles available to worldwide communities that are in need of healing from protracted interreligious and intercultural conflicts. This is what led to the development of the Fellows programme and was at the heart of a curriculum first delivered in 2015 to the inaugural cohort.

Five years after it was first introduced, the programme continues to bring together leaders and educators from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other religious backgrounds from around the world. In addition to religious diversity, the programme seeks, as far as possible, to balance the regions, genders and ages represented, in the full understanding that only an inclusive approach will allow the programme to achieve the impact of restoring, or enhancing, social harmony. Through a year-long sequence of three residential training sessions supplemented by online courses that focus on IRD, coexistence and

pluralism, the Fellows learn about dialogue facilitation, intercultural communication and how to promote social cohesion. The programme also equips Fellows with the skills to educate their students and communities about IRD so that they, in turn, can become facilitators and leaders in the IRD sphere, as well as being active peace advocates in their communities.

Today's landscape requires religious leaders and educators to become proficient in bringing relevant dialogical solutions that speak to the religious, cultural and social transitions taking place in their communities. These are qualitatively different issues whose influences are challenging social cohesion in several parts of the world. The Fellows programme seeks not only to address these problems but also to network institutions that train religious leaders transnationally so that IRD can become a common feature of all religious training across every religion. In response to societal shifts, the Fellows programme has evolved from a single, internationally oriented initiative in 2015, to a regionally focused programme with localised content for South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Arab region and Africa. Alumni from these regional cohorts go on to form local chapters that create their own initiatives to tackle local challenges, giving the programme the potential to reach every corner of the globe.

“Five years on from when it was first introduced, the Fellows programme continues to bring together leaders and educators from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other religious backgrounds from around the world”

In this way, the programme now utilises a distinctive, regional-cohort-based model that consistently delivers on its commitment to develop knowledge and skills for religious leaders, educators and civil society actors who aspire to be IRD experts, or for experienced IRD experts who want to learn the theoretical underpinning to support the years of



practical work they have been doing in the interreligious sphere. By facilitating the breadth of opportunity and perspective through this regional expansion, the programme allows Fellows to gain an understanding of logical, practical and emotional elements that underscore a successful interreligious exchange. This is consistent with the programme's aim to create learning opportunities that impart knowledge about, and appreciation for, the diversity and intensity of issues that impact social cohesion.

When Fellows immerse themselves in the principles of IRD, they witness a multitude of perspectives and solutions that, if internalised, can serve as a baseline for evaluating the needs of their own

communities and allow them to localise solutions and prioritise issues requiring most attention. This experience can move them beyond the unique context and culture of their own religion, thus empowering them to understand "the Other" more holistically.

Since the programme began, the overwhelming feedback from participants is that it has been a worthy undertaking. This is in large part due to the post-programme support offered by KAICIID, including post-training grants, pedagogical support and IRD resources, as well as continued access to KAICIID experts.

Looking to the next five years, the Centre aims to continue extending the reach and impact of the Fellows programme.

KAICIID foresees the growing network of programme alumni as being the key to attracting new Fellows and deepening the impact of those who have already undertaken the training. The network brings together experienced alumni with participants who are new to the IRD space for mentoring, information exchange, brainstorming and collaboration. Because they are like-minded individuals who have, throughout the programme, received guidance at the training sessions, followed up with their own initiatives and supported each other after the training, the result is a definitive increase in the number of individuals who can actively engage communities and working groups around dialogical principles.

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# Featured Fellows from around the world

As well as religious diversity, the Fellows programme seeks to balance the regions, genders and ages represented, in the full understanding that only an inclusive approach will allow the programme to achieve the impact of restoring or enhancing social harmony

**Dr. Rania Alayoubi**  
Amman, Jordan



**Dr. Nourah Alhasawi**  
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



**Wafa' AlMakhamreh**  
Amman, Jordan



**Zaid Bahraluloom**  
Najaf, Iraq



**Rabbi Marcelo Bater**  
Buenos Aires, Argentina



**Janani Chaitanya**  
Eugene, Oregon, US



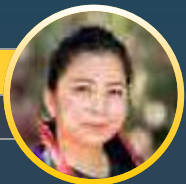
**Yudhistir Govinda Das**  
New Delhi, India



**Rabbi Alexander Goldberg**  
Guildford, UK



**Nang Loung Hom**  
Colombo, Sri Lanka



**Kristan**  
Bogor, Indonesia



**Abubakar Fatima Madaki**  
Abuja, Nigeria



**Sister Justina Mike Ngwobia**  
Jos, Nigeria



**Ruth Ouazana**  
Lyon, France



**Heidi Rautionmaa**  
Espoo, Finland



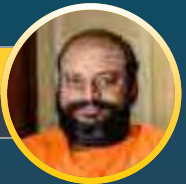
**Mabrouka Rayachi**  
Vienna, Austria



**Father Nehme Saliba**  
Beirut, Lebanon



**Chidakashananda Saraswati Swamikal**  
Jaffna, Sri Lanka



**Dr. Ashin Vicittasara**  
Yangon, Myanmar



## Creating spaces for the empowerment and inclusion of women

As far as partnerships go, the collaboration between Dr. Rania Alayoubi and Wafa' AlMakhamreh is inspirational. Wafa', a Christian who works for Jordan's Ministry of Education, first met Rania, a Syrian adviser and expert on women's issues and dialogue, in Amman, Jordan, in 2017. Both were attending the

*Dialogue as a Lifestyle in Multi-Religious Societies*. Since initiating the programme in 2017, the women have worked to expand its reach far and wide. For Rania, this has meant targeting hate speech prevention by introducing young people to dialogue principles and other programming.

Rania also works with religious leaders and teachers to keep the dialogue process integrated across generations. This has not only entailed creating alliances with institutions, helping to align their missions more closely, it has also empowered her to develop and apply new educational tools. "This way, we can keep the programme running efficiently in future and also bring a culture of dialogue to younger tranches of the population — a culture that is built on dialogue and forgiveness," Rania said.

In parallel, Wafa' is devoting herself to creating a collaborative network of women in the Arab world and is working together with local NGOs to address issues of participation and inclusion. She credits the Fellows programme with empowering her to approach and forge partnerships with international organizations and other individuals.

Since that first meeting in 2017, over 1,000 men, women and children have participated in Wafa' and Rania's initiative. Events organized on behalf of the project have included Training of Trainers' workshops, lectures, problem-solving seminars, street football and iftar\* banquets.

Using both digital and offline outreach methods, Wafa' and Rania have so far managed to create a community of dialogue advocates from the Bahá'í, Christian, Druze and Muslim faiths. Coming from in and around Amman, and representing communities in Egypt, Iraq, Italy, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, the US and Yemen, the participants make up an impressively inclusive kaleidoscope of cultures and religions.

Building on this success, Rania and Wafa' have created new training programmes, partnering with other institutions on these opportunities in order to guarantee their project's sustainability and to expand its reach.

"Women need to be offered more activities in order to get involved in the field of dialogue," Wafa' said. Even so, she and Rania worry that the resources available to fill that need may

\* Iftar, also known as fatoon, is the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset.

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**“Women need to be offered more activities in order to get involved in the field of dialogue”**

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first training session for KAICIID's Arab Region cohort in the hope of advocating more equal participation for women in the public sphere, particularly within post-conflict decision-making processes.

Following their first meeting, Rania and Wafa' teamed up on a project, titled *Fostering The Role of Women in Promoting*



**“It's not just about training, it's about helping to carve out a new way of life in society so that we can coexist peacefully in the future”**



not be enough. Additionally, although the programme's conception was seamless, both women admit that its implementation has been much harder.

In Jordan, even though women have a modest role in interreligious dialogue, their initiative is proving consistent in delivering impact.

underserved community — women — in the dialogue space.

KAICIID has supported Wafa' and Rania's initiative since 2017 and the impact has been a perceptible shift in thinking among the programme's participants. Wafa' recounts instances of participants who were closed off to people of other faiths, simply because they had never met "the Other" before. She also said that many of the male participants were eager to learn how to be allies for women in the interreligious dialogue space, commenting that it was the first time that they'd had the opportunity to learn about gender issues in a formal and supportive context.

As a result of the training and the diverse methods used, Rania perceives the medley of cultures and religions to be moving

closer together and showing more mutual respect. This has been achieved through a sustained effort to make the training ongoing, rather than episodic. Even after the formal sessions conclude, participants are encouraged to continue to engage one another in dialogue, build stronger community bonds, play a sport or to share activities, meals and religious holidays.

This growing cohesion is what spurs the two women to continue working to magnify female representation in interreligious dialogue. With her devotion to creating a just and peaceful society, fuelled by a belief that every individual has a role to play in peacebuilding and citizenship, Wafa' has also begun training young people in civics and non-violence, on behalf of the Young Women's Christian

Association. These additional community-focused priorities serve to amplify rather than dissipate the effects of their own initiative.

Wafa' and Rania maintain a singularity of purpose as they look to the future, determined to protect a spark of hope that

they can change the planet for the better. "I truly believe that if each one of us does even one small thing, it can be huge for the future," Wafa' said.

"I want every woman to know her value and to understand her leading role in creating peace." Rania added, "I feel that

my role in society is very important. It's not just about training, it's about helping to carve out a new way of life in society so that we can coexist peacefully in the future. I strongly believe that every small deed that we do now will have a big impact in years to come."

**“I want every woman to know her value and to understand her leading role in creating peace. I strongly believe that every small deed that we do now will have a big impact in years to come”**

Despite battling with the logistics of transporting hundreds of participants to a single venue, and funding that is being largely outpaced by demand, they remain committed to amplifying the voices of an

Dr. Rania Alayoubi	
Base	Amman, Jordan
Institution	Aouge of the Middle East
Religious affiliation	Islam
Professional background	Director of Training and Development

Wafa' AlMakhamreh	
Base	Amman, Jordan
Institution	Young Women's Christian Association
Religious affiliation	Christianity
Professional background	Project Unit Member

Photographs by Hussam Shareef



## Faith, friendship and fellowship

**D**r. Nourah Alhasawi and Janani Chaitanya have forged a powerful partnership through their shared commitment to humanity and, now, to one another.

**“The commitment we have is not just to the project, but to each other. That’s an important aspect of this because it wouldn’t work otherwise”**

As a Hindu, Janani first experienced a yearning to discover “the Other” during her years living in India, several thousand miles away from her home in Oregon, US.

Muslim by birth, Nourah had an innate curiosity to understand how people build their relationships with God. “I just

wanted to see others, as well as wish for ourselves to be seen, for who we really are as full human beings in order to have a relationship built on mutual respect, understanding and, most importantly, equality,” she said.

The two women met at the start of 2015, when they joined the first cohort of the Fellows programme. By that time, both had shed their preconceived notions of dialogue: the idea that it takes little more than showing up with good intentions to conduct successful interreligious dialogue or that intercultural dialogue is unlikely to be required among communities united by a shared language, for example those of the US and the UK.

On that first day of training, it was not shared attributes but rather distinct differences that opened the door to a five-year partnership. Nourah recalls challenging Janani on her decision to follow a strict diet. Janani had her own questions about how the violent actions of Da’esh could possibly find an association with Islam, a bias that she admits was influenced by inaccurate media reports on that complicated topic.

With common ground initially seeming a high improbability, an admittedly sceptical Janani set herself the challenge

of proving that interreligious dialogue could work by engaging with somebody with whom she disagreed “on a fundamental level”.

Rather than being repelled by one another’s differences, Nourah and Janani sought instead to better understand each other’s perspectives, delving deeper into topics such as the afterlife and other practices in Islam. Their immediate immersion in core topics quickened their understanding of one another’s contexts.

This was swiftly followed by a proposal from Janani, who suggested that the two co-author a book about being women of faith in the field of dialogue, sharing their experiences from Austria, India, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and the US.

For Nourah, it was easy to agree to the idea of the book as she was already convinced of Janani’s genuineness. “When she asked me those questions about Islam, I answered her fully,” said Nourah. “I felt that she was very interested in what she was asking me about.”

For Janani, these early conversations with Nourah were pivotal, opening a third and unexpected dimension of dialogue. “When you have the opportunity to get to know somebody from a culture so different from your own, you form both



**“Neither of us wants to prove that one is right and the other wrong. It’s more about asking how we can support each other... united in the light of the fact that a lot of people from our cultures and many people from our religions do not get along”**



you really can be trustful and be your true self; where you can be a good friend and a nice person to the other, because the relationship is always reminding you that you are different to that person. Sometimes, I find that difficult and, at other times, wonderful — just being able to cross that line every now and then, seeing humanity in each other and being supportive.”

“Neither of us wants to prove that one is right and the other wrong,” Janani added. “It’s more about asking how we can support each other. How we can be in our separate places and really stand together, united in the light of the fact that a lot of people from our cultures and many people from our religions do not get along.”

Nourah and Janani have given their first collaborative effort the working title:

*Two Women, Two Cultures, Two Religions: A Dialogue.* The book is still a work in progress, but both women are committed to completing a publication that honours their bond.

“I just want to emphasise how supportive

we are. I couldn’t do this without Janani,” concluded Nourah. Janani agrees: “I would definitely say that the commitment we have is not just to the project, but to each other. That’s an important aspect of this because it wouldn’t work otherwise,” she added.



“The relationship is always reminding you that you are different to that person. Sometimes, I find that difficult and, at other times, wonderful — just being able to cross that line every now and then, seeing humanity in each other and being supportive”

Interreligious dialogue now has two unabashed champions who are still discovering the depths to which it can be helpful. Given the geographic, cultural, personal and professional hurdles that they’ve had to overcome to access and understand one another’s experiences over the last few years, there is no way that it could be otherwise.

an intercultural and an interreligious relationship,” she said.

Five years later, Janani and Nourah say their relationship has evolved into something even more substantive and satisfying, describing their interreligious friendship in terms of devotion, commitment, humility, vulnerability, courage, trust and depth.

Sustained by frequent in-person connections and candour, the women do recognise that they remain part of societal groups that are distinct from one another’s. Describing the ties that bind them, Nourah says: “It’s difficult to find spaces where

Dr. Nourah Alhasawi	
Base	Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Institution	Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University
Religious affiliation	Islam
Professional background	Islamic Studies Scholar

Janani Chaitanya	
Base	Eugene, Oregon, US
Institution	Arsha Vijnana Gurukulam
Religious affiliation	Hinduism
Professional background	Mediator, Teacher, Organiser, Student

Photographs of Dr. Nourah Alhasawi by Helmy Al Sagaff. Photographs of Janani Chaitanya by Payton Bruni

## An invitation to inclusion

**Z**aid Bahraluloom believes that the definition of citizenship in Iraq is changing. Today, he says, most Iraqis want the same rights and responsibilities

for all, in order to create a country where everyone can realise their dreams.

Iraq comprises a rich tapestry of distinct identities that include people of the Bahá'í, Christian, Mandaean, Muslim, Yarsani and Yazidi faiths. For Zaid, religious and cultural pluralism is an important and necessary way of life.

Born in 1981 in Baghdad, Zaid grew up in Al-Najaf, a city in central-south Iraq. While studying at university, he began studies in the Hawzah — a seminary for Shi'a Muslim clerics. "The Hawzah is the zenith of Shiite religious studies," he said. "It has always supported humanitarian principles." Zaid applies these same principles to his own interreligious work at the Al-Balaghi Academy.

According to the Borgen Project, a US-based initiative to bring political attention to global poverty, an over-emphasis on religious teaching is causing conflict within the Iraqi population. The Iraqi education system was overhauled in 2008, introducing new standards that prioritised Islamic education. This resulted in an unequal distribution of religious education in the country, given that religious minorities were not afforded opportunities to learn about their own religions.

In 2017, Zaid was nominated to join the Fellows programme. Knowing that Iraq is so religiously diverse, it seemed incongruous to him that followers of other faith traditions were excluded from the methodological make up of the country's religious schooling. "Other religions exist, regardless of whether we want them to or not," he said, explaining that religious pluralism in education is important. "All religions have the same goal and honour the same human values that are almost universal."

Today, as a researcher at the Bahr al-Uloom Institute in Al-Najaf, he is at the forefront of advising policymakers and other stakeholders within the Iraqi education system. The institute relies on advocacy to engage and motivate stakeholders to accept the vitality of pluralistic religious perspectives within local education.

By inviting influential decision-makers within the education ministry, key thought leaders, educators, organizations that work in education and people directly involved in curriculum development to become part of the institute's programming, Zaid is working to create a collective consciousness that addresses the need for a more religiously inclusive

**“The process of uniting stakeholders around the idea of pluralism in education is a slow one. We’re working to change the current religious education to one that suits Christians, Yazidis, Sabians, Mandaeans, Sunni and Shiite Muslims... everyone”**



**“Other religions exist, regardless of whether we want them to or not. All religions have the same goal and honour the same human values that are almost universal”**

“If we could chart the progress from 2003 to today, we would find that the collective consciousness of Iraqi society has grown and changed for the better. That is true of the whole country, as well as for people here in Al-Najaf”



current religious education to one that suits Christians, Yazidis, Sabians, Mandeans, Sunni and Shiite Muslims... everyone. We're also working to create an atmosphere of civil peace, acceptance of "the Other", and peaceful coexistence among all people. We are targeting children in primary, secondary and high school, and we want to instil in their hearts love for "the Other," he explained.

Zaid thinks that the case for religious diversity is mandated by two factors: common sense and faith. "All religions will continue to exist, whether we want them to or not," he said. "And on top of

that, as a Muslim and a Shiite, if I go back to my religious foundation, I find that nowhere in any of the sacred Shi'a texts, or anywhere else in Islam, does it call for us to oppress followers of different faiths."

Instead, Zaid believes that his faith calls on him to coexist with and complement "the Other". "If we want to coexist, we need to take advantage of diversity in a positive way," he said. "All religions vilify lying, all religions honour the human soul, all religions honour human blood, all religions forbid the transgression of laws concerning the land or wealth of another person."

curriculum in school. He hopes that the Bahr al-Uloom Institute can build a broad and powerful consensus for the idea of religious inclusiveness in Iraqi schools.

"The process of uniting stakeholders around the idea of pluralism in education is a slow one," Zaid admitted. Yet he remains undeterred, inspired by a vision of religious education that suits all components of a diverse Iraqi society. "We're working to change the

#### Zaid Bahraluloom

Base	Najaf, Iraq
Institution	Al-Balaghi Academy (Al-Khoei Institute)
Religious affiliation	Islam
Professional background	Director

Photographs by Hayder Almosawi

Zaid says that he is encouraged by the social advances made in his country and that modern Iraqis are beginning to embrace religious inclusiveness. "If we could chart the progress from 2003 to today, we would find that the collective consciousness of Iraqi society has grown and changed for the better. That is true of the whole country, as well as for the people here in Al-Najaf."

Looking ahead, for Zaid, the question of redeveloping the religious studies curriculum is one that he is determined to help resolve. He is pleased to have instigated an earnest exploration of the topic, pushing it to a new level, whereas before it was thought to be so nebulous and complex that few dared even approach it, let alone confront it head on.

With his cousin Haydr, another alumnus of the Fellows programme, who also serves as Director of the Al-Najaf Center for Culture and Research as well as Director of the Dialogue Chair at the Bahr Al-Uloom Charity Foundation, Zaid is pleased to have been among the first to contribute to this discussion. "We were the ones who broke that barrier, at least in Al-Najaf," he said.

Having had the courage to bring this vital topic firmly into the foreground, Zaid remains optimistic that the first step in bringing pluralistic religious education from the realms of theoretical possibility to a practical reality has been successfully navigated.



## The centrality of listening

Growing up in a close-knit Jewish community in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Rabbi Marcelo Bater's first experience with religious and ethnic

conflict occurred while he was a teenager. In the 1990s, Buenos Aires was rocked by two terrorist attacks — the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy and the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community centre of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA).

The long history of the Jewish community in Argentina, dating back to the 16th century, has been marked both by periods of peaceful coexistence and anti-Semitism. Today, Argentina is home to the largest Jewish population in Latin America, with nearly 181,000 Jews centralised primarily in Buenos Aires and the surrounding areas. Even so, Jews make up less than 5% of the population of the predominantly Christian country.

Deeply affected by the terrorist attacks, Marcelo says that he began to see the importance of coalescing around the Jewish identity. "I thought: If we don't care about ourselves, as Jews, as a minority around the world, nobody else will," he said.

While some may have viewed these traumatic events as justification to insulate their religious community from "the Other", for Marcelo, they were the catalyst for a journey towards greater understanding of, and among, religions.

At 26 years old, he was ordained as a Rabbi and, following posts in Aruba and Florida, he rejoined the Jewish community in Argentina, bringing with him a clear vision for the country's pluralistic future. Since then, he has worked hard to ensure representation of the Jewish perspective in local policymaking, and to counter anti-Semitism through education.

Marcelo also realised that he could make a difference by teaching young children about the importance of interreligious perspectives, alongside imparting the value of Jewish traditions. "I discovered that I really enjoy teaching and that I am in charge of handing Judaism to the next generation. I need to teach why it is important to fight against anti-Semitism and against all intolerance," he said.

Encouragingly, Marcelo's vision of a pluralistic Argentina has already begun to be realised. In 2016, the Buenos Aires legislature passed a law declaring the Argentine capital as the "City of Interreligious Dialogue". The law affirms the city's position as an "environment in which people, communities and institutions from different religious traditions coexist in harmony, value the richness of religious diversity, promote



**"At interreligious meetings, I used to refer to God as The God of Many Names. This God, by whatever name, wants us to create a peaceful world"**

“When you see someone drawing a swastika and you ask: ‘Why are you doing this? Do you know what it means?’ You realise that, most of the time, these people have no idea”

common values and build relationships through dialogue, reflection and cooperative actions in order to strengthen the social fabric for the common good.”

This effort has been largely supported and promoted by an organization of which Marcelo is a member: the Latin American Jewish Congress (CJL), founded to keep the Jewish tradition alive and to keep dialogue with other faiths. It is also through the CJL that Marcelo learned about the Fellows programme, joining the international cohort in 2018.

Interacting with a diverse group of people from countries around the world, Marcelo found his passion for pluralism and interreligious dialogue to be fully



affirmed. “Everything I learned as a Fellow has helped to reinforce my belief that dialogue is really the only route to peace. Since becoming a Fellow, the emphasis has been on the need to talk to everyone at every age about how religion is misunderstood,” he said.

Marcelo said that, for him, this realisation has struck home particularly with regard to anti-Semitism. “When you see someone drawing a swastika and you ask: ‘Why are you doing this? Do you know what it means?’ You realise that, most of the time, these people have no idea.”

As much as it matters to talk to

members of the local community, Marcelo says that learning dialogue practices from KAICIID taught him something much more valuable: the importance of listening. “With each meeting of the Fellows, the focus was on dialogue; on listening to what “the Other” wants to say. Because when you use dialogue effectively, when you talk from a different point of view and you’re a good, active listener, you realise that the attitudes and topics that you thought might be confrontational are not as much so after all,” he said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this revelation became crucial to how

#### Rabbi Marcelo Bater

Base	Buenos Aires, Argentina
Institution	Dor Jadash Congregation
Religious affiliation	Judaism
Professional background	Rabbi

Photographs by Ignacio Marcello

Marcelo performs his duties, as pastoral counselling was compelled to move from the actual to the virtual world. “I now use the telephone 24 hours a day because people need to be in contact. We are isolated with our families, and if you don’t have any family, you are completely alone,” he said.

Marcelo reasons that the ability to listen is “the most important tool for 2020”, because it equips individuals with the facility to break down stereotypes, enhance inclusion efforts and amplify the voices of the underrepresented. According to Marcelo, this is as true for Jews in a majority Christian country, as it is for those who are isolated and anxious during a global health crisis.

He has also joined Argentina’s Faith Phone Chain (Cadena Telefónica), a multireligious initiative established by the Argentine government that connects anxious or isolated individuals to a leader of their faith. Marcelo sees the Phone Chain as yet another way to practice his life philosophy: that it is important to exchange different life experiences, understand the stories of others and be a good listener.

“We may have different religions, but it doesn’t matter if God is mentioned in this or another name”, he said. At interreligious meetings, I used to refer to God as The God of Many Names. This God, by whatever name, wants us to create a peaceful world.”



## Distilling global goals into concrete actions

**Y**udhistir Govinda Das represents the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, whose core beliefs are based on sacred Hindu texts. From early childhood, he knew that

**“An Indian can watch a video online, of something that possibly happened in Syria, and be convinced of it having happened in a neighbouring village. Then he is ready to attack his neighbour. How do you resolve that? That’s the real challenge”**

he would devote his life to the community of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The sole question was whether his lifelong devotion to the cause would be as a monk or as a community member. “In terms of my personal and spiritual goals, it was always clear that I needed to do something for God and for the community,” he said.

Growing up during India’s oscillating periods of peace and conflict, the need to focus on reconciliation and healing quickly crystallised in Yudhistir’s young mind. Today, as an adult, he believes more than ever that there is a major need for interreligious dialogue within the massive South Asian nation.

The rise of fake news coupled with problematic and offensive opinion, much of it proliferated via social media, has become a key incubator of resentment, pushing people towards violence among parts of India’s Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities. “I wouldn’t say that it has spread all over the country, but certainly, in some parts of India it’s very prominent. That’s where we, as peacebuilders and interreligious dialogue practitioners, have an important role to play,” he said.

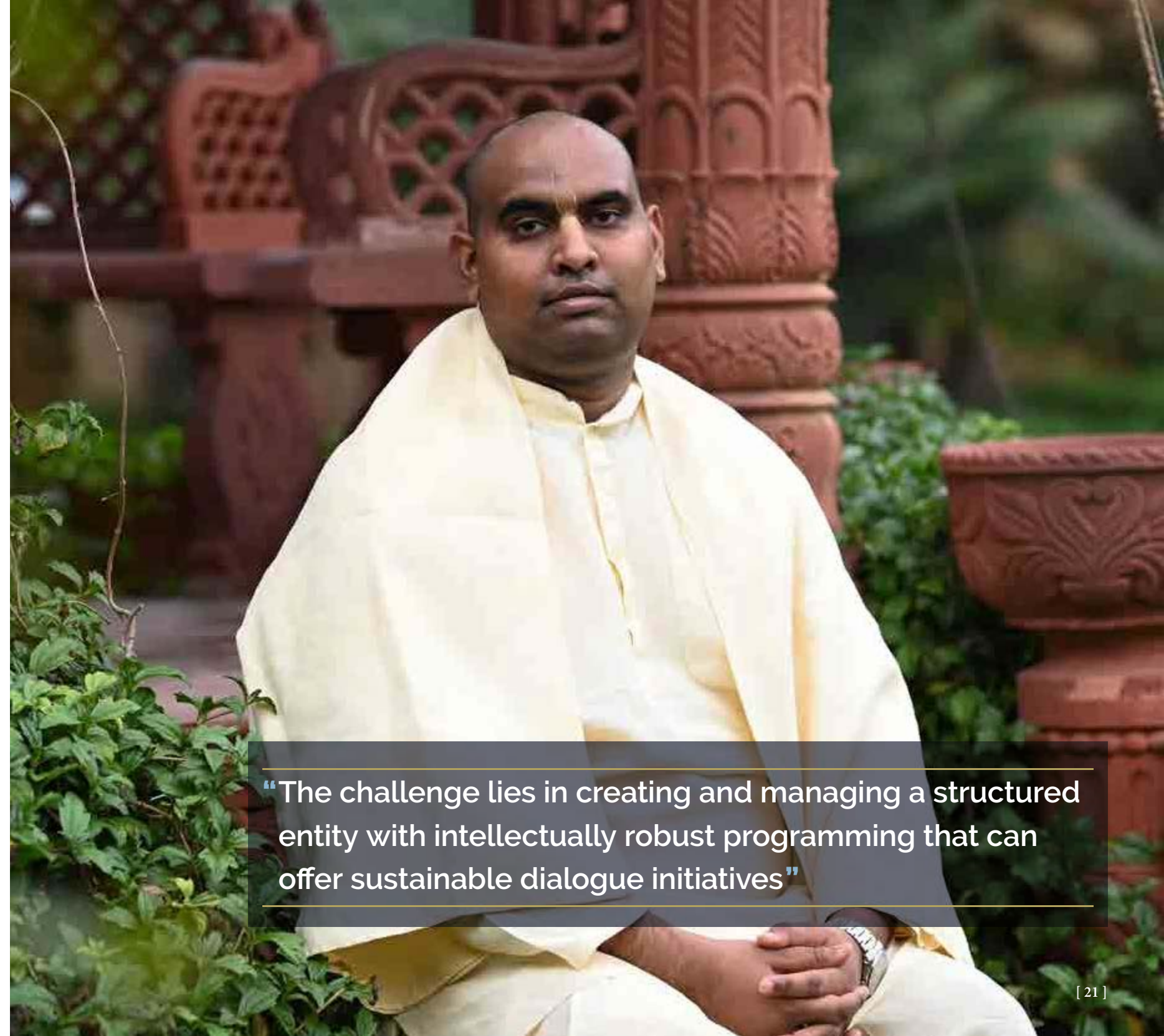
This drive to solve the problems facing India has inspired Yudhistir to

look at the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that provide a series of targets to help countries to eliminate poverty, improve healthcare and education, reduce inequality, spur economic growth and tackle climate change by the year 2030. Yudhistir has assessed the role that faith communities, in particular, can play in the achievement of the goals. “The United Nations consulted policymakers and business communities on the SDGs, but not faith communities,” he said.

Given that, according to Pew Research, over 80% of the global population identifies with a religion, Yudhistir felt driven to reach out to current Indian KAICIID Fellows and alumni, as well as to senior Indian faith leaders and policymakers, to talk about how the faith community can have a voice in the SDG discourse.

As a result of the talks, a conference on inclusive education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5) and peaceful communities (SDG 6) has been scheduled to take place in Delhi during the summer of 2020. There will also be a social media training session conducted by KAICIID.

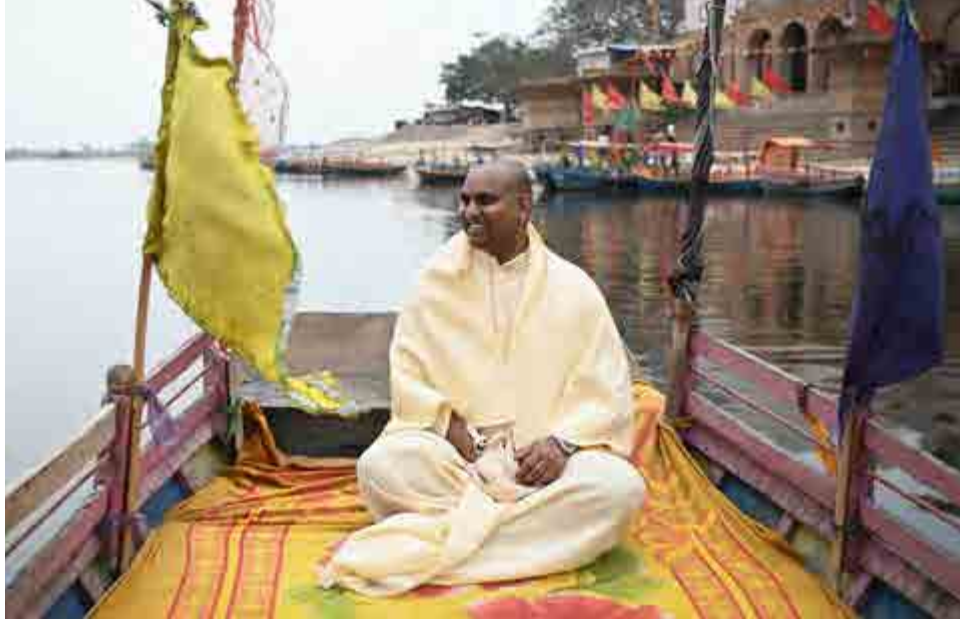
Alongside his passion for the SDGs, Yudhistir is keen to be an expert on



**“The challenge lies in creating and managing a structured entity with intellectually robust programming that can offer sustainable dialogue initiatives”**



“We’re not saying that we’re going to resolve every issue. We’re trying to create bridges between communities so that at least there is an open channel and dialogue can happen such that, if a conflict erupts, there is a partner on the other side”



leads some of the participants in dialogue initiatives to perceive the dialogue space as an echo chamber in which disagreements are eschewed, and from which, therefore, no real outcomes can emerge.

Yet, even if some of India’s dialogical spaces do not allow for disagreement, discord and violence are nevertheless happening at grassroots levels in some remote villages, according to Yudhistir. “An Indian can watch a video online, of something that possibly happened in Syria, and be convinced of it having

happened in a neighbouring village. Then he is ready to attack his neighbour. How do you resolve that? That’s the real challenge,” he said.

Looking ahead, the challenge is not to coalesce communities around the idea that it is important to help followers of different faiths understand one another. “Instead, the challenge lies in creating and managing a structured entity with intellectually robust programming, that can offer sustainable dialogue initiatives,” he said. This structured entity is what

interreligious dialogue. Having found a paucity of local dialogue training opportunities in India, he sought out the Fellows programme. He was also inspired, in part, by the findings of John Fahy’s paper: *Beyond Dialogue? Interfaith Engagement In Delhi, Doha & London*, which asserts that a reluctance to address social issues around religious differences

Yudhistir Govinda Das	
Base	New Delhi, India
Institution	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
Religious affiliation	Hinduism
Professional background	Monk and Country Director of Communications

Photographs by Sahiba Chawdhary

Yudhistir is working on, not only with other members of the Fellows programme, but also through his extensive and influential network of lawyers, policymakers, think-tank executives, social activists and religious leaders.

The task is not a simple one because, as well as the need to differentiate new interreligious dialogue bodies in an already crowded space, there is a level of cynicism that Yudhistir and his colleagues need to overcome. For instance, it is apparent that some new interreligious initiatives are perceived with a degree of scepticism in India, by people wary of proselytisation or of ambiguous intentions among some of the dialogue actors.

Yet, even in the face of this distrust, Yudhistir’s optimism persists. He is working hard to recreate the global KAICIID Fellows network in India in order to establish a scalable nationwide resource that bridges gaps in religious understanding among and between Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Vaishanava communities.

As ambitious as his goal is, Yudhistir’s aspirations, together with those of the other Indian Fellows, are reinforced with realism. “We’re not saying that we’re going to resolve every issue. We’re trying to create bridges between communities so that at least there is an open channel and dialogue can happen such that, if a conflict erupts, there is a partner on the other side.”



## Reenvisioning the traditional chaplaincy

In his own words, Rabbi Alex Goldberg has “reverse-engineered” his career. He pursued a rabbinic education only after becoming a chaplain at the University of Surrey, where today he serves as Dean of the College of Chaplains and Advisors. Not only does his professional network read like a Who’s Who of global game changers, Alex also packs an extraordinary list of projects into his CV — founder, BBC

radio presenter, human rights activist, CEO and barrister are among his titles.

The lessons that Alex learned during the Fellows programme have helped him transition into a post-Brexit UK. As his country has grappled with its future relationship with Europe and questioned how to heal rifts between its citizens, Alex has responded with dialogue principles.

“We’re actually using interreligious dialogue to try to respect each other’s points of view and listen to each other. It helps to navigate that path on a campus where people display their politics in public,” he said.

His goal is to use dialogue to develop a new chaplaincy model that promotes the wellbeing of all. Gone is the monocultural Surrey of his youth. In its place is a 21st century community where religious, ethnic and ideological perspectives jostle for attention.

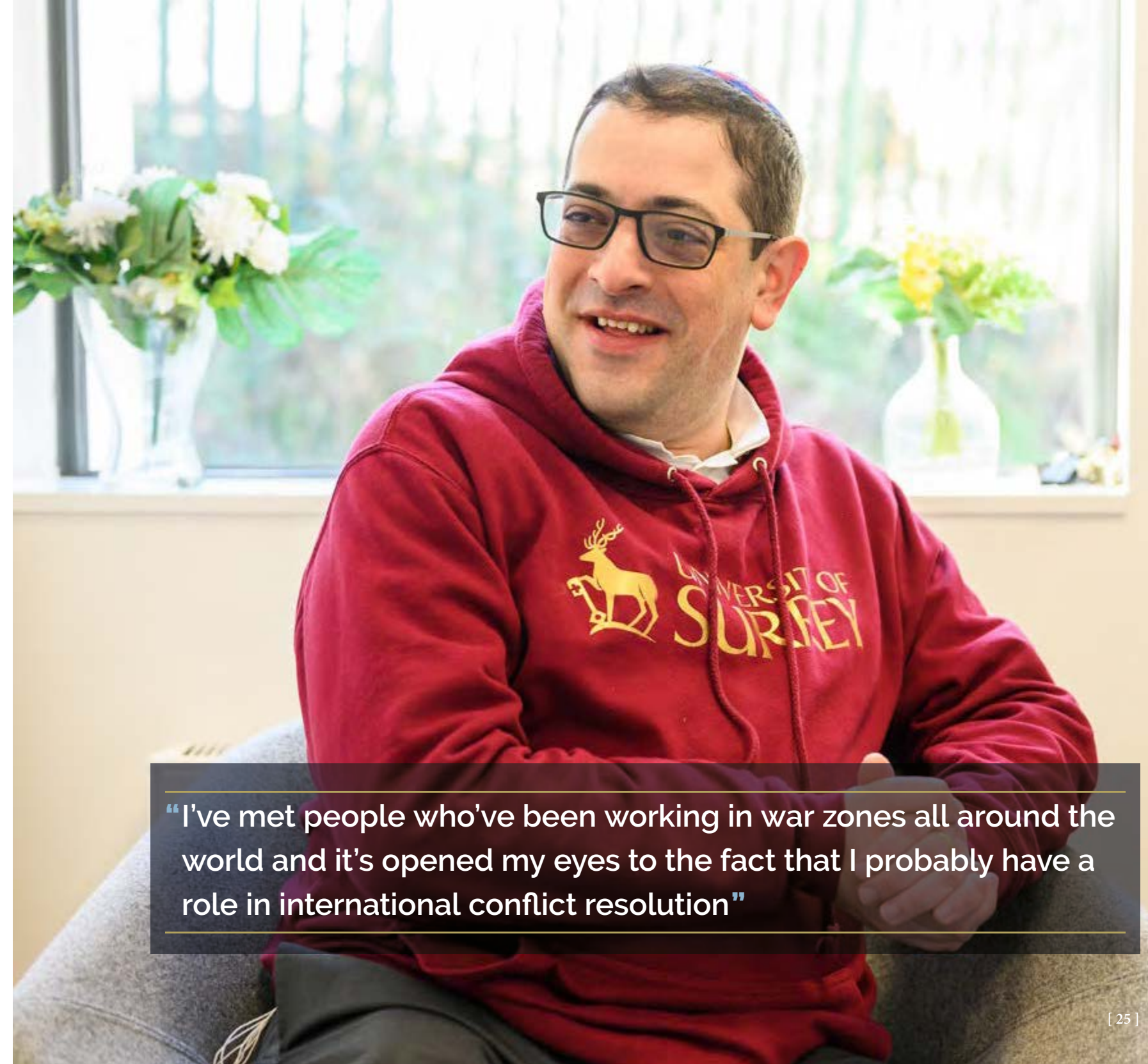
Today, there is a new focus on creating more inclusive spaces and women-friendly areas. The university canteen has started to cater for those who follow halal, kosher and Hindu diets, and the number of people who affiliate with Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh faith traditions at the university has increased in 2019. A sure sign, Alex says, of the impact of the chaplaincy team’s work.

Alex’s team of chaplains now stands at an all-time high of 15, double the number of 2019, and includes the university’s first humanist chaplain. Being able to reorient the chaplaincy at the university to fit with the changing face of Britain is particularly satisfying for him. “We’re probably the most diverse team at any leading university. We’re trying to engage with each other among 16,000 students, and 2,000 staff, and we’re trying to produce programmes that matter,” he said.

Among a series of notable firsts since becoming a KAICIID Fellow, Alex is the first and only rabbi in the UK to become a coordinating chaplain at a large university, a role that was traditionally the preserve of Church of England Anglican chaplains. He is also one of only two rabbis working in the public sector. In 2019, Alex was also the first rabbi to enter Lebanon’s second largest city, Tripoli, in over 40 years as part of the European Union’s Programme of Religion and Society.

A staunch believer in the maxim that diversity is a strength, Alex appreciates KAICIID’s efforts to balance the representation of different faith communities within their initiatives. “The fact that there is gender balance as well as a geographical and regional balance

**“We’re actually using interreligious dialogue to try to respect each other’s points of view and listen to each other. It helps to navigate that path on a campus where people display their politics in public”**



**“I’ve met people who’ve been working in war zones all around the world and it’s opened my eyes to the fact that I probably have a role in international conflict resolution”**

“When I tell people that I have been a KAICIID Fellow, they see me as part of an organization backed by Austria, Saudi Arabia, Spain and the Vatican. That connection opens doors and enables access”



to bring people together in large urban metropolises that results in action and changes on the ground,” said Alex.

In a programme-sponsored trip to Philadelphia, together with other members of the Fellows network, Alex discovered “critical incident chaplaincy”, which is an arrangement that provides a member of the clergy during periods of civil unrest or at the site of a traumatic incident such as a road traffic accident. After police, fire and ambulance, Alex considers the introduction of these frontline chaplains akin to having a fourth emergency service, and has been

instrumental in setting up this facility for forces in southern England.

Being a Fellow has also crystallised for Alex the need to contribute to conflict resolution work. “Through KAICIID, I’ve met people who’ve been working in war zones all around the world and it’s opened my eyes to the fact that I probably have a role in international conflict resolution,” said Alex.

He is now working with England’s Football Association as chair of its faith network to develop a programme bringing together, through football, Arabs and Jews in Israel and Palestine. “I think it’s that

creates a very powerful network,” he said. This network is one that he considers an “enormous resource” and a springboard for a number of ideations.

Among major projects that he has spearheaded or contributed to through the Fellows network has been the Transatlantic Dialogue Programme which brought together Fellows to view urban conflicts in complex, multi-ethnic, multi-religious areas across major European and US cities. “The Transatlantic Dialogue Programme looked at very different models of how interreligious dialogue can influence society and how it can help

**Rabbi Alexander Goldberg**

Base	Guildford, UK
Institution	University of Surrey
Religious affiliation	Judaism
Professional background	Dean of the College of Chaplains and Advisors

Photographs by Khalid Bari

KAICIID experience and the Centre’s network that enables me to contribute to projects like this,” said Alex. “Because KAICIID does have a cachet, it is seen as a leader in interreligious dialogue. And, when I tell people in the field that I have been a KAICIID Fellow, they see me as part of an organization backed by Austria, Saudi Arabia, Spain and the Vatican. That connection opens doors and enables access.”

Although it is clear that much has changed for Alex Goldberg in the five years since his KAICIID Fellowship, it is equally apparent that the foundational principles that guide him remain the same. He draws inspiration from great thinkers like Martin Buber and Rabbi Joshua Heschel, the latter of whom joined the 1965 marches from Selma to Montgomery alongside Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Rabbi Heschel, a Hasidic Jew and passionate social activist, was in his element when he lent his voice to the African-American protest. He pronounced: “When I marched in Selma, I felt that my legs were praying.”

The idea of unequivocally responding to calls to social action resonates strongly with Alex, who sees his engagement with KAICIID as a chance to metaphorically wear the shoes of Fellows from the Arab world, with people from conflict areas, and to work through the necessary discomfort that comes with true empathy, so that he can view the world through another’s eyes. For him, it is these encounters that are most meaningful.



## Transforming fear and anger into understanding and courage

Nang Loung Hom grew up around survivors of sexual assault who lived at a rehabilitative sanctuary set up by her mother in 1980s Burma. After stints in London and Singapore, Hom is now based in Sri Lanka, a country working through its own socioreligious tensions, not far from where her life began.

In Sri Lanka, she is on a personal mission to embrace traumatic childhood memories and to work through them using dialogue. She said of her numerous projects to create social healing, dialogue and conflict transformation: “I want to help people to become so compassionate

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“The safe space that we co-created with great empathy and care was transforming pain, fear and anger”

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about pain and fear that we forget about devastating events.”

The Fellows programme helped Hom to address her mission with added theoretical underpinning. Her journey to becoming a Fellow began in 2016, years after she’d already gathered extensive experience in peacebuilding training. “Of the many peacebuilding tools, dialogue was my favourite,” she said. She learned about the Fellows programme from a friend who had applied to join the inaugural cohort, and found herself both attracted by, and wary of, the idea of following suit. How would the Buddhist communities she worked with so closely in Sri Lanka and Myanmar perceive her participation in an initiative that welcomed diverse perspectives and collaboration among the world religions, including Islam? Deeper reflection convinced her to apply for the Fellows programme.

Since taking that leap of faith, Hom has applied what she learned in the Fellows training to several key initiatives. One of the projects that she feels has the most impact is the creation of a training manual on peacebuilding,

social cohesion, and interreligious dialogue — an instructional guide that she is co-developing for KMSS–Caritas Myanmar. The manual is designed to support leaders of both host and displaced communities in the war-ravaged areas of northern and north-eastern Myanmar, as well as political, religious and cultural leaders, women and youth, in order to bring justice and healing to communities affected by decades of hurt. According to Hom, the manual is symbolic of how KAICIID’s intervention has empowered her. Beyond the pedagogical value of the Fellows programme, and the network boost of engaging with an open minded cohort, Hom now feels better able to share her understanding of dialogue. “I know that I am able to write this book because of my journey with KAICIID,” she said.

The idea of creating healing environments for communities in pain is a common thread across all of Hom’s work. She has also designed and facilitated a fellowship, titled *Interreligious Dialogue on Social Healing*, a nine-month programme aimed at religious leaders. This is one of the first collaborative



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“I want to help people to be more compassionate towards their pain and fear so that they can free themselves from traumatic memories and understand the complexity of the devastating events they experience”

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“This beautiful transformation comes not from training or attending a conference, but from very deep dialogue that helps us to get in touch with our fear and gives us a chance to speak out about it”

projects that she has devised in partnership with a Sri Lankan KAICIID Fellow, including contributions from three other Asian and African Fellows.

Additionally, Hom has consulted on a project for Karuna Center for Peacebuilding in Myanmar where she has helped to develop another interreligious dialogue manual, which focuses specifically on community dialogue and the Training of Trainers.

Hom is also working on a project to restore the practices of dialogue in



Buddhist culture and institutions; another project, which reimagines KAICIID’s 10 Principles of Dialogue in terms of Buddhist-focused values, and a third project that seeks to include dialogue in issues of social and restorative justice, reconciliation, social healing and gender justice in the Buddhist community.

For her project on gender justice, Hom hopes to use dialogue to help participants in finding social healing and to deconstruct “heavy, complex and painful issues”.

Additionally, she is attempting to institutionalise dialogue within corporate

culture, exploring ways of creating a cohesive and inclusive workplace in an interreligious and intercultural society.

While Hom clearly invests much of her personal and professional self into every cause that she pursues, it is the *Metta Dialogue* project, named after the Pali word for love, that she describes most poignantly. The project was the result of the 2019 Easter suicide bombings on three churches and three hotels in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In the aftermath, communities faced deep divisions and further violence.

Hom launched *Metta Dialogue* together

#### Nang Loung Hom

Base	Colombo, Sri Lanka
Institution	Walpola Rahula Institute
Religious affiliation	Buddhism
Professional background	Conflict Transformation, Social Healing, Buddhist Approaches to Peacebuilding

Photographs by Don Harith Gamage

with a colleague, training facilitators in interreligious and interethnic dialogue. The facilitators then opened dialogue sessions to the public in an effort to create safe, nurturing spaces for justice and healing. Hom ensured that the sessions were small and that they included a mix of religious communities and ethnicities. In just a few months, the project reached more than 80 people.

Nine months after the *Metta Dialogue* sessions began, the participants most directly affected by the horrific attack started to speak about the perpetrators using language of forgiveness rather than words of vengeance. “This really touched my heart and enlightened me”, she said. “The safe space that we co-created with great empathy and care was transforming pain, fear and anger into understanding and courage to envision an inclusive and cohesive future. After that, we began to implement many collective actions.”

Hom’s efforts are driven by her dedication to help others move past horrific violence to find peace and understanding. She believes that if pain and fear fail to find a positive outlet through dialogue, then community divisions will thrive and the cycle of violence will continue.

“This beautiful transformation comes not from training or attending a conference,” she said. “It comes from very deep dialogue that helps us to get in touch with our fear and gives us a chance to speak out about it.”



## Widening the circle

A child of Chinese immigrants to Indonesia, Kristan grew up in the Confucian religion. Devoting himself to a lifelong education in Confucianism, from elementary school to college, he now chairs the Central Board of Youth Confucianism in Indonesia and represents Indonesian Confucians at interfaith events around the world. “It has been our family religion for many generations, and my father is actually one of only a handful of Confucian high priests in Indonesia,” he said.

million Muslims in Indonesia, accounting for over 87% of the country’s entire population, and more than 12% of the total number of Muslims worldwide.

After Indonesia had made a policy shift towards greater religious openness in the late 1990s, less than a decade later, in 2006, the Indonesian government recognised Confucianism as an official religion, alongside Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

With Confucianism having secured its seat at Indonesia’s table of pluralism, Kristan now wants to give it a voice. To do that, he is spearheading efforts to optimise Confucian–Muslim relations within Indonesia through a collaboration with other Muslim alumni from the Fellows programme: Kamilia Hamidah, Suhadi Cholil and Muhammad Afdillah.

The four have joined forces to form Interreligious Dialogue Schools where they conduct training on Confucian–Muslim relations. They have already created two such schools, the first in Malang City, East Java, and the second in Bogor, West Java.

Participants in the training workshops, which are held inside Confucian temples, are university students recruited via social media. The students have in common a

demonstrable openness, as well as a high degree of curiosity about other cultures and faiths. While the workshops’ opening session is conducted in plenary format, the learning sessions are targeted towards Muslim and Confucian youth.

Although the workshops have been extremely successful, Kristan has, at times, encountered challenges with engaging the whole Muslim community. Many from stricter backgrounds do not feel comfortable entering a Confucian temple, believing it to be counter to their own faith.

“It’s sometimes hard to invite Muslims to come to our temple, or even to church, because of stereotypes and prejudice,” he said. “Parts of the Muslim community are very protective.”

Kristan credits his Muslim colleague, Kamilia, with being an instrumental force in breaking down those barriers, by reaching out to other Muslims and welcoming them into the interreligious dialogue programme.

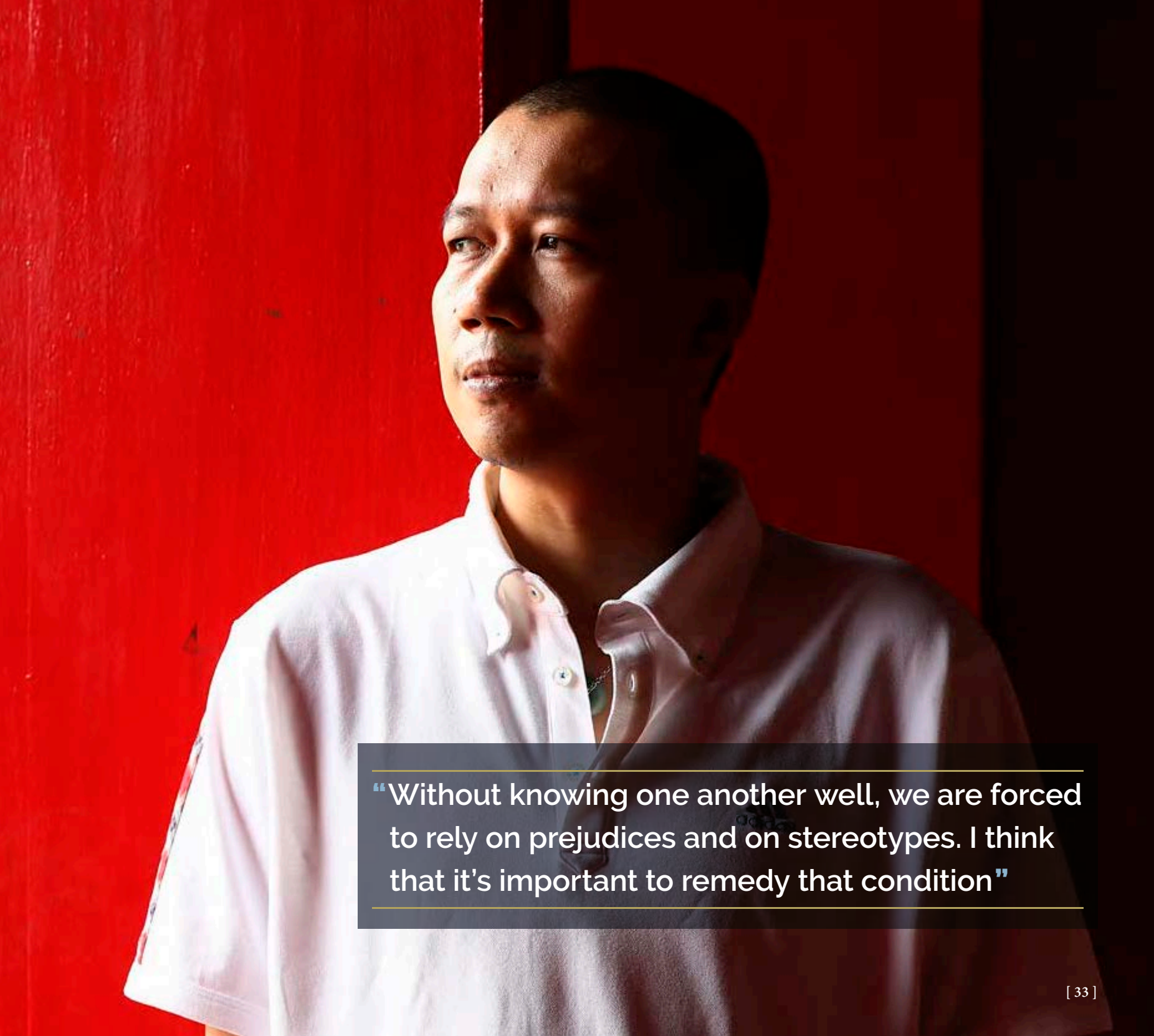
Having already devoted so much of his life to elevating the Confucian faith within Indonesian society, Kristan does not intend to scale back his efforts. “Interreligious dialogue is my mission,” he said. It is one that he continues to pursue

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**“Interreligious dialogue is much needed in Indonesia. That is why it is my mission”**

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In a country that is overwhelmingly Muslim, Kristan’s mission to enhance Confucian–Muslim relations is particularly momentous. According to the Pew Research Centre, there are over 219



**“Without knowing one another well, we are forced to rely on prejudices and on stereotypes. I think that it’s important to remedy that condition”**

“By virtue of being Confucian, I am also a cosmopolitan. That’s what Confucians are: citizens of the world, and children of heaven. It has been our family religion for many generations, and my father is actually one of only a handful of Confucian high priests in Indonesia”



strategic approach to interreligious dialogue and how to take a future-oriented perspective towards creating a single, interreligious community in the country. “That’s one of my goals,” he affirmed. “That’s why I am involved in interreligious dialogue.”

Kristan is also proud of the uniqueness of the Confucian philosophy, which encourages him to engage people from all religions and backgrounds. “By virtue of being Confucian, I am also a cosmopolitan. That’s what Confucians are: citizens of the world, and children of heaven,” he said.

Kristan hopes to amplify these shared values through his work to improve Confucian–Muslim relations in Indonesia. “Interreligious dialogue is much needed in Indonesia. That is why it is my mission” he said. He is convinced that by identifying the many commonalities in a shared humanity, in accordance with the teachings of Confucius, everyone will be able to see one another as being connected.

Kristan believes that the root of wars that have a religious dimension is a lack of understanding between one side and the other. “Without knowing one another well,” he said, “we are forced to rely on prejudices and on stereotypes. I think that it’s important to remedy that condition.”

in both his academic and professional endeavours.

As a member of such a small minority community in Indonesia, he believes interreligious dialogue work to be critical. And through his time as a KAICIID Fellow, he has learned much about the

Kristan	
Base	Bogor, Indonesia
Institution	Central Board of Indonesia Youth Confucian Generation
Religious affiliation	Confucianism
Professional background	Lecturer in Character Building and Confucianism at Bina Nusantara University

Photographs by Hendra Eka



## Creating cohesive interreligious communities

As a child growing up in Nigeria, Fatima Madaki hoped to study medicine, believing that to be the best way of saving lives. As an adult, she realised that she could achieve more on the streets than in hospitals. “There

better able to address social issues.”

Even growing up in a predominantly Muslim community in a country divided along religious and ethnic lines, young Fatima’s social circle was inclusive of all religions, which taught her to believe that people were generally loving and hospitable. For her, discovering the stark polarisation and divisive narratives that thrived beyond her immediate experience was a blunt realisation. “This made me even more convinced that the peacebuilding field is where I need to be,” said Fatima.

Fuelled by a burning desire to mend the discord among Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria, Fatima has built up an impressive track record of initiatives. To date, she’s worked with a number of organizations such as Mercy Corps and Search for Common Ground (SFCG), and on a wide range of development issues. Eventually, she decided that engaging with religious communities and conducting meaningful dialogue sessions would be her primary focus.

“The more you think you know, the more you realise that you don’t really know much”, Fatima explained, regarding her decision to bolster her already

extensive peacebuilding experience by joining the Fellows programme. Not only did she feel that her accustomed methods towards peacebuilding could be improved, she also wanted to increase her knowledge of interreligious dialogue.

Her curiosity to learn how dialogue can be used to advantage in affecting issues of social cohesion was key to her seeking out the Fellows programme. “With KAICIID, I got to learn that interreligious dialogue is not just about solving problems; it is also about understanding “the Other” better. We don’t need to make people become exactly like us. Once you come to that realisation, that is when you can begin to empathise,” she said.

Having completed the Fellows programme, Fatima has changed the way she works. Whereas before, she engaged only with established experts in the field of peacebuilding, her training taught her the importance of including perspectives from all ages and all walks of life. “Being a KAICIID Fellow even helped me better understand how to implement intergenerational dialogue. That is the focus of my new initiative, to bring people, young and old, together to exchange ideas around how to better protect holy sites,” she said.

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**“With KAICIID, I got to learn that interreligious dialogue is not just about solving problems; it is also about understanding “the Other” better”**

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were so many social issues that I knew I could address without being a medical professional,” she said. “I wanted to understand how and why people do the things they do. So, I studied psychology at university, hoping that it would make me



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**“We don’t need to make people become exactly like us. Once you come to that realisation, that is when you can begin to empathise”**

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Fatima currently works with SFCG Nigeria as a Senior Project Coordinator on the *Advancing Religious Tolerance* project, engaging religious leaders and other high-level state and non-state actors. She confesses to formerly wearing institutional affiliations like a coat of professional armour, using the organizational connection to create a type of detachment that prevented her from absorbing the



**“Not being a religious scholar, sometimes it’s difficult to engage with religious people because you feel you do not have enough authority or knowledge”**

Up until then, I’d not realised that I was carrying a lot of emotional baggage in my role as a peacebuilder. I felt as though I needed to be strong so that others could be strong too,” she said.

As well as peeling back layers of impenetrability, being an alumna of the Fellows programme has done much to enhance Fatima’s ethos within the field. “Not being a religious scholar, sometimes it’s difficult to engage with religious people because you feel you do not have enough authority or knowledge,” she admitted.

“But being a Fellow has given me that leverage to have access to them. It has also opened me up to linkages for resource mobilisation and knowledge sharing. I’ve reached out to other Fellows programme alumni for advice on activities that I want to run, or for feedback on projects that I’m designing. Speaking to them helps me to understand conflict dynamics better.”

Beyond simply benefiting from the network, Fatima is actively expanding it. “In the religious engagement sector there is room for us to come together to hold

emotional impact of her work. It was the Fellows training, particularly the dialogue sessions, that helped her shed the protective shield.

“I came to understand the different layers of identity and in one particular dialogue session, I was even able to cry.

Abubakar Fatima Madaki	
Base	Abuja, Nigeria
Institution	Education and Sustainable Livelihood Youth Initiative
Religious affiliation	Islam
Professional background	Institution Founder

Photographs by Godwin Oisi

review missions and plan strategies,” she said. “That’s why I’ve initiated a process where SFCG collaborates with KAICIID in Nigeria to host quarterly meetings in which we bring religious engagement organizations and civil society together to review various initiatives and see what is working. We also assess what needs to be improved and how best to evaluate impact more effectively.”

When talk turns to the durability of her efforts within a sometimes volatile Nigeria, Fatima is clear about what is needed in order to prolong impact. In her view, too many organizations fail by

turning training into one-off episodes, rather than long-term engagements. This is where KAICIID differentiates itself. “The post-training support given by KAICIID to Fellows, in the form of small grants, recognises the fact that, sometimes, brilliant ideas are dead on arrival for lack of support,” she said. Fatima credits KAICIID’s readiness to support even grassroots efforts with helping her to implement several peacebuilding initiatives beyond the scope of her primary role with SFCG.

For Fatima, the goal of working towards a Nigeria where people come to learn

about how to successfully build peace remains paramount. That vision can sometimes feel far away, as turbulent changes within the country’s social, political and religious structures keep everyone on edge.

Still, Fatima thinks that the training and dialogue process that has helped her to encounter her vulnerability also gives her hope. “If I could experience that, and if other people are granted the opportunity to experience something similar, then we can move forward with our commonalities as a key value for enduring change,” she said.



## Women's empowerment is critical to sustainable development

For Sister Justina Mike Ngwobia, women's empowerment and global development go hand in hand. "Women make up half of the world's population and most of them are still uneducated, unemployed and lack opportunities. Any society that neglects such a huge amount of human resource potential cannot achieve meaningful development," she said.

Justina defines women's empowerment as "the creation of an atmosphere where women can make informed decisions

about their own personal interests and benefits, as well as for their community." She has actively worked to foster this atmosphere since joining the Fellows programme in 2016, later launching an initiative that united a group of courageous women committed to bringing healing to divided Christian-Muslim communities in Nigeria. The initiative has since been recognised by UN Women, and participants have been given the designation of Women Peace Mentors.

Mentors are tasked with training other women in Nigeria to actively engage with peace and security issues and to campaign against gender injustices in their communities. Due to her success, Justina is working to scale up her projects, looking to add additional partners and resources. She is particularly proud that her initiative is helping women to see themselves as confident participants in society and, in turn, to become changemakers in their communities.

"Women have always been relegated to the background as a result of continuous abuse of religious practices, patriarchal societal structures and cultural and traditional stereotypes, which have

given men an upper hand in all aspects of society, including those of social, economic and political power. The attainment of gender equality is an important means of achieving justice and human rights, as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals", she said.

Justina grew up in the near monoreligious Abia State in Eastern Nigeria, where the community was 95% Christian. After college, she moved north to Jos in Plateau State, where the balance between Christians and Muslims was 60:40. Due to violence in the north of Nigeria as well as a depletion of natural resources, predominately Muslim cattle herders moved to Plateau State to search for pasture and water outside of their villages, fighting with local Christian farmers over those scarce resources.

In Jos, these tensions have been keenly felt, resulting in deep divisions on ethnic and religious lines. Faced with this conflict, most people would leave the area in search of a less fraught existence. Instead, Justina decided that Jos was the place in which she was most needed. In 1991, she took a job with the Christian

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**"Gender equality is an important means of achieving justice and human rights, as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals"**

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**"I am a proud African woman and I am so excited to have full potential and great cultural heritage and values as an African"**

**“Women are emotionally intelligent, and they have such hearts of compassion. These are powerful assets that can reduce the challenges from conflicts and wars”**

Council of Nigeria and started working to improve Christian–Muslim relations. Her new role coincided with the start of a protracted period of ethnoreligious upheaval in the city. September 7, 2001, marked the start of the Jos riots, involving Christians and Muslims, which lasted nearly two weeks and resulted in the loss of over 1,000 lives. “I discovered that women had a role to play in ending the violence,” she said.

Following the riots, Justina worked tirelessly over the next decade to move women from the role of passive onlookers to powerful protagonists. Through her initiative following the KAICIID Fellows programme, she has worked together with



a Muslim partner to teach Christian and Muslim women how to prevent, monitor, analyse and mediate conflicts. To date, the five-day, multi-phase programme has trained nearly 300 women. The very first part of the programme focuses on confidence building. “We want women to realise what they are truly capable of,” said Justina. The following days of training focus on improving communication skills, understanding drivers of conflict, using interreligious dialogue for peace and learning how to implement these new skills

in the participants’ local communities.

Since 2016, Justina has expanded this work across Adawama, Kaduna and Taraba states, in addition to Plateau state. She points to her pride in her heritage as being the driving force behind her efforts to bring healing and peace to Nigeria. “I am a proud African woman and I am so excited to have full potential and great cultural heritage and values as an African.”

Justina also works hard to affirm and promote the cultural and religious values that underpin opportunity and inclusion

#### Sister Justina Mike Ngwobia

Base	Jos, Nigeria
Institution	Justice peace and Reconciliation Movement
Religious affiliation	Christianity
Professional background	Conflict Manager

Photographs by Godwin Oisi

for women. Often, this means working to attain the partnership and support of male leaders in her community, so that they can tackle issues of gender equality together. “The ability to empower women to become active participants in all aspects of decision-making processes and the ability to engage in such a way as to include the men in the fight for women’s empowerment makes the difference for me as an African woman. I totally believe that I cannot succeed alone.”

Justina also believes that although women’s empowerment should look more or less the same in different cultures and countries, there are often differences based on the needs of each region. “For example, the pressing needs of women in Africa may be different to those of women in Europe or Asia, based on our cultures and contexts. What we need as African women is access to education, healthcare, justice and human rights. For women in Europe, it may be about needing more recognition and that is where the difference comes in.”

Still, she says, the benefits that women bring to conflict resolution and peace processes are the same all over the world. “Women are emotionally intelligent, and they have such hearts of compassion. These are powerful assets that can reduce the challenges from conflicts and wars around the globe. If they are given space to participate and bring these rich perspectives to the table, I can attest to the fact that the world will be a better place.”



## Heart, head and hands

When she was seven years old, one of Ruth Ouazana's playmates announced that she didn't want to catch "the Jewish disease" from Ruth, daughter of Moroccan-Jewish parents. As they were both children of African migrants to France, that spiteful declaration stunned Ruth. What element of her identity could

anyone possibly fear being infected by? That marked the end of Ruth's age of innocence and, in many ways, the beginning of a lifelong quest to better understand Jewish identity as well as how her religion intersects with other faiths.

Following that first brush with anti-Semitism, Ruth found herself exploring Judaism more intensely. She zigzagged across continents, breaking down barriers and building communities along her way. Within the World Organization of the Scout Movement, she rose to Secretary General of the International Forum of Jewish Scouts. She also founded Limoud, the French arm of a grassroots Jewish learning movement. In parallel, she worked as a lawyer in France, with additional stints in the UK and Israel.

It was at the 2015 World Scout Jamboree in Yamaguchi City, Japan, that Ruth first learned about KAICIID and discovered the Centre's principles of dialogue. Meanwhile, back home, France was having an uneasy time finding the right approach to multicultural diversity.

Worried about the growing division, Ruth and her husband formed *The Roots of Tomorrow*, a training initiative focused on interreligious dialogue and on managing cultural differences among Christians,

Jews and Muslims. Since then, the project's success together with the tools that she gained in her Fellows training have given rise to similar initiatives.

Although Ruth had two decades of experience in interfaith relations prior to joining the 2019 European Fellows cohort, she credits the programme with adding important theoretical knowledge to her real world experience. "It has helped to reinforce confidence in my approach to my work," she said. "In a French society that values credentials highly, identifying myself as a KAICIID Fellow also carries with it the cachet of being immediately recognised as an expert in interreligious dialogue.

During the Fellows programme's blended learning courses, she was taught the Head, Heart, Hands approach to imparting dialogical principles. "For me, the Heart part was about going to places where people were praying, so that they could experience it, live it, feel it," she said.

The second part, Head, involved theological study. Here, Ruth has since reached out to la Pastorale du Tourisme, a service of social and spiritual support dedicated to schools and to vacationers in Lyon, to educate the service's guides on the religions of people who come into their pastoral care.

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**"In a French society that values credentials highly, identifying myself as a KAICIID Fellow also carries with it the cachet of being immediately recognised as an expert in interreligious dialogue"**

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**"They told us that they felt an urgent need to do something to change the way young people were behaving"**

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The third part of the Fellows training, Hands, involved practical dialogue training, where the guides learned principles for engaging with people of different faiths, and how to apply those

**“The European Fellows already had so much overlap, in terms of culture. It really helped us to understand one another when we got together because we had so many reference points in common such as a Western cultural background and our origins in Christian-majority democratic countries”**

principles in real-world situations. These are the same principles on which Ruth decided to base her first post-Fellows initiative, funded by KAICIID — a series of training sessions targeted at Christian, Jewish and Muslim counsellors, for a three-day immersive interreligious experience.

When KAICIID introduced its first European cohort in 2019, Ruth initially wondered if the new regional approach would really be a better fit for her than the global programming that the Centre had conducted until then. “Then I realised that the European Fellows already had so much overlap, in terms of culture. It really helped us to understand one another when we got together because we had so many reference points in common such as a Western cultural background and our origins in Christian-majority democratic countries. It turned out to be really beneficial for us all, as Europeans, to be starting with more or less the same common knowledge.”

In the few months since she completed the Fellows programme, Ruth has appreciated the extent to which European



cohort members share commonalities. This helps them to tap into each other as resources for co-designing approaches to the challenges that each faces in their local communities.

Back home in Lyon, the issue of common ground has taken on an especially urgent meaning. Civic leaders have approached Ruth to help them in managing disaffected young people whose antisocial behaviour is driving them

Ruth Ouazana	
Base	Lyon, France
Institution	Les Racines de Demain
Religious affiliation	Judaism
Professional background	Outreach Organization Founder

Photographs by Jean-Baptiste Poggi

increasingly to the fringes of local society. “They’ve asked us to run training sessions. They told us that they felt an urgent need to do something to change the way young people were behaving,” she said.

Ruth has now offered up her pilot project of Head, Heart, Hands dialogical training to civic leaders from suburbs that have socially vulnerable populations.

She is grateful to KAICIID for investing in the initial stages of her project and for acknowledging its potential. She believes that this show of faith helped her to take a bold approach.

Today, she is already seeing the first seedlings of success — a growing yearning across religious communities to weave together the kaleidoscope of cultural

threads that make up modern France. One Imam has already requested that each of the spiritual guides at his mosque participates in the next session of the dialogue training.

“I just want people to conduct themselves as humans,” Ruth said of her ultimate mission. “I want them to behave with humanity.”



## The grassroots of Finland's dialogue movement

**B**orn and raised in Finland, Heidi Rautionmaa had over 20 years of experience in interreligious dialogue when she joined the Fellows programme in 2019.

A pastor and an academic, Heidi is a devotee of lifelong learning, which is why she grasped the Fellows opportunity with both hands. “Once you’re in the field, it’s always good to keep learning. Especially if you’re an educator. If you’re always just

conducting training but not learning anymore, then you go blind,” she said.

For her, joining the first European cohort of the Fellows programme was a powerful affirmation of the self-taught principles of interreligious dialogue that she had begun to practice when Finland’s Muslim community began to grow in the 1990s. That was a time when the country began to welcome refugees from conflict areas such as Somalia.

Born in a small town in Southern Finland, Heidi has been organizing interfaith events, such as multireligious visits to religious sites, for over two decades. When she saw Finland’s demographic makeup begin to change due to immigration, Heidi chose to learn Arabic to become more inclusive and better informed. Today, many religious leaders in Finland reach out to her for help and advice — whether its Muslim community leaders calling for support after a mosque is vandalised or the Hindu community calling for help on finding a suitable venue for Diwali celebrations.

For much of her career, Heidi has concentrated on grassroots efforts to build cohesive interreligious communities across Finland. She has forged longstanding affiliations with NGOs

such as the Religions for Peace Global Women of Faith Network, as well as Faiths Without Borders and the multiregional United Religions Initiative Cooperation Circle — multireligious organizations dedicated to promoting social cohesion in Finland’s capital and elsewhere.

Currently writing her PhD thesis on interworldview education, Heidi is also a student of the University of Helsinki, under whose auspices she has attended interfaith meetings. She is particularly eager to combine her background in academia with her work with civil society organizations. According to Heidi, this is crucial since, in her view, academia is somewhat detached from the work on the ground as well as from evolving societal needs.

At the lower tiers of education, the need for this collaboration is evident. As the make-up of Finland’s classrooms becomes more diverse, so must the method and practice of teaching change and create educators equipped to thrive in a shifting field. Worldview education is now part of Finland’s newest school curriculum, and many teachers have reached out to Heidi, asking how to go beyond mere classroom management and integrate a holistic perspective in their work with children and parents from different religions.

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**“We need a platform like the alumni channel because interfaith work can be lonely, full of tension, and, sometimes, negativity. People don’t always understand the work you are trying to do”**

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**“A tiny project here and there is not enough anymore, so it’s crucial what comes after this. I believe that KAICIID can create the structure for that”**

“Having a Europe-focused cohort allows for a type of shorthand, and accessibility around issues such as immigration, climate change, European unity, and even secularism, as religion plays a slightly different role in Europe than in other parts of the world”



solutions to problems,” Heidi reflected.

She feels that KAICIID’s European cohort can be the precursor to regular regional forums where Fellows from locations with close cultural alignment can learn from one another’s perspectives.

“Having a Europe-focused cohort allows for a type of shorthand, and accessibility around issues such as immigration, climate change, European unity, and even secularism, as religion plays a slightly

different role in Europe than in other parts of the world,” she said.

While the European cohort remains a close-knit group, the network that Heidi has accessed from the Fellows programme is borderless. As she operates in a Finnish ecosystem that has a narrow experience of interfaith relations, she finds spiritual reinforcement in being able to talk to other alumni from the Fellows programme all around the world.

Beyond the local challenges of Finland’s interreligious nuances, Europe, too is facing its own awakening as it seeks to come to better terms with pluralistic religious communities. “Europe is facing a lot of challenges, much like many parts of the world, and being able to view those challenges from a regional point of view allows Europeans to concentrate on local

#### Heidi Rautionmaa

Base	Espoo, Finland
Institution	Religions for Peace European Women of Faith Network, Faiths Without Borders URI CC, University in Helsinki
Religious affiliation	Christianity
Professional background	Educator, Journalist, Lutheran Pastor

Photographs by Antti Yrjönen

Alumni stay in contact through active group chats that provide safe spaces to learn and express opinions within a community of kindred spirits. “Alumni share information, give one another support and propose ideas around how to carry out interreligious dialogue in various parts of the world. We need a platform like the alumni channel because, nowadays, interfaith work can be lonely, full of tension, and, sometimes, negativity,” she said. “People don’t always understand the work you are trying to

do, so having the Fellows network and its support is very important.”

While access to this richness of viewpoints and variety of interreligious experiences is comforting to Heidi, she is keen to take her Fellows activities beyond the exchange of ideas and the fortification of flagging spirits. “Right now, we are in a crucial moment. Now that we have had this Fellows training and experience, we have to really do something together. Something more concrete must come out of this,” she said.

Heidi believes that, although small projects are a good place to start, they are not enough. People in the field need support and resources. She therefore sees networking as an opportunity to put the building blocks in place for more material outcomes.

“A tiny project here and there is not enough anymore, so it’s crucial what comes after this. A group chat is nice but something more productive must come out” she said. “I believe that KAICIID can create the structure for that.”



## Finding a place to belong

Tunisian by birth, Muslim by faith and Austrian by choice, Mabrouka Rayachi knows exactly what it's like to

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**“The more we stress differences, the more difficulties we get into. Being a Muslim in Austria is not a disadvantage. Religion is just one part of our identity, it's not our entire identity”**

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come from a diverse migrant background. During two decades of experience as a religious teacher in Austria, she regularly encountered children from diverse backgrounds in her classrooms

who were grappling with religious and cultural identities. In 2012, she became a supervisor for Islamic religious teachers, trading her classroom role for one with a less direct, but more far reaching impact.

In 2015, Mabrouka discovered KAICIID, and joined the inaugural Fellows programme in order to increase her skills in intercultural and interreligious dialogue. As a result of the programme's wide-ranging curriculum and the network connections that her status as a KAICIID Fellow has enabled, she has been able to significantly expand her professional toolkit and gain access to opportunities that allow her to make a positive impact on the Muslim community.

The year 2015 was pivotal for Austria. It was the first of four consecutive years during which thousands of people, many of them fleeing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, flooded Europe's borders, seeking safe haven from violent conflict. There's a Greek word, *kairos*, which loosely translates to 'the right time to do something meaningful'. As the crisis along Austria's borders developed, Mabrouka knew that this was her *kairos*. She reshaped her role within the Austrian education system into becoming what

she calls a cultural interpreter between Muslim people seeking refuge in Austria and the local academic system.

“I work at all levels. Within the communities, I work with parents. At schools, I work with headteachers and classroom teachers for the sake of children and youth,” she said. Through her work, she seeks to provide a sense of security with practical reassurance. “I tell the migrants: You are secure. You don't have to fear anything. Just learn the language.”

Mabrouka's current role seeks to demystify Austrian schools for migrants, advising parents how they can best support their child to be successful in a new environment. As a Muslim woman working in the Austrian education system, she finds no contradiction between her religious identity and her professional environment, even if there are challenges at times.

“I think that the Austrian education system is open to anyone,” she said. “The more we stress differences, the more difficulties we get into. I try to emphasise that point to my teachers, to the migrant parents, and to their children. Being a Muslim in Austria is not a disadvantage. Religion is just one part of our identity, it's not our entire identity.”



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**“It is possible to be both Austrian and Muslim. It's all about living in the Austrian context”**

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“As a cultural interpreter, I’m a bridge-builder. I know the Austrian school system well and I understand the perspectives of the Muslim community... Austria has given me so many things and I am now in a position where I can give back”

Mabrouka is frustrated by what she sees as misrepresentation of Muslims in some areas of Austrian media. The recurring narrative that Muslims are reluctant to integrate, or their presentation as victims of, rather than active participants in, Austrian society is one that she is desperate to reframe. In order to do this, she is actively engaging policymakers, educators and community leaders. “As a cultural interpreter, I’m a bridge-builder.

I know the Austrian school system well and I understand the perspectives of the Muslim community,” she said.

School officials particularly rely on her to navigate sometimes complex religious and cultural situations. For example, several days after a young Muslim-Austrian girl had felt uncomfortable with wearing a standard bathing suit to a swimming class, even though she had worn a bikini during a recent school excursion to a lake, Mabrouka received a call from the puzzled school administrator asking for clarity. She explained that one possible reason for the young girl’s behaviour could have been that switching back and forth between cultural codes is harder when you feel that you’re being held to a certain standard by people of your own faith. While the young girl had been the only Muslim on the lake trip, that was not the case during swimming class.

It is in situations like these, with children trying to navigate a new home and new identity, that Mabrouka is

particularly motivated to find sustainable solutions that improve the lives of young people and increase their chances of academic success. “I want the school administrators to understand the child at school, and not to discriminate,” she said.

As issues of identity, pluralism and belonging continue to percolate just under the skin of Austria’s multicultural communities, Mabrouka will continue to place her focus on young people. She feels that it is vital for children to be able to acknowledge every part of their religious and cultural identities without shutting off any one part to accommodate certain situations. “It is possible to be both Austrian and Muslim. It’s all about living in the Austrian context”, she said.

For Mabrouka, the next steps of her mission to help migrant and refugee youth to integrate are embedded in her regard for her current home. “I love this country and I want to do something here,” she said. “Austria has given me so many things and I am now in a position where I can give back.”

Mabrouka Rayachi	
Base	Vienna, Austria
Institution	Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft Österreich
Religious affiliation	Islam
Professional background	Supervisor for Islamic Religious Teachers in Lower Austria

Photograph on page 53 by Daniel Shaked



## The butterfly effect of dialogue

Father Nehme Saliba was born in multicultural Lebanon in 1974, the same year that the civil war broke out. Having lived his formative years against a backdrop of fierce religious and political conflict, today he is determined to educate young people against the misuse of religion to justify violence.

“I seek to make my community immune,” he said, describing his drive to create a cohesive interreligious culture.

“And by ‘my community’, I don’t just mean Lebanon. My community includes the Arab countries, because Arab countries suffer from so many of the same diseases.” The ‘diseases’ he’s talking about are conflicts that have a religious dimension, fuelled by the likes of Da’esh, against whose virulence he is determined to inoculate young people.

During his childhood, Nehme was not swayed by divisive rhetoric in Lebanon’s Christian and Muslim communities. The way that different faith traditions were demonised by the others struck him as spurious and contrived. “I never believed in the demonisation of Muslims because I had experienced living together with them,” he said.

A first meeting with His Eminence, the Most Reverend Metropolitan George Khodr, encouraged Nehme’s interest in learning more about how followers of Christian and Islamic faith traditions could better relate to one another. It also sparked a passion within him to work towards creating peaceful coexistence, particularly with young people.

Having previously worked with the Orthodox Youth Movement, he understands many of the prejudices that Lebanese youth grapple with, as well as how these preconceptions can quickly

inflare fights between Christians and Muslims. Today, he reaches out to the future leaders of Lebanon — students at local universities — inviting them to move past stereotypes and conflict.

During the 2018 Fellows programme, Nehme, together with 15 other Fellows each from different Arab countries, developed and launched the Arab Region Youth Forum for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (AYFIID). “Our workshops are not about lecturing, writing books or telling stories,” said Nehme. “They’re about self-discovery. And dialogue is not just about exchanging information. It’s about sharing a part of yourself.”

His workshops have welcomed college-age participants from the major Muslim sects and Christian traditions. One example of the experiential approach is the encouragement of participants to imagine themselves leading the day-to-day life of another.

“Dialogue is about sharing and empathising with others,” he said. “So, by taking something personal of yours and giving it to someone else, and by receiving the same from them, you open up to another’s experience and share with them. And if you can share someone’s perspective, that is the first step to being able to share their values.”

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**“Our workshops are not about lecturing, writing books or telling stories. They’re about self-discovery. And dialogue is not just about exchanging information. It’s about sharing a part of yourself”**

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**“Dialogue is like a benevolent stone that I launch into the sea of life. And I watch this stone create concentric circles that spread very, very far”**

“The young people who join the workshops use social media to spread their message of understanding, sharing images, videos and insights with their own networks and creating the kind of virality needed to defeat prejudice”

Nehme believes that this approach to dialogue will help young people to change their lives for the better, specifically by addressing their fears through peaceful means, rather than violence. He also wants to equip them with the skills to design their own solutions to problems that they face in their communities.

For many of the participants, taking part in AYFIID has been a revelation. For some, it was the first opportunity to



meet a member of the Druze religion. For others, like members of the Sunni community, the workshops provided the first opportunity to meet a Shi'a Muslim. AYFIID workshops also emphasise inclusivity and gender equality, engaging both male and female participants.

“The young people who join the workshops use social media to spread their message of understanding, sharing

images, videos and insights with their own networks and creating the kind of virality needed to defeat prejudice,” said Nehme.

He sees the early impact of AYFIID as merely a starting point to build a better future for the next generation, including his children, Nabil (15), Houda (13) and Naya (9). And in KAICIID, he believes that he has found a trusted partner and advocate.

#### Father Nehme Saliba

Base	Beirut, Lebanon
Institution	The Greek Orthodox Church
Religious affiliation	Christianity
Professional background	Clergyman

Photographs by Nadim Bou Habib

“KAICIID shows a lot of respect for the Fellows’ initiatives, as well as for volunteers and participants. The Centre gives credit for your own initiatives and appreciates your work in a way that many organizations do not. I really value that,” he said.

As far as the scale of his ambition is concerned for both Lebanon and the world, Nehme does not temper his belief in the power of dialogue to create change. He believes that, with Christianity grounded in love, and Islam grounded in mercy, Lebanon is thus provided

with a firm foundation for creating and sustaining culturally cohesive communities.

“Dialogue is like a benevolent stone that I launch into the sea of life”, he said. “And I watch this stone create concentric circles that spread very, very far.”



## Overcoming hurt and hatred through dialogue

Having spent his early childhood idolising Albert Einstein before going on to study metaphysics, chemical engineering and process engineering at university, Swami Chidakashananda grew up convinced that science could

end all human suffering. But after years of scouring scientific avenues for answers to the human condition, and finding none, he turned his mind instead to the spirituality of Vedanta, one of six schools of Hindu philosophy.

Today, Swami is a Hindu monk and one of the foremost spiritual teachers at Chinmaya mission in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka.

It was at an interreligious training event in Colombo that he learned about the Fellows programme and immediately applied to join. Since then, he has been working with other Fellows alumni based in Sri Lanka in order to coordinate local activities.

Swami says that he and his colleagues are concerned with the growing risks for young people, such as online hate speech. “There is a well known Buddhist monk, for example, who is making speeches that denounce other minorities, whether Hindus, Christians, or Muslims. He recently made a statement suggesting that, after the upcoming elections, a monoreligious government should be formed,” Swami said.

Having witnessed the damage caused to

some communities by exposure to online vitriol, the Sri Lankan Fellows designed a one-day workshop that took place in the first quarter of 2020, for which KAICIID contributed guidelines and content that was used to create instructions for recognising and reducing online hate speech, targeting people from across the island nation.

The need for such an initiative was vital as tensions were high from inflammatory rhetoric spread by senior religious leaders against people of different faiths. A number of Hindu holy sites were also desecrated, prompting followers of Sri Lanka’s minority religions — Christians, Hindus and Muslims — to urgently seek peaceful means for de-escalating conflict.

In addition to his anti-hate-speech project with other Fellows alumni, Swami is working with religious leaders in Jaffna to provide interreligious dialogue training that also teaches conflict prevention and reconciliation. While the topics are new to the Buddhist monks and Christian priests taught by Swami, he is determined to enhance the flagging reputation, and limited understanding of interreligious dialogue in his part of Sri Lanka.

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“Sri Lanka’s diverse religious groups often fear that working together means that their identities are at stake. Additionally many perceive that other religions are tied to certain political viewpoints”

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“I have a clear vision in mind. And this year I will take that vision, plan it, modify it and convert it into a mission”

“Now, when some untruth is spoken by some religious leaders or by others, the way in which I take that message and how I try to convert that argument into a dialogue, or how I deal with that situation, is all helped by the KAICIID training”

Swami believes that cynicism about the true value of interreligious work comes from the paucity of real reconciliatory outcomes within the community. “Sri Lanka’s diverse religious groups often fear that working together means that their identities are at stake. Additionally many perceive that other religions are tied to certain political viewpoints,” he said.



Swami credits the Fellows experience with creating a marked change in his own behaviour and thought pattern. Now, when others spout hateful rhetoric about another religious or ethnic group, Swami calls to mind the principles of dialogue before reacting or giving a response. Explaining the change in his approach, Swami reveals: “Now, when some untruth is spoken by some religious leaders or by others, the way in which I take that message and how I try to convert that argument into a dialogue, or how I deal

with that situation, is all helped by the KAICIID training.”

Whereas the scope of his interactions led Swami to an insular view of religion, the Fellows programme has given him the opportunity to interact with religious leaders from around the world and forge real friendships with “the Other”. The contact and camaraderie allow him to take a universal outlook on problems, and see beyond his immediate community to understand impacts, and seek solutions

Now, Swami is working on a 30-year

**Chidakashananda Saraswati Swamikal**

Base	Jaffna, Sri Lanka
Institution	Chinmaya Mission of Sri Lanka
Religious affiliation	Hinduism
Professional background	Monk

Photographs by Don Harith Gamage

plan that constitutes his bright vision for the nation’s future. Starting in Jaffna, he is focusing on youth, approaching his mission not only as a religious leader but also as a social worker and community healer. Starting in 2020, he is mapping out three consecutive 10-year milestones up until 2050, for a nationwide scheme that will allow Sri Lanka’s youth to learn and live the experience of interreligious

dialogue. Through this training, Swami aims to tackle the crucial questions that lie at the intersection of one particular identity with another. For instance, does building a Buddhist temple mean that its site now belongs to Buddhism? Whose burial rituals should be followed when a religious leader dies and what factors should be allowed to influence that decision? These questions strike at the

very core of the interreligious healing for which Swami sees such a great need in Jaffna. And only through a long-term view and panoramic lens of dialogue can the answers be universally understood and accepted.

“I have a clear vision in mind,” Swami said. “And this year, I will take that vision, plan it, modify it and convert it into a mission.”



## Building a global village

Dr. Ashin Vicittasara, or Vicitta, as he likes to be known, has devoted his life, from the age of seven, to the monastic service of others. Vicitta grew up a

bibliophile in Myanmar, and his desire to dive into the cultural depths of every part of the world around him translated into a voracious appetite for reading, but one that was not always encouraged.

“As a child, I wasn’t allowed to read books that were not Buddhist religious texts,” Vicitta said. “So, I had to read in secret. I read story books and translation books, and the more I read, the more I wanted to read, especially books in their original languages, which was usually English. So, I tried to learn the language.”

The curious boy with a hunger to uncover all of the truths about humanity became a young man who, he candidly admits, “tried to run away from the monastery many times” when his passion for exploring his creative aptitudes came into conflict with the strict code of monastic life.

Although he eventually contented himself with the demands of monastic life, this did not deter him from wanting to change Myanmar’s monastic education system to incorporate more openness and diversity.

In 2013, having authored 10 books and several publications, the monk with a passion for absorbing and spreading knowledge founded Dhamma Ganga

Buddhist Pali College in Yangon, named after his pen name.

The first iteration of the college was small, situated on just a single acre of land. The very next year, Vicitta pursued efforts to expand the fledgling college by extending learning opportunities to young monks and nuns who, until then, only had the chance to study Buddhist texts.

At Dhamma Ganga, students come not only to learn Pali, the language of Buddhist scripture, which is native to the Indian subcontinent, but also to expand their knowledge of other religions and cultures. “The curriculum is also designed to present new ideas, highlight global ideologies and facilitate change on philosophical, historical and diplomatic levels,” he said. “This is where the focus on interreligious dialogue has proven to be particularly powerful.”

The college is open to educators of all religions, who participate in workshops co-designed by Vicitta and other alumni from the Fellows programme. Vicitta credits his time as a KAICIID Fellow as the root of his motivation to expand the college curriculum to include interreligious dialogue modules.

“When I became a Fellow, I became even more interested in interreligious

“The curriculum is designed to present new ideas, highlight global ideologies and facilitate change on philosophical, historical and diplomatic levels — this is where the focus on interreligious dialogue has proven to be particularly powerful”



“By developing the country and the people, we can create peace in society and build our global village together”

“A number of them knew virtually nothing about other faiths. They had been exposed only to Buddhist education and had never visited any other religious places. So, when they finally met “the Other”, they had so much to say, and so many questions to ask. They loved each other”



election, Vicitta has spent much time expanding his knowledge and passion for the written word to try to negotiate a pluralistic peace. He subsequently joined a writers’ collective in order to publish a series of books that shone a spotlight on the true roots of the political violence, and proposed a pathway to peace.

“Religion shouldn’t be part of conflict,” he said. “We should meet each other and talk, and we should educate one another to come to a full understanding of the situation.” This same principle is

the one he applies to programmes at the college. The course work there is specially designed to help people understand Myanmar’s true religio-political situation, so that they can live peacefully together.

One mind at a time, Vicitta is helping to build a vision of a peaceful Myanmar. In 2019, in collaboration with other Fellows alumni, he played host to Buddhist teachers for a three-day interreligious dialogue training session. On the third day, religious leaders from Christianity, Hinduism and Islam joined in discussions

on prospects for peaceful pluralism in the Southeast Asian nation. The Buddhist teachers were thrilled at this rare opportunity to connect with people from other religions in a safe space.

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education and had never visited any other religious places. So, when they finally met “the Other”, they had so much to say, and so many questions to ask. They loved each other.”

In terms of the future, Vicitta is forging ahead with the vision of a loving humanity characterised by peaceful

religious coexistence. He is currently building a new global education centre to teach Buddhists in Myanmar about followers of other religions. “By developing the country and the people, we can create peace in society, and build up our global village together. That is my message.”



dialogue. So, I introduced world religions and dialogue as new subjects to students in my college,” he said.

With Myanmar still recovering from religious conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims that characterised the events leading up to the country’s 2015 general

**Dr. Ashin Vicittasara**

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Religious affiliation	Buddhism
Professional background	Public Speaker, Writer and Prominent Young Religious Leader

Photographs by Tay Zar

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