

HEROES *of* DIALOGUE



H E R O E S
of
D I A L O G U E

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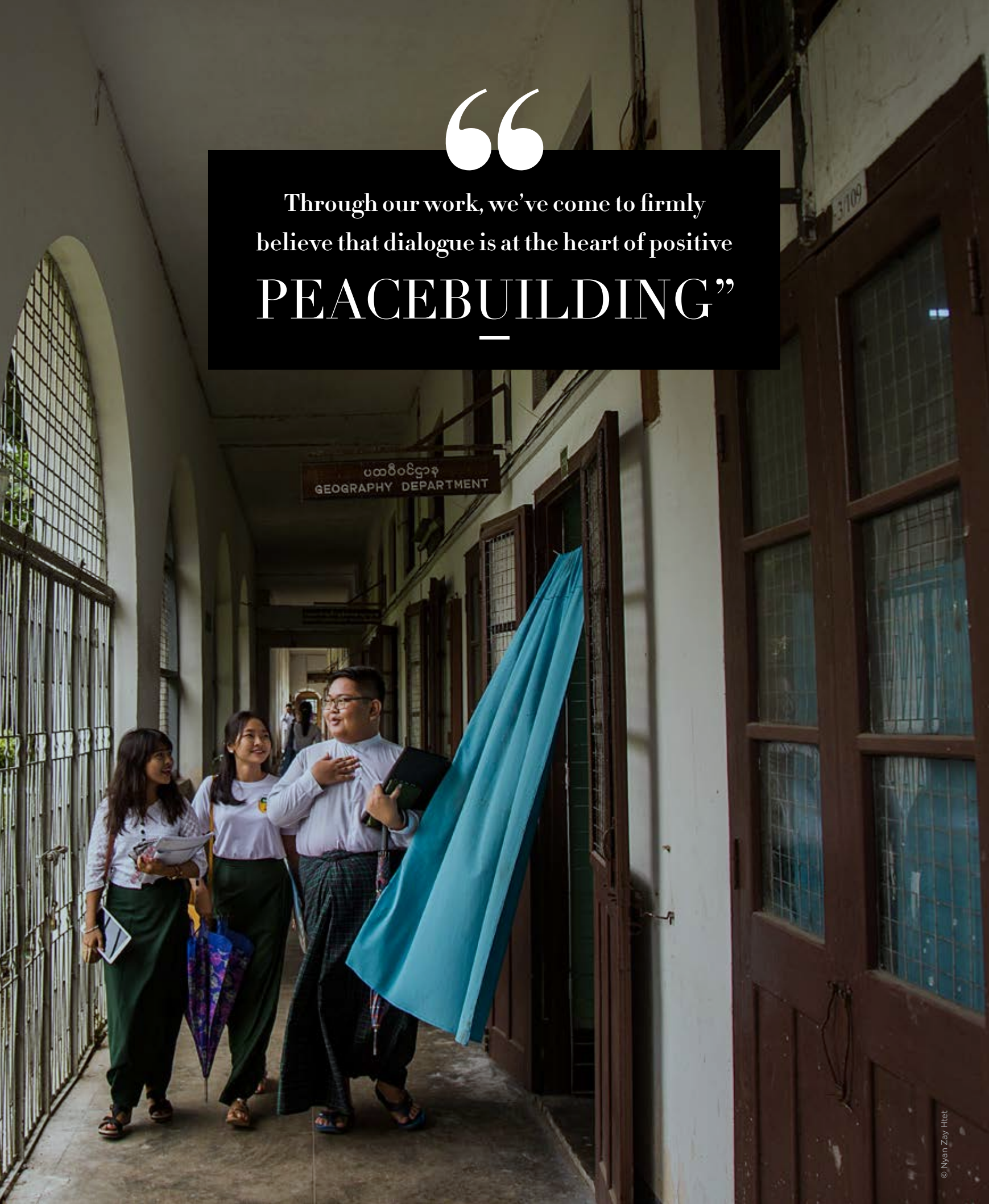
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Through our work, we've come to firmly believe that dialogue is at the heart of positive
PEACEBUILDING”



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At KAICIID, we talk a lot about what it means to foster peace. Is it laying down weapons and signing treaties? Is it a pastor and an imam sitting down together to enjoy one another's company over a cup of coffee? Is it welcoming the foreigner or the refugee in our midst?

Through our work, we've come to firmly believe that dialogue is at the heart of positive peacebuilding. Its processes are in all phases, from prevention of conflicts, to peacemaking and post-conflict rebuilding.

Its positive, transformative power takes place in acts both large and small.

This publication spotlights the everyday dialogue heroes among us - individual agents of hope and change who have committed themselves to fostering peaceful coexistence in the world around them.



Faisal bin Muaammar
KAICIID Secretary General

We received hundreds of nominations for "Heroes of Dialogue" from our partners and friends, through social media and word of mouth. We were delighted by the difficulty in choosing the final candidates and encouraged that there are so many people who have devoted their lives to making a difference.

The final heroes selected for this book are young men and women of inspirational leadership who are dedicated to building safe, inclusive communities through interreligious dialogue and cooperation. They represent six religions - Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism - and fourteen countries. Their backgrounds are diverse and the impact of their efforts is far reaching.

Through their stories, we see that there truly is no contribution to peace which is too small or too insignificant. Whether each of us reaches out to "the Other" by showing kindness, leading a community-wide movement, or helping to heal the wounds of deep conflict, we help promote a culture of peace and inclusivity.

We hope these stories inspire and encourage you to become an advocate for peace in your own community.



HEROES
of
DIALOGUE



LVIV,
Ukraine

Taras Dzyubanskyy: DARING TO TRUST

When Taras Dzyubanskyy founded the Libertas Centre for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue in Lviv in May 2013, Ukraine was at relative peace. Less than a year later, violent protests had toppled the government as a result of Russian claims to the Crimean Peninsula.

“Originally, I just wanted Ukraine’s different religious communities to get to know each other, but when you’re at war, that’s not enough. Working together for peaceful ends is now our main focus,” Dzyubanskyy said of Libertas’s evolving mission.

More than 3,000 Muslim Tatars displaced from Crimea soon found refuge in Lviv, a majority Catholic and overwhelmingly Christian city in western Ukraine that until then was home to few Muslims. When these new arrivals asked for help establishing a Muslim prayer house, Libertas organized a roundtable meeting for religious and community leaders to discuss.

“It was interesting to see that a lot of the Christian leaders wanted to give them permission to build a mosque. They remember the communist times when Christians could not have churches or prayer houses in Ukraine and said, ‘Now these people need help, why not give it to them?’, so we did,” Taras said.

Lviv’s Islamic Cultural Center was inaugurated in 2015. Nearly 200 people, including Taras and other representatives from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Protestant denominations, stood in solidarity as the building opened its doors on the same street as several Christian houses of worship.

The Libertas Centre has continued to assist displaced Crimeans find housing and job opportunities and adjust to life in Lviv. In his role as religious issues adviser to the mayor, Taras recently helped designate a cemetery space where Muslims can perform their own burial rituals. Such efforts have encouraged Lviv natives and new arrivals to interact and find common ground.



At a recent conference on migration, a Christian bishop asked a Muslim imam to say a prayer and a blessing. “The imam said his blessing in Arabic. That was revolutionary for the people there,” Taras said. “They thought, ‘if the bishop is accepting this blessing from an imam, why should we not accept it?’”

Libertas’s work extends far beyond resettlement. Since its inauguration in 2013, the Centre for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue has hosted more than 40 ecumenical and interreligious events including conferences, seminars, lectures, and social projects involving more than 5,000 members and leaders of different faiths in Lviv and around Ukraine. Taras says Libertas is Ukraine’s first neutral platform for interfaith work and a long overdue addition to the interreligious dialogue landscape.

“Before starting the centre, I noticed that when one religious community would organize an event, members of the other faiths wouldn’t come. By establishing Libertas as a neutral platform that does not represent one particular religion, it gives us more freedom to navigate topics that are difficult for religious communities to explore, including corruption, fake news, gender, and LGBT rights,” he said.

Taras belongs to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and teaches theology of interfaith dialogue at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. He was born and grew up in Lviv but attended a rural school outside the city.

“My interest in religion was born out in the countryside,” Taras said. “At that time, Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union, but in the villages, religion played an important role in people’s lives. The country was communist and religion was underground, but a lot of people still went to churches.”

Taras set his mind on joining a seminary in his teens and eventually earned a Ph.D. in theology and interreligious dialogue from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (the Angelicum) in Rome.

“My commitment to interreligious dialogue started the first time I heard a rabbi speak at my university,” he said.



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“St. Thomas Aquinas was very conservative, but I went to a conference where a rabbi was speaking about the Jewish roots of Christianity. Suddenly, it struck me. Jesus was a Jew, Mary was Jewish, the apostles were Jewish, so I realized I needed to study the Bible from the Jewish point of view, not just from the Catholic perspective. Listening to this rabbi was an illumination, a revelation.”

Putting these interreligious dialogue studies into practice has become Taras’s life mission and a particular challenge in Ukraine.

That goal has become more difficult to achieve as information wars have raged on social media – particularly in regards to Ukrainian politics. The Libertas Centre has addressed the volatile situation head on through its School of Interreligious Journalism, which trains journalists to promote dialogue and combat propaganda. The project received an Intercultural Achievement Award in 2018 from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs.

Similarly, much of Libertas’ work in recent months has addressed conflict and unrest, working to heal communities which have been affected by violence. Recently the organization reached out to Orthodox and Catholic children who lost their fathers in eastern Ukraine’s armed conflict.

“We brought together a group of about 30 children and their mothers at a Ukrainian Orthodox monastery and brought psychologists, social workers, and spiritual leaders to talk about the loss of their fathers and husbands,” Taras said.

“Ukrainians usually don’t want to talk about their problems in public, but when we had these widows come talk about their loss with a psychologist, their eyes welled with tears. They thanked us for doing this work, for bringing them together and for bringing religious leaders to talk to them in this difficult time.”

The Libertas Centre’s commitment to interconfessional and interreligious dialogue has been deeply instrumental in a time when tensions are high and divisions over politics run deep.

“There is so much distrust among people here after communism. When I organize these interfaith meetings, people wonder about my intentions. Breaking this pattern of mistrust and building trust within the people is something I’m working hard to implement here.”

“Originally, I just wanted Ukraine’s different religious communities to get to know each other, but when you’re at war, that’s not enough. Working together for peaceful ends is now our main focus”

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AMSTERDAM,
Netherlands

Chantal Suissa-Runne:

“WHERE THERE IS
DARKNESS, YOU
CAN REVEAL THE
MOST LIGHT”

Chantal Suissa-Runne grew up in a Dutch village in the 1980s acutely aware of her minority status. “We were raised Jewish but were living in this vastly non-Jewish environment,” she said. “I learned early on how to live between two worlds that spoke different languages, which made me sensitive to the needs of other minorities.”

That sensitivity transformed Chantal into an interfaith activist at just 19-years-old, when she moved to a kibbutz in Israel.

“I was this blonde, blue-eyed Jewish girl sorting melons with Arab Muslim Bedouins in the hot Negev desert,” she remembers fondly. “I befriended them and decided to dive into their culture.”

When others in the kibbutz objected to her bringing a Bedouin colleague to their dining room, Chantal boycotted the kitchen and ate with her Arab friends on their caravan floor. They appreciated her solidarity and invited Chantal to a Muslim wedding in a remote desert village.

“It was this huge, crazy experience of love and kindness and hospitality. I was so intrigued by these people and inspired to learn more about the world,” she said.

Upon returning to the Netherlands, Chantal joined a Jewish youth organization that hosted interfaith events and exchanges with Muslim and Hindu groups. That led to an Interfaith Alliance job fighting prejudice and discrimination in Dutch classrooms, which later inspired her first large-scale social project Get to Know Your Neighbours.

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“In 2011 our synagogue in Amsterdam South experienced some anti-Semitic incidents involving students at a school next door. Rather than building a higher fence, we invited them into the synagogue to get to know us in a relaxed way,” Chantal said of the project’s humble origins.

Since that first encounter, Get to Know Your Neighbours has welcomed 13,000 students and teachers into synagogues in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Enschede, and Rotterdam.

The aim is to combat prejudice and anti-Semitism by facilitating person-to-person dialogue between young people from diverse backgrounds and local Jewish communities. Each 90-minute visit includes a synagogue tour and open discussion about Jewish customs and culture while also giving participants the chance to share their own heritage. These free-flowing conversations address stereotypes head-on, using humour to ease tensions.

“Humour is like oxygen when dealing with this serious stuff,” Chantal said. “It’s better to surface and dissect the anti-Semitic stereotypes we’ve all heard in a safe environment than to let them linger below the waterline. Many

students come reluctantly but then are so intrigued they don’t want to leave.”

Chantal remembers one girl who entered the synagogue saying she hated Jews. She went from being the most resistant to the most interested student of her group, apologising at the end for her earlier remarks and vowing to rethink how she envisions Jewish people. Another memorable moment came when a Muslim teacher hugged Chantal at the end of a visit, thanking her for opening the synagogue doors and her students’ minds.

As that teacher and Chantal both knew, local tensions between Jews and Muslims often peak when Israeli-Palestinian conflicts flare up in the Middle East. During one such conflict in 2012, Chantal got the idea for her next big project Mo & Moos, which is familiar shorthand for the prophets Mohammed and Moses.

“I was so fed up with debates and wanted to start something based on real connection, a deep programme built on friendship, trust, and leadership. I wanted to build a new generation of leaders,” Chantal said.

She crafted Mo & Moos as a long-term initiative that would bring together young Jewish and Muslim professionals to jointly fight anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Just when it came time to recruit participants, the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict broke out. Other members of the Mayor of Amsterdam’s Muslim-Jewish Dialogue Group worried Mo and Moos would be a liability, but Chantal spotted an opportunity.

“The people who want to cooperate when times are toughest are the keepers,” she said. “For Mo & Moos, it was a blessing in disguise.”

The intensive 18-month programme Chantal developed brought together eight Muslims and eight Jews from a wide range of backgrounds and with diverse relationships to their faiths. These university students, business professionals, journalists, teachers, and representatives of political and civil society groups learned dialogue skills and discussed hot topics including freedom of speech, religious diversity, and Middle East politics.



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“Everyone is complaining that polarisation and populism are on the rise, which is true, but I built my best project when there were wars and mistrust”

Beyond the classroom, participants came together for Shabbat dinners and the Muslim call to prayer, sang songs in Hebrew and Arabic, and celebrated each other’s festivals and holidays.

“I knew my mission in the friendship department succeeded when one of the fiercest pro-Palestinian activists who had never talked to a Jew before Mo & Moos and one of the Jewish participants from an Orthodox background called me to say they were going on vacation together,” Chantal said.

The two now serve respectively as board chair and secretary of Mo & Moos, which, due to its success, has been turned into an independent foundation. Today, the organization builds on Chantal’s vision by hosting workshops, school lectures, and events that promote inclusivity and fight discrimination. Recently members teamed up in Jewish-Muslim pairs to welcome Syrian refugees to the Netherlands.

“Everyone is complaining that polarisation and populism are on the rise, which is true, but I built my best project when there were wars and mistrust,” Chantal said. “This is an opportunity. Where there is darkness, you can reveal the most light.”



PLATEAU STATE,
Nigeria

Justina Mike Ngwobia:

OUR VOICES MUST BE HEARD

Plateau State, which bills itself as Nigeria's "home of peace and tourism," has been marred by violence since 2001 when tensions erupted over resource scarcity.

"It was a disaster. More than 2,000 people were killed, their houses burned, churches and mosques destroyed. The capital Jos became polarised with Christians and Muslims moving to different areas," Justina Mike Ngwobia said of the factional divisions that still permeate her homeland.

Justina is a KAICIID International Fellow and executive director of the Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Movement, an interreligious organization based in Jos that works across faith, culture and tribal lines to resolve conflict. Her passion for interreligious and intercultural dialogue emerged when she moved from a predominantly Christian part of Eastern Nigeria to Jos, which is home to a significant Muslim population.

"I discovered the crisis was largely the result of political

manipulation: people were using different religious groups for their own selfish gain, leading to violent conflicts. My motivation grew when I visited people in rural communities and saw how they were suffering and struggling to survive," she said.

In 2016, to help heal the wounds of ongoing conflict and prevent further outbreaks, Justina paired together more than 30 Christian and Muslim women from six communities in Jos North for dialogue on peace and security issues in the region.

This initial three-day workshop focused on building women's confidence and capacity in peacebuilding, decision-making, dialogue, and conflict analysis. At the end of the training, participants committed to becoming active peace actors and ambassadors in their communities and to promoting interfaith cooperation, understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect. By bringing Christian and Muslim women into each other's lives and homes, Justina's Women Peacebuilders Network has helped dissolve lingering resentment.





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“Most of the women had never entered the others’ neighbourhoods since the 2001 crisis. Now Muslim and Christian women are inviting each other into their communities, going across town and going to the others’ area. They have started visiting Muslim and Christian traditional leaders. They have a voice now and are saying they are tired of this crisis. They want to learn to live together as one people,” Justina said.

Since 2016, the Women Peacebuilders Network has expanded to 10 communities in and around Jos. More than 65 women, ranging in age from 18 to 50, have participated in small intimate dialogue sessions and empowered their neighbours to do the same.

One participant said the network has given her the confidence to contribute more meaningfully to society while others say it has empowered them to stand up and work towards positive change.

“If women are trained and have the capacity to take care of their families and instil good values in their children, those children will grow up to be responsible and won’t

become perpetrators of violence,” Justina said. “Women are natural peacebuilders. When you build up a woman they will be able to build a better family and that will translate into a better society.”

Justina is now working with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) to increase women’s involvement in government and decision-making processes in Nigeria and expand her Women Peacebuilders Network to neighbouring states and regions most affected by Boko Haram.

“The Boko Haram incidents have rocked parts of Northeastern Nigeria and have led to the displacement of millions of people in these communities and the loss of life and livelihoods. Muslims and Christians have been killed, abducted and displaced. We need to address this crisis through dialogue if we’re going to find peace again,” Justina said.

In Plateau State, conflicts between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers have also escalated in recent years, leading to increased violence, internally displaced persons, and online hate speech.

“People go to social media and say all kinds of things against other communities or political parties or just one another. This has become religiously tinged with Christians spreading hate against Muslims and Muslims against Christians,” Justina said. “The women we train are adding their voices to this conversation, telling people to dialogue instead of resorting to violence. It’s making an impact. These women have helped calm tensions in areas where violence could have been intense.”

In 2019, the Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Movement will open its Peace Orientation and Conference Centre in Jos. The centre’s day-long and week-long trainings will primarily target women and address conflict resolution and transformation, interreligious and ecumenical learning, democracy education, human rights, and gender sensitisation. The centre aims to create platforms where women and other community members can dialogue together in search of lasting and sustainable peace for Northern Nigeria.

“Women in Nigeria have always been relegated to the background, but we cannot be separated from this process. We are integral to peacebuilding, and our voices must

be heard,” Justina said of her hopes for the new centre. As the Women Peacebuilders Network continues to grow, its members’ calls for interreligious and intercultural dialogue as alternatives to violent conflict are louder than ever.

“If women are trained and have the capacity to take care of their families and instil good values in their children, those children will grow up to be responsible and won’t become perpetrators of violence”

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“ Women are natural peacebuilders. When you build up a woman they will be able to build a better family and that will translate into a better **SOCIETY**”



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WISCONSIN,
United States

**Arno Michaelis and
Pardeep Singh Kaleka:**

“FORGIVENESS IS THE ULTIMATE FORM OF POWER”

Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Singh Kaleka met under horrific circumstances.

In August 2012, a gunman murdered Pardeep’s father and five other worshippers during Sunday morning services at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin near Milwaukee. The shooter, who killed himself after the attack, belonged to a white supremacist group Arno helped form in the late 1980s.

Arno and Pardeep became unlikely friends and collaborators in the months that followed, an incredible story of resilience and transformative forgiveness.

The two men were born on opposite sides of the world. Though they both grew up in Greater Milwaukee, their early lives ran perpendicular. Arno was raised in a nice neighbourhood, but his childhood was far from perfect. Hurt by family troubles, he began lashing out.

“I went from bullying kids on the bus to starting fights at school to beating people up. By 16 I was a full-blown alcoholic. White power skinhead music introduced me to the ideology of hate, and some friends and I started our own hate-metal band, which helped grow our gang the Hammerskins into the largest white supremacist skinhead group on Earth.”

Several kilometres away, Pardeep and his younger brother were just trying to fit in. His family had left their farm in India when Pardeep was six and moved to Wisconsin in search of a better life. He remembers the transition as a steep learning curve and a constant struggle for stability.

“We went through a lot of assimilation,” Pardeep said. “I remember my father cutting our hair, an important religious symbol for Sikhs, after kids teased us about how long it was. It hurt him to have to do this because he saw

it as losing part of our identity and spirituality.”

As Pardeep perfected his American accent and baseball swings, Arno increasingly isolated himself from mainstream society. He dropped out of school at 16, wrote songs about exterminating racial, religious, and sexual minorities, and wore swastikas to work.

“The owner of the T-shirt company where I worked was Jewish. He not only let me keep my job but hired my skin-head buddies too. It was hard to maintain our anti-Semitic tropes when the only Jewish person we saw regularly treated us so kindly,” Arno said.

Similar kindness from black, Latinx, and gay colleagues started chipping away at Arno’s hate.

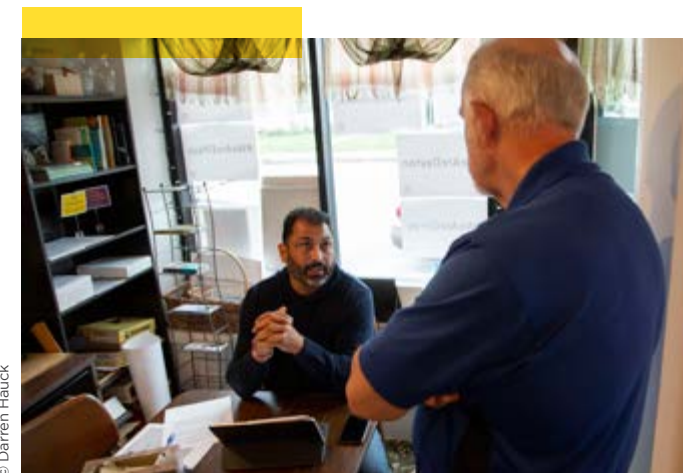
“The big factor that led me to leave the gang was exhaustion,” he said. “I knew it was wrong to hate and attack people because of the colour of their skin and I was constantly expending energy to deny that. These people I claimed to hate treated me with compassion I didn’t deserve. Nothing drove home the wrongness of my actions more than that.”

In 1994 his daughter was born and a second Hammer-skins friend was murdered. He left the gang and never looked back.

Arno later wrote a memoir and started an online magazine called Life After Hate that featured articles about compassion from contributors all over the world. That’s where he was when Pardeep reached out after the Sikh Temple shooting in 2012. Strangers at the time, the two men met for dinner.

“I was trying to understand the shooter’s motivations,” Pardeep said of his decision to contact Arno. “We came to the conclusion that hurt people hurt people, and that pain that is not transformed is transferred. More important than the shooter’s motivations was our response. If hate begets more hate, the cycle of misery continues and often escalates, so we needed to figure out how to respond to prevent another shooting.”

“In that first meeting, Pardeep and I spoke for four hours and realised we had so much in common despite our different backgrounds,” Arno remembered. “My vision for



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Life After Hate was about bridging cultures and bringing people together. By the time we finished dinner, we knew we would be working together.”

Pardeep and others who lost loved ones at the Sikh Temple had been brainstorming ways to reduce hate-based violence. When Pardeep invited Arno to speak with him at a local high school, Serve 2 Unite was born.

“Individually our stories are strong, but together they transcend the atrocity that happened and deliver a message that the human spirit is resilient, and that forgiveness is the ultimate form of power,” Pardeep said.

Serve 2 Unite uses dialogue, solutions-based problem solving, service learning, and artistic expression to help young people establish a healthy sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. Their school programmes address gun violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and religious intolerance, helping divert youth from violent extremist ideologies, bullying, substance abuse, and other forms of harm.

Since that first high school assembly in 2013, Serve 2 Unite has reached more than 10,000 students at more than 40 schools in Southeast Wisconsin and engaged with thousands of other young people across the U.S.

Akaya sticks out in Arno’s mind as one student Serve 2 Unite’s work helped transform.

“She was the holy terror of her school, but after hearing

our stories, Akaya went to her teacher and said, ‘I won’t start fights anymore. I’ll stop them from happening by getting people to talk,’” Arno recalled.

She followed through on that promise, organizing weekly summer block parties for children in Milwaukee’s heavily segregated inner city and eventually getting an internship at a local organization that works to build safe and empowered neighbourhoods.

In 2018, Arno and Pardeep co-authored a book called The Gift of Our Wounds documenting their journey together and current work with Serve 2 Unite.

“We think we can escape our past because time has passed, but sometimes time does not heal wounds, it makes them worse,” Pardeep said of the title. “Arno promised me the day we met he would do what he could to cleanse the wounds of our past. The book explores how we atone so that we can heal properly moving forward.”

A shooter’s fear, ignorance, and hatred brought Arno and Pardeep together for the first time in 2012. What binds them now is a shared commitment to transform these evils into courage, wisdom, and love.

“Individually our stories are strong, but together they transcend the atrocity that happened and deliver a message that the human spirit is resilient, and that forgiveness is the ultimate form of power”

© Darren Hauck





AMMAN,
Jordan

Hiba Ibrahim:

YALLA TALK! EMBRACING CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Hiba Ibrahim's passion for intercultural dialogue started as a nightly monologue to herself.

"My family doesn't speak much English, so I used to practice by talking to my pillow at night. One time, my father passed by my bedroom, heard me speaking a foreign tongue, and entered to ask who else was there. 'Just me,' I said, encouraging him to look around. I think he was concerned," Hiba recalled with a laugh.

These solo late-night language sessions paid off when a few Arab American and European students joined her high school in Amman. Conversing in a mixture of Arabic and English, Hiba's language skills steadily increased, as did her curiosity about different cultures.

"I began thinking of language not just as a functional tool to get things done but as a way to interact with people and to learn more about our cultures. Too often we limit our idea of culture to food, festivals, and fashion, but

culture is how we think in different ways. Learning about culture through language can help us better understand our place in the world."

This philosophy inspired Hiba and a group of friends to start Yalla Talk in 2006. For nearly a decade, Yalla Talk promoted face-to-face intercultural dialogue and language partnerships between young Jordanians and foreign college students, professionals, and artists who were eager to learn more about the Arab world and Islamic culture.

By conversing across language barriers and cultural divides, participants learned about one another's lives and discovered new aspects of their own identities.

"It was eye opening to talk with Christian and Jewish colleagues about their faiths, and our foreign participants were able to ask us about personal experiences around wearing the hijab and practicing Islam. I'm proud of how we created a safe environment with no boundaries and no red lines."

© Nick Kozak



Maintaining such an environment created obvious challenges, but also opportunities for growth.

“Sometimes conflicts or clashes arise because ideas are lost in translation. That’s where language and dialogue facilitation skills come in. Sometimes we just need to help people clarify or rephrase their thoughts because what they are trying to say is not clear or their facial expressions or body language doesn’t match another culture’s.”

Between its group dialogue sessions and language partnerships, Yalla Talk worked with more than 300 participants from around the world. Hiba says the impact is still ongoing.

“Yalla Talk exposed me to cultural perspectives, tolerance, and mutual understanding at an early age and enriched my skills as a facilitator”

“An American history teacher emailed to say that Yalla Talk had given him a fresh perspective after seeing and experiencing and being part of conversations with hijabi women in Jordan. That was really inspiring to hear.”

One such woman, a Yalla Talk participant from a conservative region in southern Jordan, experienced her own transformation through the programme.

“It’s harder for women to be out and active in that community,” Hiba said of the woman’s hometown. “She was really shy and reluctant to share her perspective and culture at first. Then one day she started speaking more positively about aspects of her community, and over time we saw her become more outgoing and confident. It’s inspiring to

see how Yalla Talk helped participants like her reflect on their own identities and cultures.”

Yalla Talk no longer organizes regular dialogue sessions or language partnerships, but Hiba has incorporated many lessons from the programme into subsequent work as a dialogue facilitator with the online cross-cultural exchange platform Soliya and as a programme coordinator with Global Nomads Group, which fosters dialogue and mutual understanding between students in the Middle East and the United States.

These roles helped inspire Hiba to complete a master’s degree in education, allowing her to delve deeper into some of the theoretical underpinnings of her intercultural exchange work. As part of her studies, Hiba started an after-school programme for ninth-grade girls in Amman to see whether adding components of intercultural communicative competence to their English curriculum might enhance their enthusiasm to learn the language. It did.

“We focused on mutual understanding and identity, and the girls were motivated to learn about themselves as Jordanians and Muslims,” she said. “It’s really important for kids to master some facilitation and dialogue skills in their own language to better understand who they are and to have a base to build on when they enter those conversations in a foreign language.”



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Hiba did just that in 2013 when she moved to the United States to teach Arabic as a Fulbright Scholar at Baldwin Wallace University in Ohio. There she collaborated across departments and spoke on panel discussions at churches, movie festivals, and other universities about women in the Middle East, religion, and Islamophobia.

“I tried to do all I could. I read a storybook to third-graders called The Sandwich Swap, which was written by Jordan’s Queen Rania. The story addresses issues of cultural difference. Through the book and activities, we talked about cultural identity and how people come from different backgrounds and how we should celebrate their differences,” she said. “Although the Americans I met were not very experienced with Islam, they were very friendly and welcoming, and I enjoyed being part of their community.”

That year in the United States solidified Hiba’s commitment to pursuing an academic career in intercultural learning. She is now working on a PhD in Applied Linguistics at York University in Toronto.

After finishing her doctorate, Hiba plans to return to Amman to develop intercultural communicative com-

petence tools that can be integrated into teaching curriculum in Jordan and beyond. She also wants to start a student-led podcast in English and Arabic that would allow young people to reflect on intercultural issues and celebrate their own diversity.

“Traveling and studying abroad are very important for cultural exchange, but new technology gives policymakers, learners, and educators a lot of effective alternatives. I’d like to contribute to this new field of intercultural communication and learning,” she said.

Although Yalla Talk no longer hosts regular dialogue sessions, its legacy lives on through former participants and in Hiba’s work.

“Yalla Talk exposed me to cultural perspectives, tolerance, and mutual understanding at an early age and enriched my skills as a facilitator. It helped me become more introspective, open-minded and curious about how people connect with each other. It made me celebrate being a Jordanian Muslim woman -- all key parts of my identity -- and appreciate intercultural dialogue as an opportunity to learn not just about other people but also about ourselves,” she said.



DELHI,
India

Mridul Upadhyay:

COMPASSION WITHOUT BORDERS

Born into a Hindu Brahman family and raised in a small village in North India, Mridul Upadhyay's first meaningful connection with Muslims came in 2008 when he enrolled at the central university Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi.

"I was 17 and went from having no Muslim friends to living in a hostel with mostly Muslim students and attending a university where nearly all of the teachers were Muslim. That was the first time I started learning about other religions and the power of interfaith dialogue," he said.

Mridul's curiosity prompted him to explore the Quran and to fast during Ramadan. Long-held prejudices dissipated as he learned about his new friends' faith. Little by little, his personal experience became a lifelong mission to promote peace and coexistence.

Mridul co-founded Youth for Peace International (YfPI) in 2015. This network of young peacebuilders uses research, advocacy, capacity building, and direct action to address religious and cultural intolerance, online hate speech, and

intractable tensions between India and Pakistan, among other structural issues that stir conflict and prevent peace in and around the region.

Through their capacity building programmes, the organization has trained nearly 100 youth trainers from 14 countries on conflict transformation and the prevention of violent extremism.

Additionally, YfPI's flagship community outreach programme provides humanitarian support to a community of 250 Rohingya Muslims who fled persecution in Myanmar and settled in Delhi in 2012.

"We wanted to work with and support this vulnerable community because they don't get much support," Mridul said. "So far we have led clothes donation drives for them, organized community clean-up and engagement projects, reached out to corporations and philanthropists to donate food and study materials, and taught children 'Play for Peace' methodologies to facilitate trauma healing."

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Through their capacity building programmes, the organization has trained nearly 100 youth trainers from 14 countries on conflict transformation and the prevention of violent extremism.

The reaction to their work has been widely positive, especially among the Rohingya community.

“They really trust us,” Mridul said. “We are young people working without many resources and with many limitations, but we have engaged with them on a very personal level. We come, sit with their children, listen to them, lead trauma healing sessions, whatever is necessary. That has helped us establish credibility in the community. Whenever they face problems, they call us. They trust us to help.”

Similarly, much of YfPI’s work focuses on advocacy, particularly for those in vulnerable situations, and preventing rumour-spreading and incitement to violence.

In 2018, false reports circulated that Mridul’s alma mater was teaching anti-Indian ideologies. Mridul and other Hindu alumni knew from their own experiences that these accusations were untrue, so they teamed up to provide an alternative perspective and set the record straight.

“We created an online campaign to defend the university and its teachers, publishing articles and personal narratives about how we as Hindus had studied there and had always felt safe and welcome, and how we had never seen any dangerous or anti-nationalist teaching occur,” Mridul said.

With nearly 10,000 Facebook followers on YfPI’s official page and a team of 30 staff and fellows, their positive



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message spread quickly, helping to combat the false and damaging rumours.

YfPI also works to dismantle false narratives which are meant to divide Hindus and Muslims and stoke violent tensions with neighbouring Pakistan.

“These kinds of narratives have created fear, Mridul said. A lot of Muslims now say they don’t feel safe in public spaces,” Mridul said. “The origins of these conflicts and of hate often lie in bias and ignorance. Religious intolerance incites and exacerbates extremist violence, so it’s important for us to facilitate dialogue using faith-based belief systems to bring these diverse communities together.”

In 2016 and 2017, YfPI ran an online dialogue and exposure campaign called “Guftagu” (Urdu for “Conversation”) encouraging Pakistanis and North Indians to share photos

and memories of local foods, clothes, festivals, music, poetry, and other cultural staples.

“North India and Pakistan share a similar culture -- there are a lot of commonalities. We wanted to emphasise that just because the two countries are divided by religion does not mean that there should be hatred between them,” Mridul said.

YfPI is planning another campaign called “Sarhad Ke Paar” (Urdu and Hindi for “Across Borders”) that will encourage young Indians and Pakistanis who have visited each other’s countries to discuss prejudices they held before their trips and how their experiences across the border changed their perspectives in positive ways.

YfPI is now creating a values-based curriculum for government schools that will emphasise the benefits or inter-religious and intercultural dialogue in promoting respect, compassion, trust, gratitude, love, and empathy. Mridul hopes this work will lead to more cross-cultural and cross-border exchanges before students reach university, helping to promote peace and coexistence.

“I want to bring these communities together. I want India and Pakistan to come together as West and East Germany did,” he said. If that’s not possible, at least we can all have a little more tolerance for one another, and maybe even compassion.”

I want to bring these communities together. I want India and Pakistan to come together as West and East Germany did



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BUDAPEST,
Hungary

Tamas Horn:

THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE

The idea for Adománytaxi Alapítvány (Charity Taxi Foundation) struck Tamas Horn when the European migrant crisis peaked in 2015. All around him, ordinary Hungarians were opening their hearts and their homes to help asylum seekers. If they could rally to support this temporary influx of migrants, Tamas thought, why not maintain that momentum to help Hungarians living in persistent poverty?

"During the refugee crisis, we saw how much surplus people had in their homes because they didn't know what to do with it or didn't trust existing organizations to put it to good use. So I thought, why don't we go directly to people's homes to pick it up? I posted the idea on Facebook, and that's how we started," Tamas said.

Four years later, Charity Taxi has collected unwanted goods from nearly 800 homes in Budapest and, with the

help of 400 volunteers, distributed these resources to more than 40 villages around Hungary. Despite its name, Charity Taxi does more than just distribute donations. The organization's unique volunteer model creates dialogue and social action opportunities, connecting urban and rural people from different backgrounds.

"Our main goal is to build bridges," Tamas said. "Participants enjoy volunteering but also gain insight into village life. Meeting with local partners and families gives us the opportunity to discuss pressing issues and to counteract harmful stereotypes. All this work contributes to a more collaborative and understanding society, a more sustainable environment, and helps reduce social inequalities."

Most of the villages Charity Taxi works with are predominantly Roma, a community that is often vilified and discriminated against in Hungary and much of Europe.



“We target people living in extreme poverty, in segregated villages, in settlements without real access to education, health care, and other basic services,” Tamas said. “Volunteers are usually surprised by the lack of opportunities and how the villagers live. Sometimes they can only afford to heat one room in the winter, so five or six people will all sleep together on cold nights. It’s an important reality check for our volunteers.”

To help the villagers’ money go further, Charity Taxi organizes monthly village markets where donated goods are sold at nominal prices. More than 8,000 people have visited more than 45 of these markets to-date.

“Giving items a symbolic price, like 20 cents each, gives people pride that they are able to buy it, that they don’t need everything for free,” Tamas said. “We give that money to a local NGO to spend on educational activities for the children or community programs like planting trees. This allows villagers in need to support and invest in their community.”

After the market, volunteers play with local children, have lunch with community leaders who help coordinate the day, and visit a few families in their homes.

“The family visits are the most sensitive and interesting part of each trip,” Tamas said. “Sharing personal stories is the best way to break down stereotypes and make the volunteers step out of their Budapest bubble. We go there to chat and learn about each other’s lives and the challenges we all face.”

Beyond just collecting donations in Budapest, Charity Taxi also organizes auctions in the capital to help cover its operational costs and donates clothes to the city’s urban poor.

“People in Budapest like us because we are transparent and they know their unwanted stuff is going to a good place. We go to their doorsteps and help them get rid of it for free,” Tamas said. “The auctions mean people can buy trendy things for a very friendly price and support our work. So it’s a win-win situation. We make it easier for people to be socially active.”

One of Charity Taxi’s most enthusiastic volunteers is Tamas’s father András. He says the opportunity to volunteer with his son’s organization has allowed him to meet people from across the country. András describes volunteering not as work but as a source of joy and opportunity.



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Pamela Kalas, a local partner and community leader in one of the participating villages, says Charity Taxi is the only organization that provides “real help without using us for something.”

“There are many charity programmes that use the Roma for various reasons,” Tamas said. “No one trusts anyone in Hungary. It’s very heartwarming when people acknowledge and trust our work and are truly grateful.”

Tamas started working with Hungary’s Roma community a decade ago, first at a music centre for Roma children and then surveying villagers about their lives as part of his academic research. These experiences helped him build bridges in the community and ultimately influenced his idea to start Charity Taxi.

While most of the Roma who benefit from Charity Taxi’s donations are Christian, Tamas and many of the organization’s volunteers identify as culturally Jewish but not necessarily religious. Charity Taxi operates out of Budapest’s Mozaic Jewish Community Hub, which provided Tamas with free NGO management training and mentoring to help launch the initiative.

“I have a personal mission to mobilise the Jewish community,” Tamas said, mentioning several organizations who share the Mozaic coworking space. “We have many Jewish NGOs here, but many operate in a Jewish bubble, and

I want them to go see the real Hungary and what social responsibility looks like more broadly.”

In the coming years, Tamas plans to greatly expand Charity Taxi’s reach and scope. With its warehouse of donated goods currently filled to capacity, there is no choice but to grow, making more deliveries so more clothes can come in. Tamas is also working to train and develop local leaders in the villages.

“Nothing will change from charity. You have to empower people and give them knowledge,” he said. “I want to encourage more people to be socially responsible and to volunteer as a way to have real dialogue with people they likely would not otherwise encounter.”

Charity Taxi changed my life. It gave me work and gave me a mission to empower and impact other people. Now I want to change this country”

Tamas can’t imagine wanting to leave Charity Taxi but says he may eventually step down to pursue other opportunities in civil society or politics when he feels the organization has reached a sustainable place.

“Charity Taxi changed my life. It gave me work and gave me a mission to empower and impact other people. Now I want to change this country,” Tamas said. “I believe that if we open up people’s eyes and make them active, we will have real dialogue and the whole system can change.”

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“ Our main goal is to build
BRIDGES ”
—



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MADRID,
Spain

Victoria Martin de la Torre:

THE OPEN DOOR

More than 200 neighbours gathered to break the Ramadan fast at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Villanueva del Pardillo, a small town on the outskirts of Madrid, in June 2017. For many locals in attendance, it was their first time entering a mosque.

The evening, which featured a tour of the centre, an interfaith panel, and an al fresco Ramadan feast, was part of Foro Abraham's Open Doors initiative, which aims to strengthen relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in and around Madrid.

"Non-Muslim neighbours don't really know what's happening in mosques, and what they read about Islam in the news is often negative, so every year we organize this event around Ramadan and ask a local mosque to welcome their neighbours and explain what they are

celebrating," Victoria Martin de la Torre, co-founder and chair of Foro Abraham, said of the annual event. "From then on, the communities know each other, so if there is ever a misunderstanding, people know who to contact and how to keep in touch."

Victoria co-founded Foro Abraham (the Abraham Forum for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) in 2009 to combat stereotypes and enrich cultural exchange and knowledge among people of different religious beliefs in Spain and beyond.

The idea for this non-profit organization emerged during a 2008 conference Victoria attended on whether religions contribute more to peace or conflict in society. Her fellow panellists agreed that religion can and should enhance peace, but that civil society needs to help build bridges when tensions arise.

"I could see the Muslim participant and the priest really enjoyed speaking with each other, and so many misconceptions came up, so when we went back to Madrid, I proposed that we create a permanent space of dialogue where we could learn from each other," Victoria said. A local Jewish journalist joined the team, and Foro Abraham was born.

"Our work is really grassroots and not hierarchical," Victoria said. "Even though I am the chair, I'm also the one who takes notes. We're like a family, and we share the work. If one person takes the initiative for a project, we all bring support."

In its 10 years, Foro Abraham has organized educational and cultural activities -- including university conferences, open door events, and trainings for journalists who cover religious issues -- reaching and impacting thousands of people around Madrid and throughout Spain. They've also weighed in on interreligious and intercultural mishaps and misunderstandings, helping smooth tensions and foster cooperation and coexistence.

When a local newspaper incorrectly reported that a village outside Madrid removed Christian symbols from a public building because Muslims were offended, Victoria contacted the journalist to provide reliable sources. She also wrote a letter to local government officials, encouraging them to exercise sensitivity in their statements and ensure that reporting on interfaith issues is carried out in a professional, responsible way.

"This type of response has a stronger impact when our interfaith organization is speaking than it would coming from a single faith-based organization," Victoria said. "I am Catholic, but I feel as offended by this as my Muslim friend. If one of us has a problem, we all have a problem, because we're all in this together."

Foro Abraham once sent a letter to the Spanish airline Iberia when they noticed that every sandwich on one of the company's in-flight menus contained pork. "We asked them to consider that there might be Muslim or Jewish passengers onboard. They didn't answer, but they did change the menu," Victoria said.

Foro Abraham is not Victoria's first interfaith dialogue initiative. After studying journalism at Columbia University in New York, she and several international classmates started an interfaith blog called "Pashalam", a mix of the word "peace" in Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew.

"My perspective about religion completely changed in New York because my best friends were from all over the world. Two were Jewish and two were Muslim. I discovered a completely different aspect of religion and how it brings good things to people," Victoria said.

Like most Spaniards, Victoria grew up in a secular Roman Catholic family. She started exploring her own faith when she returned to Madrid in 2000 to work as a journalist for a weekly news magazine.

In 2006, while on a reporting assignment in Bethlehem, she spent one day each with a Christian, Jewish, and Muslim family. She used the experience to write a book about what the holy city means for each faith. Victoria continues to engage with journalists as a press officer for the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats at the European Parliament in Brussels, where she has lived since 2008.

In addition to this full-time job and her work with Foro Abraham, Victoria is completing a Ph.D. that explores cultural aspects of religion and intercultural dialogue.

"My thesis topic brings together my two passions, interfaith/intercultural dialogue and the European Union," Victoria said. "The EU's motto is 'united in diversity'. Some of its founding fathers were religious, some were not, but they were able to work together for the common good."

Foro Abraham is doing the same, fighting discrimination and ensuring dignity, respect and common spaces for people of all religions and beliefs.

"We live in a time of fragmentation and isolation. We

We live in a time of fragmentation and isolation. We need to build communities so people feel they can work together for the common good. That has to start at the local level, not with abstract imagined online communities but with getting to know your next-door neighbour"

need to build communities so people feel they can work together for the common good. That has to start at the local level, not with abstract imagined online communities but with getting to know your next-door neighbour," Victoria said. "This is the real challenge, not to organize events for open-minded people who already communicate, but to penetrate closed communities and help them change their perspectives without judging them," she said.

The Open Doors project has brought non-Muslims into five mosques around Madrid, demystifying Ramadan and inspiring a greater sense of community among former next-door strangers. For Victoria and Foro Abraham, opening these doors is only the beginning.



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YANGON,
Myanmar

Myo Htut:

THE FUTURE IS IN OUR HANDS

The Yangon University of Education, where Myo Htut is a fourth-year student, represents a microcosm of Myanmar's rich diversity.

"My university has Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds across the country. When we have heated discussions about our religions, I try to calm people down by saying we should all have the right to express our own beliefs," Myo Htut said of his experience there.

This peacekeeping intuition is sorely needed in Myanmar, where tensions between religious and ethnic minorities sometimes erupt in violence.

"Many people in Myanmar have negative views about Muslims, as we've seen with the Rohingya issue in Rakhine State. Through interreligious dialogue, I tell people that Muslims are just like everyone else and have the right to practice their own religion," he said. "It's important that we communicate with people who are different from us. I have Muslim

friends, and we have a good relationship because, despite our differences, we respect each other's identities."

Myo Htut is Mon -- a predominantly Buddhist ethnic minority group native to southern Myanmar -- and grew up in the seaport city of Mawlamyine in Mon State.

"In Mon State, you'll see a Buddhist pagoda next to a church, and within five minutes' walk there will be a mosque and a Hindu temple," he said of his homeland. Growing up surrounded by such diversity coupled with his experience as an ethnic minority in Yangon sparked Myo Htut's interest in using interreligious and intercultural dialogue to promote peace.

In July 2018 he participated in a KAICIID-Scouts Dialogue for Peace Facilitator Training in Naypyidaw with 60 participants from across the Asia-Pacific region. This workshop was a revelation for Myo Htut and inspired him to start youth dialogue projects at his university in Yangon and at home in Mon State.



"After the KAICIID training, I realised that younger people are often the most flexible, open-minded, and effective in dialogue. They can communicate across cultural, religious, and ethnic lines and help us stop fighting. If we want a peaceful situation, we need to empower the next generation, because the future is in their hands," Myo Htut said.

His first dialogue workshops included 15 to 16-year-olds from his university's English and debate clubs and even younger students from high schools in Mon State. In total, more than 60 youth from different religious and ethnic backgrounds gathered to learn dialogue tools and skills, which they later shared with peers. Myo Htut started each session by sharing his own dialogue experiences and perceptions about identities. The groups then examined critical differences between debate and dialogue and created their own dialogue spaces to discuss religion, gender, and ethnicity.

"One of the university participants said that at first, she didn't know what dialogue was for, but after attending my workshop, she realised that dialogue skills can be used to create safe spaces to express thoughts and differences, to address problems, and to find solutions in peaceful ways," Myo Htut said.

Leading these dialogue workshops has strengthened his confidence as a teacher and in everyday life.

Growing up surrounded by such diversity coupled with his experience as an ethnic minority in Yangon sparked Myo Htut's interest in using interreligious and intercultural dialogue to promote peace.



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"After the workshops, I believe in myself more and understand people better. Being different was an insecurity thing for me, a source of fear, but now I see it as a positive part of my identity," he said. "If we can be good to other people, we can be good to ourselves as well."

The dialogue sessions have also prompted Myo Htut to interrogate his own evolving relationship with religion, shifting his identity from Buddhist to atheist to now more of a spiritual seeker.

"As I learned more about Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, I realised that each religion contains positive elements. If we focus on these good things, we can live peacefully," he said. "My parents are Buddhist, but I choose to embrace all the religions and take what works for me. I believe that if I behave positively I will get positive results."

Myo Htut expects to finish his teaching degree in 2020 and move back to Mawlamyine to teach high school English, Chemistry or Biology. Whatever the subject, he plans to incorporate interreligious and intercultural dialogue activities into his curriculum. He also plans to expand the focus of future workshops to include sensitive topics beyond religion and ethnicity.

"In Myanmar, there is a lot of misunderstanding about gender and sexual identities. LGBT people are often rejected because people think their identities go against Buddhism, he said. "Too many people judge other people without considering alternative worldviews. To understand ourselves and live in peace, we need to understand other people and view things from their perspectives. Dialogue can help us do that."

Myo Htut also wants to talk about food, which he considers a perfect catalyst for intercultural dialogue. He plans to expand his cooking hobby and restaurant reviews into a full-blown food blog.

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"Food can be an important window into culture. In Myanmar, lahpet (fermented tea) is our signature food. Shan state has many unique dishes. If we want the best food, we have to travel to get it, and this gives us a chance to learn about different cultures and how people live," he said.

To understand ourselves and live in peace, we need to understand other people and view things from their perspectives. Dialogue can help us do that





“ As I learned more about Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, I realised that each religion contains positive elements. If we focus on these good things, we can live **PEACEFULLY**”



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RISHIKESH,
India

Nandini Tripathi:

OFF THE MAT

At 22, disenchanted with life in the United States and seeking to reconnect with her Indian roots, Nandini Tripathi embarked on a spiritual journey to picturesque Rishikesh where the Ganges River (Ganga) emerges pristine from the Himalayan Mountains.

Her visit to this world-famous yoga haven was supposed to be temporary, a way to reflect and reset before starting medical school or whatever obligation beckoned next, but Ganga had other plans.

"I felt a deep energetic connection with the river. It was more than just a flowing body of water. It felt like I had come home," Nandini said of her first moments along Ganga's banks.

She felt a similar connection to His Holiness Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, President of Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, and to his vision for protecting Ganga, a vital source of physical and spiritual sustenance

for hundreds of millions of Indians that gets heavily polluted downstream.

"His vision encompassed environmental, scientific, agricultural, cultural, and spiritual concerns, a vision that would help Ganga survive and remain a source of inspiration," Nandini remembers of her first interaction with Pujya Swami. "When he asked for help conserving Ganga, I immediately raised my hand. I thought it would be a few months' internship. I didn't anticipate a lifetime of service."

Nine years later, Nandini still lives at Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh where she serves as director of programme implementation, integration, and communication for the Global Interfaith Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) Alliance (GIWA) and as project coordinator for Ganga Action Parivar.

GIWA collaborates with spiritual leaders and civil society from around the world to improve standards of drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene, provide disaster relief ser-

vices, and promote river conservation and environmental preservation. Nandini works tirelessly bringing Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Muslim and Sikh communities together in dialogue to advance these goals.

"Religious leaders play a critical role in addressing seemingly intractable problems like access to safe water and sanitation. These things affect us all, so it's no surprise that interfaith dialogue and harmony has flowed from this work," she said.

We want to utilise faith as a medium to inspire people to make green pilgrimages and be more aware and conscious of their impact on these spaces

Among GIWA's biggest priorities in recent years have been to end open defecation and promote sanitary toilet use in India.

"When we started this work, it was unheard of to use faith platforms to talk about toilets. GIWA spreads the message that just like temples keep our thoughts clean, toilets keep our bodies clean," Nandini said. "The government made millions of toilets available in its Open Defecation Free (ODF) campaign, but people were not using them. Getting faith leaders to talk about these issues inspired sustainable behavioural change in ways that infrastructural provisions on their own never could."

GIWA's advocacy and education campaigns have been bold, but they've also been playful. At the recent Prayagraj Kumbh Mela, a pilgrimage and festival where up to 150

million Hindus gather to bathe in sacred waters, GIWA set up a toilet park and eco-friendly café where visitors could sit and drink tea atop decorative toilet seats.

"People would go to temples, take a holy dip, and then come take selfies and hang out at our toilet café," Nandini said. "It was a huge success. We lined the walls with different toilet technologies so people could see how to improve sanitation in their communities and be inspired to live more sustainably."

GIWA's Secretariat Parmarth Niketan Ashram is leading by example, using some of these technologies to treat and re-use their grey water for gardening and other daily needs.

"The most revered pilgrimage sites in the Himalayan state are located near us at Ganga's and her tributaries' origins. We want to utilise faith as a medium to inspire people to make green pilgrimages and be more aware and conscious of their impact on these spaces," Nandini explained.

GIWA also leads educational programmes to inspire young people of different faiths to be ambassadors for water conservation and women empowerment programmes that go beyond WASH to promote girl's education and menstrual hygiene management and to oppose child marriage.



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Religious leaders play a critical role in addressing seemingly intractable problems like access to safe water and sanitation.

"These things are all interwoven and interlinked. Women are the most affected by water crises and often face other obstacles that prevent them from seeking improved WASH. Our Women for WASH programme empowers women to be the change they wish to see in their communities," Nandini said.

Closely related to GIWA is Nandini's service with Ganga Action Parivar (GAP), a network of engineers, scientists, activists, spiritual leaders, environmental specialists and volunteers who work to restore and protect Ganga and its tributaries in their free-flowing natural state.

Businesses along Ganga's banks contribute heavily to its pollution, as do individuals discarding waste and washing clothes using environmentally unfriendly detergent. GAP is working to ban industries from dumping toxic effluents in Ganga and pushing for legislation that would protect the river's right to flow as a living entity, similar to how human rights protect people.

"Ganga's flow and the flow of India's progress are linked," Nandini said. "GAP's founder and my Guru H.H. Pujya Swami often says that if Ganga dies, India dies, and if Ganga thrives, India thrives."

With droughts and floods crippling major cities and

threatening much of India's population, GIWA and GAP are rejuvenating rivers and reframing waste as wealth to promote sustainable development. GIWA is also planning to work with faith leaders in Nigeria to address humanitarian and environmental crises there, using interfaith dialogue to break down tensions and misperceptions. These tools help participants recognise their common humanity.

"Harmony and interreligious dialogue are like the river's flow," Nandini said. "Discrimination, stereotypes, and our limited understanding of the other pollutes and diverts harmony. We need to connect with our common humanity and celebrate its rich diversity for harmony to flow freely."

Since arriving in Rishikesh nearly a decade ago, Nandini has embraced Karma Yoga, expanding her practice "off the mat and into the world" to selflessly serve others. This transformation has deepened her association with Hinduism, India, and Ganga in ways she never expected.

"This work has shown me how to respect the environment and other faiths and to live and exist in harmony with all of creation. It's shown me that the world is one family and that we can be vessels and instruments of service. Clearly the divine has a bigger plan for me, and I've decided to go with that flow."



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BIRMINGHAM,
United Kingdom

Tim Fawssett:

“COME TO THE FEAST”

Tim Fawssett grew up in Far North Queensland, Australia, in the remote aboriginal community of Doomadgee. His parents were Christian missionaries there -- his mother a nurse and his father the local school principal.

“I was a white boy in a fairly large aboriginal community, but I never felt like an outsider,” Tim said. “We learned about aboriginal culture, art, dance, and heard the Dreamtime stories at school. Those formative years were very positive and helped shape my faith, identity, and worldview.”

Tim’s family left Doomadgee when he was ten-years old and moved to a predominantly white town nearer to Brisbane, Queensland’s capital city.

“Being a white boy in a mostly white school for the first time, I went through the unique process of working out what it meant to be part of a minority and then part of a majority population,” he remembers.

That experience helped guide Tim towards a career in intercultural dialogue.

From 1999 to 2009 he worked with Scripture Union Queensland (SU QLD), part of an international evangelical Christian movement. There he helped set up chaplaincy services at government schools to support students socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Near the end of that decade at SU QLD, Tim and his wife Merryn, a New Zealander who spent her teenage years in India, started looking for overseas opportunities that might expose their own kids to some of the cross-cultural experiences they had benefited from in childhood.

That was when Tim learned about The Feast, a youth-focused Christian charity in the United Kingdom that fosters interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In 2010 they packed up and moved halfway around the world to a Pakistani British suburb of Birmingham to help expand The Feast’s work.

“Trying to work out this balance between Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in Birmingham was the real start of our interfaith journey,” Tim said. “Living there helped my family build friendships with the local community and enhanced our work promoting dialogue among teens.”

Canon Dr. Andrew Smith had started what would become The Feast several years earlier, visiting schools in Birmingham to teach about Christianity. As he engaged with Muslim students, tired arguments rooted in stereotypes and misunderstandings gave way to honest conversations about faith and identity. Andrew set up The Feast

like?’ It was an opportunity to talk and listen and learn,” Tim said. “I was skeptical at first, but watching these kids have these conversations and come away thinking more about what they believed and more comfortable in who they were while getting to know each other was amazing.”

The Feast uses a small group approach for most activities, working with just 10 to 15 teenagers from different faiths at a time to foster deep personal change and dialogue. Activities include movie and sports nights, weekend adventure camps, photography courses, and even stand-up comedy.

“The comedian taught the kids how humour can be used for good rather than tearing people down,” Tim said. “Any activity we thought would be fun and engaging became an opportunity to nurture conversation and to frame general questions that would spark dialogue about their faiths, backgrounds, and cultural identities.”

Before The Feast, Tim says most interfaith work in Birmingham either tried to change people’s beliefs or tried to bring people together by ignoring real differences and disagreements.

“What made The Feast unique is that we waded into awkward spaces where kids were challenging each other and talking about things passionately without the group dynamic breaking down,” he said. “We had a full

as a formal charity in 2009 to encourage and equip more young people to discuss their beliefs and create friendships across faith, based on trust and respect.

Under Tim’s leadership, The Feast expanded to other areas of the United Kingdom including Bradford, Luton and Tower Hamlets, and brought on Muslim and Sikh youth workers and volunteers to lead community engagement. In 2017, Tim’s last year as CEO, The Feast hosted 50 youth encounter programmes, working directly with 2,700 young people.

“We reached out to mosques, churches, gurdwaras, and schools. We’d throw out questions like, ‘How does your family celebrate and teach faith?’ or ‘What does prayer look



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spectrum of Christian, Hindu, Humanist, Muslim and Sikh communities. Everyone, no matter their faith story, was treated with real dignity.”

Tim helped The Feast build an ambassador network of young interfaith leaders who continue to strengthen relationships among Birmingham’s diverse communities. At the end of 2017 he moved back to Brisbane to recreate this magic as SU QLD’s Cross Cultural Innovation lead. In this role he’s adapting The Feast for Australia with a new programme called CHAT (Cultural Hearing, Asking, and Telling). Through schools and camps, CHAT trains school chaplains to work with newer immigrants, refugees, aboriginals and other diverse and isolated communities.

“Too many of these communities are living in bubbles and silos, and too many white Australians are unaware of the struggles they face,” Tim said. “Through CHAT, we want to connect these communities and create empathy

and understanding so that they can break through culturally imposed glass ceilings and enjoy the fullness of living in Australia.”

He hopes The Feast’s work in the United Kingdom and CHAT’s work in Australia will give participants positive outlets for social change, make minority communities more resilient, and encourage majority communities to stand up for their neighbours and fight against prejudice.

On a personal level, Tim’s work is already paying off.

“My nine-year-old son was born in Birmingham. Now back in Brisbane, he’s eager to understand his mum’s Kiwi story, has started to learn a bit of Maori, and wants to understand aboriginal ethnicities in Australia. He’s starting to work out who he is in the world and have empathy for others. It’s so special to watch him grow like this and follow our lead,” he said.



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ARIZONA,
United States

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz:

NOT ALONE

During the first three months of 2019, Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz's grassroots organization Arizona Jews for Justice provided humanitarian relief to nearly 15,000 Central American migrants, most of them Christian, who entered the United States near his home in Phoenix.

"Taking care of the foreigner, the stranger, the refugee is so clearly a priority in our holy text. It's the Jewish history. We were wanderers and immigrants for 2,000 years, so this work really resonates with who we are," Shmuly said.

Several hundred Jewish volunteers work with Christian groups and Hispanic churches to assist asylum seekers however they can, often at a moment's notice.

"We sometimes need to run and jump. We'll get a call that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement just dropped off 200 - 300 people in Phoenix with virtually nothing, so we'll drive down to the bus station or over to the church where they are and respond immediately," Shmuly said. "They need hygiene products, clothes, food, medicine, legal

support, so we mobilise the Jewish community to respond. We've had people opening their homes to strangers so that asylum seekers have a place to stay. The Jewish community has really stepped up on this."

Working with Jews and Christians comes naturally to Shmuly, who grew up in an interfaith household.

"My father is a Reform Jew, my mother is an evangelical Christian, and I was raised exposed to both faiths. My mother's family would celebrate Christmas and Easter then we'd join my father's family for Passover and Rosh Hashanah services. My parents were very supportive of me choosing my own path," he said.

Shmuly solidified his commitment to Judaism at age 10, but his subsequent journey within the faith included Conservative, Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, Religious Zionist, and Progressive Orthodox Judaism. He now works primarily "in the pluralistic realm, operating with a lot of diversity rather than just working with those I agree with."

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Shmuly's interreligious dialogue work began in earnest at rabbinical school in Israel and New York.

"It was less driven by theological intrigue and more about healing the world through social justice. I think I just came to an intellectual conclusion that God is much greater than any one articulation of faith and that there is wisdom in various approaches. Studying in Israel for two years and being so proximate to Muslim populations opened my eyes to two fervently passionate approaches and world-views," he said.

"Taking care of the foreigner, the stranger, the refugee is so clearly a priority in our holy text. It's the Jewish history"

Shmuly has continued to engage with Muslims on a personal level -- inviting newly arrived Syrian refugees into his family's home for Thanksgiving dinner -- and more formally with Arizona's Jewish-Muslim dialogue group, which aims to deepen relationships between the two faith communities.

"I saw that young Jews were really hungry to engage with Muslims but didn't have outlets for that, so we created this space. The goal has been relationship building, not sharing theology but getting to know each other as human beings," Shmuly said.

The strength of these interreligious relationships became evident when tragedy struck both faith communities, first with the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in October 2018 and then with the Christchurch mosque shootings in March 2019.

"Our communities really showed up for each other," Shmuly said. "They invited me to speak to hundreds of people at a mosque, and we brought a Muslim partner to speak at our vigil. It's powerful to see that the dialogue group has become about more than just relationship building. It's

turned into real solidarity where we stand together. With rising hate crimes against minorities in the United States and with Jews and Muslims increasingly under attack, this is critical."

Both Arizona Jews for Justice and the Jewish-Muslim dialogue group are coordinated by Valley Beit Midrash, a pluralistic adult learning and leadership centre that encourages cooperation and collaboration among Arizona's diverse Jewish community. Shmuly serves as Valley Beit Midrash's president and says the intellectual think tank's community-building role is more important today than ever before.

"In-person intentional communities are breaking down around the world and being replaced by weaker bonds and virtual communities," he said. "Religious and faith communities are some of the last really strongly bonded forms of community we see. It's critical that we understand each other and mobilise the collective power of faith and religious communities to try to create positive change around the world together."

Shmuly puts these words into practice when working with migrants.

"When I've sat in detention centres talking with asylum seekers, I've been amazed at how much they talk about

their faith as the key ingredient to their resilience. I hear these horrible stories of how they were on their journey and were raped in Honduras or robbed in El Salvador or beaten in Guatemala and then somehow they got to the United States border and were thrown into a detention centre. They made it through all that, the starving, the abuse, because they had faith that they were not alone," he said.

"Not alone" in a religious sense, but also in terms of human connection and community, a gift Arizona Jews for Justice volunteers give as much as they receive.

"It's powerful to see that the dialogue group has become about more than just relationship building. It's turned into real solidarity where we stand together"

"The Jewish volunteers who have participated thought they would just be helping, but they were transformed by the work as well. Some were scared to open their homes to host asylum-seeking families, but doing so opened their eyes to really wonderful people," Shmuly said. "My hope for the Jewish community serving others is that they will incorporate this interfaith collaborative work as a central part of their identity."

Shmuly hopes Arizona Jews for Justice helps migrants find stability in ways that bring dignity. Zooming out, he hopes to see a day when no one will suffer in isolation as he works to build "a spiritually rooted global consciousness of solidarity."



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YANGON,
Myanmar

Harry Myo Lin:

DIGITAL DIALOGUE – COMBATTING ONLINE HATE SPEECH

At the height of Myanmar's Saffron Revolution in 2007, Harry Myo Lin joined thousands of Buddhist monks and frustrated citizens in the streets of Mandalay demanding political and economic change. It was the then-16-year-old's first foray into interreligious activism after a childhood steeped in interfaith dialogue.

"My father was a conservative Muslim, my mother a liberal Muslim, I studied English at a Catholic nunnery, and one of my best friends was Buddhist," he said. "I grew up in a diverse quarter of Mandalay with harmony among the faiths."

That harmony began to fray in the years that followed as predominantly Buddhist Myanmar emerged from decades of military rule. New freedoms brought new challenges. Once isolated, the country was suddenly online, and ram-

nant flows of misinformation were contributing to sharp spikes in interreligious and interethnic tensions.

In 2012, fake news and hate speech circulating on Facebook stoked violence between Buddhists and Muslims in western Rakhine State, leaving thousands displaced and hundreds dead. Harry reached out to the monks he had once protested with to brainstorm solutions and ended up living in their monastery for two months as they formulated a plan.

"We agreed we must work together to prevent violence," Harry said. "These monks were a living example for me. They treated me with such kindness and inspired me to forge ahead with interfaith engagements."

In 2013, Harry started a secret Facebook group to combat the online spread of dangerous fake news in Myanmar.

Group members fact-checked false rumours and distributed accurate information to religious and community leaders to set the record straight and ease tensions.

The need for this group was tragically reinforced that year when clashes killed more than 40 people in Meiktila. These events so close to Mandalay inspired Harry to launch The Seagull: Human Rights, Peace & Development, a group of interfaith leaders and activists who collaborate to promote dialogue and protect religious freedom. The Seagull worked in Meiktila to document violations that had occurred during the anti-Muslim riots and to encourage strained communities to reconcile. Harry attracted praise for this work but also harassment and threats.

“During one Seagull training for Buddhist monks and nuns, several ultranationalists accused me of trying to convert Buddhists to Islam. They harassed me and forced me to stop the training, so I had to go into hiding for a week,” Harry remembered.

Photos of Harry with Buddhist friends were posted with comments such as, “Muslims like him should be killed.”

Harry says the loudest and most harmful hate speech in Myanmar often targets Muslims, other religious and ethnic minorities, women, and LGBT people.

Harry joined the Panzagar (“flower speech”) movement in 2014 to counter hate speech against these and other persecuted groups in the country. Participants placed flowers in their mouths to symbolise their commitment to spreading “right speech” and opposing dangerous falsehoods spread person-to-person and via large-scale public media campaigns.

After coordinating Freedom House’s religious freedom programme and teaching conflict transformation at the Institute for Political and Civic Engagement for several years, Harry now serves as KAICIID’s country expert in Yangon. In this role he supports the Peaceful Myanmar Ini-

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tiative (PMI), a multireligious network of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim faith leaders and civil society organizations who promote harmony through interreligious trainings, interfaith forums, inclusive dialogue events, and peace celebrations.

“Before KAICIID, local policymakers were not hearing the voices of religious leaders. Now that we’re building national networks and bringing these groups together to strategise, we can work to achieve long-term structural change,” he said.

The PMI has already hosted more than 3,000 religious leaders and civil society representatives for training workshops aimed at mitigating conflict and promoting social cohesion. Harry is now setting up an interreligious dialogue centre that will host intensive conflict transformation courses for youth and faith leaders, teaching them how to use social media to combat online hate speech.

“Empowering religious leaders to use social media in positive ways creates new space for dialogue,” he said. “By promoting the basic tenets of their religions, they can challenge the misuse of faith as a means of violence and promote the idea of a united Myanmar that is equal and welcoming for everyone,” Harry said.

The PMI’s Facebook page spreads positive messages to thousands of followers as Harry’s secret Facebook group still works behind the scenes to stop violence before it starts.

“When a Muslim man was accused of raping a Buddhist woman in northern Shan State recently, our group reached out to local leaders in the region to address calls for violence against Muslims and to make sure local authorities arrested the man. This helped prevent the situation from escalating,” he said.

Fake news and online discrimination towards minorities remain key challenges in Myanmar. With Harry’s guidance, local religious leaders are working harder than ever to quash misinformation and mitigate violence. He hopes the PMI will encourage government officials and policymakers to do the same and is fighting with renewed vigour, now for his infant daughter.

“Whenever I think about the discrimination religious minorities face in Myanmar I worry for her generation,” Harry said. “We need to heal from the trauma of living under military rule, but we also need to solve these issues in our lifetime so that our children can lead better lives.”

Fake news and online discrimination towards minorities remain key challenges in Myanmar. With Harry’s guidance, local religious leaders are working harder than ever to quash misinformation and mitigate violence.



COPENHAGEN,
Denmark

Agnete Holm:

A PLACE TO BE DIFFERENT

Born to Danish missionaries, Agnete Holm spent much of her childhood abroad. She traces her comfort with intercultural diversity and passion for interreligious dialogue back to the lunch table at her primary school in Japan.

“I went to an international school with students from 37 countries. Some kids ate rice for lunch, some ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I thought being this diverse was normal,” she remembers.

Agnete’s international bubble burst when at 13 her family moved to a small village on the west coast of Denmark.

“Everyone was the same. They ate the same food, wore the same clothes, had the same type of furniture. There was no room for being different,” she said. “I simply couldn’t breathe. I was teased. I was the odd person out. I was miserable.”

Agnete longed for the diversity of her early youth where “everyone was the odd one out” and saved up enough money to revisit Asia after high school. She deepened her engagement with interreligious dialogue over the next few years by living in Hindu ashrams, studying spirituality, travelling around the region, and eventually finishing a bachelor’s and master’s degree in theology.

At the end of her studies, Danmission, the Danish Christian charity Agnete’s parents had served as missionaries, asked her to help set up a dialogue centre in southern India. She’s been working with Danmission ever since, now as senior advisor on interfaith dialogue and theology.

Danmission facilitates interreligious and intercultural dialogue to achieve mutual understanding and reduce conflict around the world. Agnete is responsible for projects in the Middle East and Asia. She’s also an ordained pastor with the national Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark



Agnete envisions the camp as a safe space where youth from different backgrounds and faiths can work through prejudices, find common ground, and go on to promote interreligious cooperation back home.

and leads occasional services at the historic Church of the Holy Spirit in Copenhagen.

“My theology is inclusive and pluralist. Being an ordained pastor does not stand in contrast to working and living and believing in interfaith dialogue. It’s two sides of the same coin for me,” she said.

For 15 consecutive summers, Agnete has put this philosophy into practice at a mountain monastery in Lebanon where she organizes and facilitates the International Dialogue and Education Camp (IDEC), a joint project of Danmission and the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue. Each year IDEC brings together around 30 diverse young people from Denmark and the Middle East to improve their interreligious and intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution skills.

Agnete envisions the camp as a safe space where youth from different backgrounds and faiths can work through prejudices, find common ground, and go on to promote interreligious cooperation back home. To accomplish these goals, her workshop model breaks the mould.

“Most dialogue conferences are really serial monologues of people speaking for a long time. I wanted to move beyond the horseshoe-shaped tables, plastic flowers, and tissue boxes we typically see and create a space for true interfaith dialogue between people,” she said.

This requires participants to interrogate their own mis-

conceptions and to improve their listening skills before effective dialogue can begin.

“It’s not possible to journey towards a relationship with other people unless you are open to journeying within yourself,” Agnete said. “Dialogue is not about convincing others you are right. It’s about connecting and relating and being inspired by the beauty of that which is different from you. It’s a gift, an invitation to take part in each others’ lives and to share. That doesn’t mean it can’t be frustrating.”

With so much religious and cultural diversity in the room, tensions inevitably arise. Agnete embraces this reality as an opportunity to break down biases and has witnessed incredible transformation among participants who lean into these tensions with openness and honesty.

She remembers a young Sunni participant from Lebanon whose parents taught him to hate Shias and told him that if he ever came home with a Shia girlfriend they would ostracise him. This veil of hatred finally fell when he met a Shia woman at IDEC.

“He took her to visit his parents. They welcomed her with kisses and had a lovely conversation. When he told them she was Shia, his parents were shocked. They had just spent an hour with this wonderful girl. It broke down all their prejudices. He told them what he had learned at camp and said he simply didn’t want to hate anymore. His



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parents understood and told him he could marry whoever he wanted to. It was an incredible change,” Agnete said.

Many participants continue their dialogue journeys long after the camp ends, either infusing their old lives and careers with lessons learned or forging new paths entirely.

One Syrian participant created a new interreligious dialogue organization after attending the camp, and several Syrian scout leaders have incorporated lessons learned into their troop meetings. An Egyptian woman who attended the camp without any interreligious dialogue experience now leads interfaith dialogue camps for youth.

“These young people have made me more and more humble. In the beginning, I thought I could teach them a lot, but now I know that the biggest change comes from us listening to each other, asking the right questions, and responding with humanity,” Agnete said.

To help former participants and the general public spread these lessons, Agnete created Danmission’s free online dialogue toolbox, which features more than 40 exercises, video clips and articles users can incorporate as they design and facilitate dialogue workshops for their local

communities. Toolbox exercises have been downloaded hundreds of times since the platform launched in 2018.

Agnete hopes the toolbox spawns more dialogue camps and encourages future facilitators to experiment with different formats that best suit their particular communities’ contexts and needs.

“Dialogue is not about exchanging knowledge, it’s about preparing a space inside me for the other to inhabit,” Agnete said. “We first have to do the work ourselves. I’m here to help people relate to each other more easily, love each other a little more, and find places where they can breathe, where it’s okay to be different.”

“Dialogue is not about exchanging knowledge, it’s about preparing a space inside me for the other to inhabit”



“ It’s not possible to journey towards a relationship with other people unless you are open to journeying within **YOURSELF**”
—



VIENNA,
Austria

Rabbi Schlomo Hofmeister:

THE JOURNEYS THAT UNITE US

When Rabbi Schlomo Hofmeister and Imam Ramazan Demir boarded their flight from Vienna to Tel Aviv together in 2015, fellow passengers took note.

“People were shocked to see a rabbi and an imam traveling together, not going somewhere like Sweden but to Jerusalem, where so much conflict seems to have its origins,” Rabbi Schlomo said. “There is a public perception that Jews and Muslims hate each other, kill each other, that they don’t talk to each other, and then you see us sitting and chatting together on a plane, going on a pilgrimage together as friends.”

That element of surprise was part of the plan.

“This imam in traditional clothes and me in my black hat. We wanted to make people think,” he said. “Most prejudice only survives because people don’t think. A rabbi and an imam traveling together, walking side by side through Jerusalem, sitting at a restaurant together -- that shock makes people think, and that’s the most important precondition for dialogue to be fruitful.”

Rabbi Schlomo is the Chief Rabbi of Lower Austria and Community Rabbi of Vienna. His 2015 trip with Ramazan Demir, a Sunni imam of Turkish descent who also lives in Vienna, was the first of five interreligious pilgrimages he has led to Jerusalem. Other trips have included priests, students of different faiths, and representatives from Austrian civil society who visit the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Temple Mount, Al-Aqsa Mosque, Dome of the Rock, and other sites of Abrahamic religious and historical significance.

“On these trips, we want to bring people who will spread the message that politics must not be used to create conflict among religions,” Rabbi Schlomo said. “Religion is never the cause of conflict. It’s only an excuse. It’s very important for me to show that the Middle East conflict some Western countries abuse to harbour antisemitism has no basis in religion.”

Back in Europe, Rabbi Schlomo is an executive member of the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council. The council works to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue



throughout Europe, to breach prejudices between Muslim and Jewish communities, and to address shared threats to religious liberty, including efforts to ban religious slaughter and religious circumcision.

“These practices, which affect Jews and Muslims in the same way, are under threat both from right-wing political movements, which want to eradicate everything they deem ‘foreign’, and from the secularist movement, which wants to ban religious practices they consider outdated,” he said.

As part of his outreach efforts to combat such prejudices and interreligious hostilities, Rabbi Schlomo speaks to public and private school groups in Austria and neighbouring countries, sometimes sharing the stage with imams. He estimates he has visited more than 100 schools and spoken to more than 10,000 students about Austria’s historic and modern-day Jewish community.

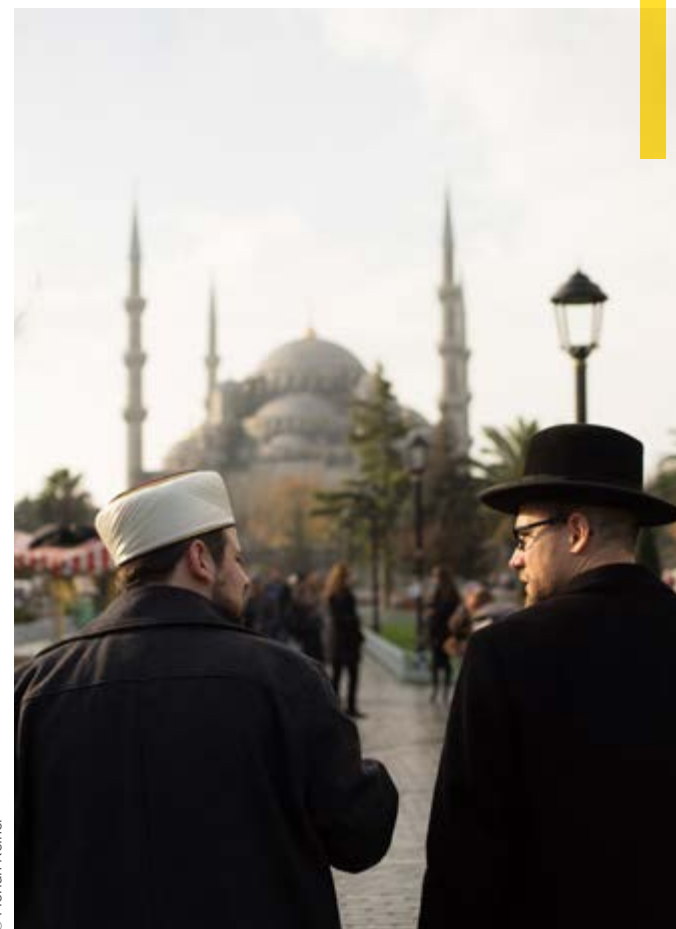
“When we dialogue, students reconsider many concepts they built their whole worldviews on,” he said. “Muslim teens who might have had a very prejudiced idea about Jews

“An attack on one religion is an attack on all. That’s the practical and pragmatic importance of interreligious dialogue”

while being otherwise open-minded, when I get to talk to them, they start crying and realise they want to meet again and ask more questions. It’s the most moving experience. Very rarely do these discussions turn into arguments.”

Rabbi Schlomo witnessed similar mental shifts among Muslim refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan who arrived in Vienna in 2016. Through an aid initiative he helped organize called Shalom Alaykum, Jewish volunteers welcomed new refugees, helping them navigate the asylum process and adjust to life in Austria.

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solidarity, to show that he has holy sites and I have holy sites, but we can both go on our pilgrimages together, authentically in our ways.”

Rabbi Schlomo strives to build the same solidarity in Austria and across Europe, uniting regional faith leaders to defend each other’s communities against encroachments on religious liberty. Recently he joined an initiative of the Catholic Church in supporting the Muslim community’s opposition to a proposed law that would ban young girls from wearing headscarves in Austrian schools.

“An attack on one religion is an attack on all. That’s the practical and pragmatic importance of interreligious dialogue,” he said. “Some people think they have to bend over backwards or compromise their worldviews to allow for bridges to be built in interreligious dialogue. I think that is completely unnecessary. My hope is that by dialoguing, by gaining respect for the other, people will also gain more confidence for their own identity, their own culture, their own religion, which will make them less insecure towards the other and result in less conflict and tension.”

Rabbi Schlomo emphasises these ideas in a book he co-wrote with Imam Ramazan about their trip to Jerusalem. “If we don’t show ‘the Other’ our real truth, they cannot understand and appreciate us,” he said. “I hope our story will inspire others to make the journey with open hearts and open minds.”

“We thought it was important to extend a helping hand to these refugees because many had lost their homes and families,” he said. “We also wanted to show them not to be afraid of Jewish identity.”

Rabbi Schlomo’s commitment to dialogue and the inspiration for his interfaith Jerusalem trips dates back to his own initiation in the Holy Land. After finishing high school in Munich, he moved to the Old City of Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter, which sits adjacent to the traditional Muslim, Christian, and Armenian Quarters.

“Through contact with the Muslim community there, I started to realise that the political conflict overshadowing everything people associate with the holy city of Jerusalem doesn’t correspond with the coexistence I experienced between Muslims and Jews there,” he said. “The point of my first trip back to Jerusalem with the imam was not to discuss the Middle East conflicts but to form

“Religion is never the cause of conflict. It’s only an excuse. It’s very important for me to show that the Middle East conflict some Western countries abuse to harbour antisemitism has no basis in religion”



“ A rabbi and an imam traveling together, walking side by side through Jerusalem, sitting at a restaurant together -- that shock makes people think, and that's the most important precondition for dialogue to be **FRUITFUL**”



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TEXAS,
United States

Simran Jeet Singh:

DIALOGUE ON THE MARGINS

As the only Sikh kids wearing turbans in South Texas in the 1980s, Simran Jeet Singh and his three brothers stood out.

“People were always trying to make sense of us,” he said. “Being visibly different, we had to learn from an early age how to answer questions about our faith and traditions.”

Simran’s parents framed their sons’ visible minority status not as a burden but as an opportunity to bust stereotypes and be good ambassadors for the Sikh community, which they did through sports.

“Whether or not we wore turbans didn’t matter to people if we were good at basketball, football, baseball, soccer. Sports really helped equalise the playing field,” Simran remembers.

The goodwill Simran’s family had cultivated through San Antonio’s sports leagues, interfaith scene, and other community outlets helped sustain them through some

of America’s darkest days. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, turbaned Sikhs became targets of xenophobic hate crimes across the country. Simran was in high school at the time, and his family joined regular conference calls with other Sikhs to discuss what was happening and what they could do.

“We realised that it wasn’t effective or helpful to only address the concerns of our community. We needed to address these issues at their core. That meant working together with Arab, Muslim, and other communities,” he said.

These conference calls helped steer Simran to a career in interreligious and intercultural dialogue. They also launched the Sikh Coalition, a New York-based civil rights organization where Simran now serves as senior religion fellow.

The Sikh Coalition works to protect civil and human rights for all people, including the right to practice faith without fear.

The Sikh Coalition works to protect civil and human rights for all people, including the right to practice faith without fear.

“It started as a mechanism to protect our survival, to make sure we weren’t all killed in racist hate attacks. Since then we’ve expanded our mission to be proactive as well. We’ve worked to seize the Sikh spirit of activism and agency to move beyond victimisation frameworks that paint us as passive targets with no control,” Simran said.

The Sikh Coalition has an education team working to include Sikhism in school curriculum and a communications team spreading positive stories about Sikhs in society. The need for both teams became painfully obvious when a gunman murdered six Sikhs at a gurdwara in Wisconsin in 2012.

“The media coverage of Sikhism was horrible, and there were not enough Sikhs speaking about our community,” Simran said of the shooting’s aftermath. “I felt a responsibility to step up and correct misperceptions about our faith. That’s what inspired me to write a reporting guide to help journalists accurately cover us and when I really began talking about Sikhism publicly.”

In 2014 when International Basketball Federation (FIBA) rules forced two Indian Sikh players to remove their turbans before playing a game, Simran launched a successful multireligious media campaign pressuring FIBA to lift its headgear ban, which it did in 2017. Simran’s brother Darsh was the first turbaned Sikh to play basketball under North America’s National Collegiate Athletic Association, so this Sikh Coalition effort felt particularly personal.

“Jewish, Muslim, and other groups came together to explain how the headgear ban negatively affected us and negatively shaped how our kids imagine their place in society,” Simran said. “Our uniting message was that sports should bring people together, not divide and discriminate. This multireligious component helped show that other communities had skin in the game.”

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Today Simran wears many hats, as the idiom goes, and not all of his interreligious work is with the Sikh Coalition. He advises the governor of New York and the Committee on Foreign Relations on religious matters, teaches introductory courses on Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism at universities and seminaries, and serves as chaplain and religious life adviser to students.

When a travel ban was issued in the United States against several Muslim-majority countries in 2017, Simran was teaching Islamic Studies at Trinity University in San Antonio and was adviser to the school’s Muslim Student Association. He started a letter-writing campaign encouraging Americans to reach out to members of their local Muslim community offering solidarity and words of love.

In the letters, which were hand-delivered to local Mosques, Simran and others offered words of support to their Muslim neighbours and thanked them for being an important part of the community.

“I was struck by how grateful they were,” he said. “Sometimes the most helpful thing you can do is just reach out to other marginalised people and let them know you are there for them.”

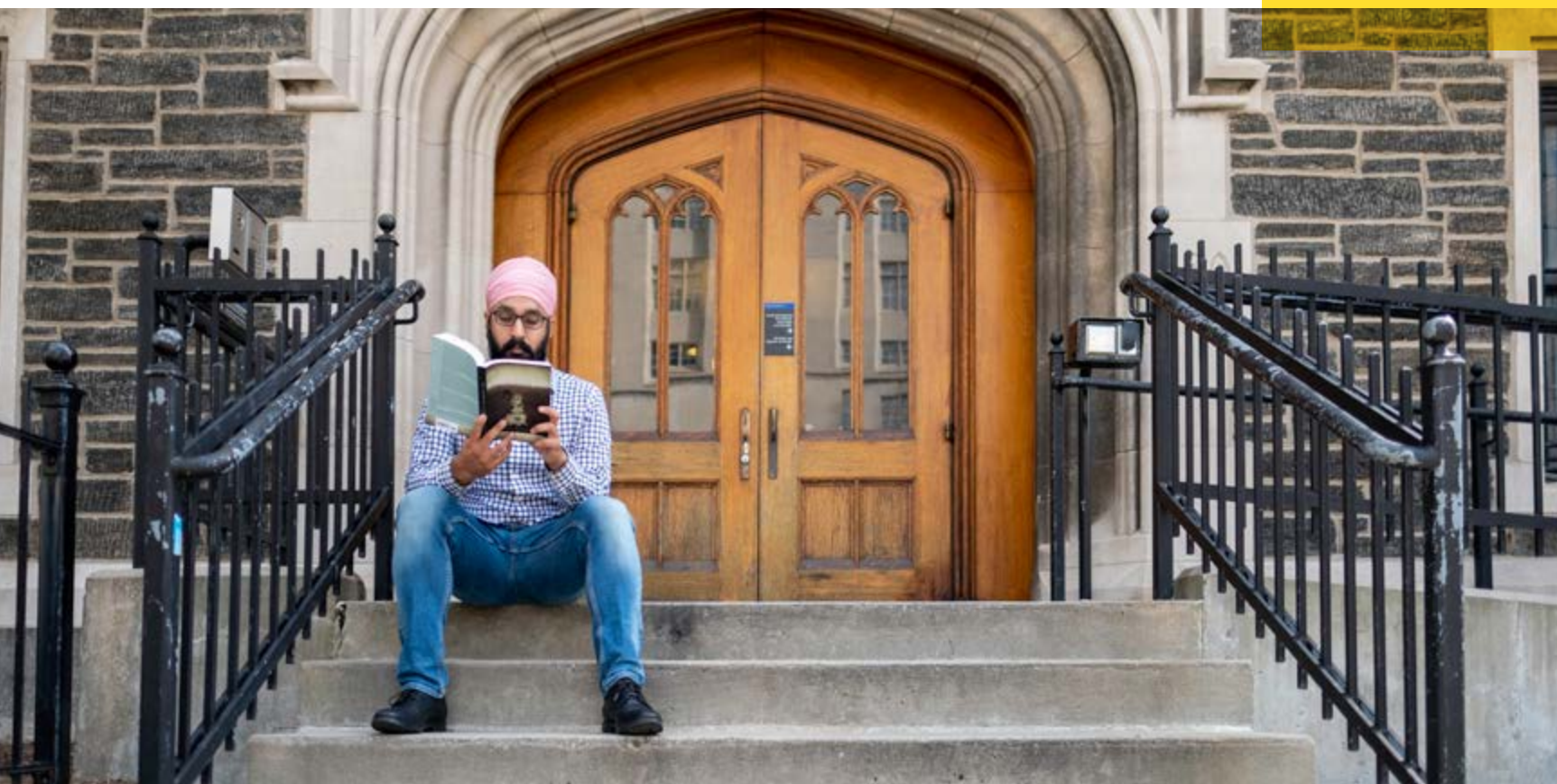
Simran says bigotry and hate crimes targeting religious minorities are still high in the United States but that positive efforts to resolve this hate have never been stronger.

Sometimes the most helpful thing you can do is just reach out to other marginalised people and let them know you are there for them”

“The most powerful way this is coming through is at the grassroots and individual level, between people of different faiths who have never interacted but who are trying to understand and stand up for one another,” he said.

Simran is doing his part through formal education and public education, which includes writing a regular column for Religion News Service that addresses ideas around representation and opens up new spaces for new conversations with his readers.

“We don’t see much media coverage of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in America,” he said. These are the communities who end up being marginalised and whose stories I’m trying to tell. Anyone who is underrepresented, I try to bring their voice to the table.”





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YOGYAKARTA,
Indonesia

Andreas Jonathan:

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

Having grown up in a sheltered Presbyterian community in Indonesia, Andreas Jonathan knows first-hand how important religiously mixed and shared spaces can be in order for fruitful dialogue to take place.

“I went to a Christian school and was sort of isolated from Muslims growing up. I had no Muslim friends, didn’t know my Muslim neighbours, and older people warned us to be cautious of them. Because of this isolated background, which many Christian and Muslim youth experience, I still have some prejudices towards my Muslim friends. I still need to dialogue more with them to see things clearly and learn,” he said.

Andreas Jonathan co-founded the Young Interfaith Peacemaker Community Indonesia (YIPCI) in 2012 to help youth from diverse backgrounds engage in faith-inspired peacebuilding efforts.

YIPCI’s interfaith peace camps give Andreas and other

youth a chance to erase prejudices and foster new friendships with people of different faiths. Although YIPCI was only established in 2012, its origin dates back to 2007 when Andreas and a group of Christian students started hosting dialogue sessions with Muslim groups in Medan, North Sumatra. Upon moving to Yogyakarta to complete a degree in interreligious studies, Andreas met Ayi Yunus Rusyana, and the two discovered a shared passion.

“We took the same class about religion, peace, and violence and discovered this mutual interest in interreligious dialogue,” Andreas said. “There was some creative chemistry between us, and we agreed to organize a Young Peacemaker Training for students.”

From that first peace camp in Yogyakarta in 2012, YIPCI has grown to host regular peace camps for interreligious dialogue and reconciliation in eight Indonesian cities, welcoming more than 2,000 students between the ages of 16 and 30 from across the archipelago.

“Unlike the many secular approaches to interreligious dialogue, our work is really based on our faith and uses scriptural reasoning to touch the core of our religious teachings”

Participants who were born into conflict on the Maluku Islands in eastern Indonesia have been among the most transformed. Ethno-political fighting between Muslims and Christians killed thousands and displaced more than half a million people there between 1999 and 2002. Today, Maluku is once again stable, but hostility and resentment still linger between followers of both faiths. Andreas and YIPCI are working to ease these tensions.

“Some of the Maluku students were young children at the time of the conflict, some were just being born. It was a very traumatic experience to see their families killed,” Andreas said. “Before the peace camp, when they would see people of the other faith, they would think ‘those people killed my father or mother.’ They hated each other. But during the reconciliation process, they found the opportunity to forgive and become friends. They understood that not every member of the other faith is violent and that the root of the problem isn’t our religious teachings.”

YIPCI’s three- to four-day retreats run by former camp participants focus on four peace values: peace with God, peace with neighbours, peace with self, and peace with the environment. Through games and direct engagement with scripture, young Muslims and Christians discuss violence, conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation in new and memorable ways.

“For some students, especially the Muslims, it’s their first encounter with Christians, and it’s a life-changing experience,” Andreas said. “We discuss false misconceptions, like that Christians have three Gods, and how to understand the divinity of Jesus. We also discuss how some Christians associate Islam with violence and terrorism, and how most Muslims find such acts unconscionable. By sharing our actual beliefs with one another and discussing them, our prejudices start to melt away.”

The highlight of each camp occurs when Christians and Muslims apologise and forgive one another for past prejudices, a critical step in the reconciliation process.

In addition to the peace camps, YIPCI organizes a national conference to unpack polemics and sensitivities between Christians and Muslims and hosts a five-day interfaith dialogue course to equip former students and future peace camp facilitators with deeper knowledge about other faiths.

What sets YIPCI apart from other interreligious dialogue initiatives facilitated by the government or targeting traditional religious leaders is its engagement with scripture and its unique focus on lay youth.

“In Indonesia, some radicals misuse the Quran and the Bible to promote religious conflict and violence and to mobilise younger generations to do the same. To counter this, we need to emphasise more peaceful verses in the holy books.



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This includes peace education and interfaith dialogue. They are like two sides of a coin. We cannot separate them. We can’t build peace without interreligious dialogue,” Andreas said. “Unlike the many secular approaches to interreligious dialogue, our work is really based on our faith and uses scriptural reasoning to touch the core of our religious teachings. It’s also focused on the grassroots youth rather than on older religious leaders.”

YIPCI is inspired by “A Common Word Between Us and You”, an open letter written in 2007 by Muslim leaders to Christian leaders that called for peace and emphasised common ground and understanding between the religions. Andreas describes YIPCI’s “Common Word” approach as “deep dialogue that emphasises the common core teachings of Christianity and Islam based on love for God and for our neighbours.”

Furthermore, YIPCI’s facilitator training model expects that peace camp participants will go on to become facilitators and organise their own peace camps directly.

This emphasis on sustainability has proved important. In 2017 Andreas became director of the Center for Peace and

Religion at Immanuel Christian University in Yogyakarta where he teaches theology and interreligious dialogue. He handed YIPCI leadership over to younger members but still serves as an adviser and helps guide future development of the organisation he founded and holds dear.

“Our goal is to establish a YIPCI presence in every city on every university campus,” Andreas said. “So far, only 10 percent of our students come from radical backgrounds. If we can reach more of these students, we can help change the future of our society for the better.”

“For some students, especially the Muslims, it’s their first encounter with Christians, and it’s a life-changing experience”



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MANDALAY,
Myanmar

Ashin Mandalankara:

THE MESSAGE OF PEACE

Nestled among Myanmar's vibrant and diverse religious communities, Ashin Mandalankara grew up in a Theravada Buddhist bubble. That bubble burst in 2010 when an Irish Catholic nun came to his monastery in Mandalay to teach English.

"She invited me to her church, where I met Christian priests and sisters. We stayed in touch, and slowly I met Hindus and Muslims around town. I learned from her not only English but also about different cultures and religions and about promoting peace and harmony, all lessons I now teach my students," he said.

Mandalankara's decade-long journey from a secluded monastery on the banks of the Irrawaddy River to promoting interreligious dialogue across Myanmar and around the world has been motivated by an urgent need for peace in his country.

In recent years, religious and ethnic tensions have erupted

into violence. The rapid spread of misinformation and hate speech online has only made clashes worse.

"The problem in Myanmar is that people are afraid to lose their identity. That leads to tension, conflict, anger, misunderstanding and discrimination among people who do not even understand the teachings of their own religions," he said.

In 2015, in an effort to reduce these tensions and as part of his commitment to KAICIID's International Fellows Programme, Mandalankara recruited more than 25 young adults from greater Mandalay's Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities to take part in ten weekend sessions of interreligious training, intercultural dialogue and sacred site visits to local mosques, temples and churches.

Convincing a group of 20-somethings to give up their Saturday mornings and brave the summer's heavy rains on their motorbikes to meet wasn't easy, but Mandalankara persevered, reaching out to other religious lead-

ers in Mandalay to help recruit receptive youth from their respective faith communities. His efforts paid off.

“Some students didn’t know anything about the other religions before the trainings. They were suspicious and had doubts. Now they are friends and host gatherings of their own in tea houses and coffee shops. They want to better understand each other’s religions and want to keep learning about each other’s traditions and cultures,” he said.

Trauma healing needs to be part of the interreligious dialogue process, just as we need interreligious dialogue to end conflicts”

Mandalarlankara has continued this momentum in recent years by leading more than a dozen interreligious dialogue trainings and activities for novice monks at his monastery and in partnership with the Center for Diversity and National Harmony, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, and the Peaceful Myanmar Initiative (PMI).

KAICIID helped establish the PMI in 2016 as a multi-religious network of prominent Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim faith leaders and civil society organizations to promote peaceful dialogue across Myanmar. Through interfaith forums, inclusive dialogue events, and peace celebrations, PMI and its partners have worked with hundreds of people to promote interreligious harmony and build bridges among religious, ethnic, political and regional communities.

Mandalarlankara also leads intra-religious dialogue sessions for Buddhist monks and nuns around the country.

“In Myanmar, we have so many ethnic groups with different cultures, values, languages, and beliefs. Living under military rule, we didn’t have a chance to study and understand these differences. There was always tension and misunderstanding. By learning about ourselves and each other through intra- and interreligious dialogue, by sharing our differences and similarities, we can find ways to live peacefully and harmoniously,” he said.

Mandalarlankara largely credits KAICIID with giving him the knowledge, skills, and confidence to design and deliver these much-needed dialogue activities, primarily to youth.

Targeting this “Facebook generation” has the added benefit of allowing Mandalarlankara to address hate speech on social media. In addition to interreligious and intercultural dialogue trainings, his work teaches young people how best to combat misinformation and discrimination they encounter online.

“People spreading hate speech don’t understand interreligious harmony, and too many youth are using social networks to make conflict. If we write abusive comments on Facebook, other people will do the same. We cannot extinguish fire with fire. We have to take care of hate speech and not use Facebook as a tool to hate other people.”



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As part of these efforts, Mandalarlankara brings young adults from different faiths and ethnicities together to discuss their customs, traditions, diets and clothes. These conversations help to reframe outward differences that sometimes draw ridicule in a more positive and empowering light.

“People ask me why I wear robes, why Muslims eat Halal, why Buddhists eat vegetarian, why Jews eat Kosher. It’s easy to criticise other people and for tensions to build when we don’t understand what we see. That’s why it’s so important to share and discuss our differences.”

Sporting his saffron robe, Mandalarlankara has sparked such discussions in Italy (where he studied interreligious and intercultural dialogue at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas), Sri Lanka (where he completed a master’s degree in Pali and Buddhist Studies), the United States (where he studied religious pluralism with the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs), Germany (where he attended the World Assembly of Religions for Peace), Morocco, and Australia (where he attended A Common Word Among the Youth’s International Fora).

Mandalarlankara is now studying international relations at the University of Mandalay and plans to study political science in order to better understand his country’s unique relationship with Buddhism and democracy. At the same time he continues working towards harmony in Myanmar by addressing communal wounds of the past using the interreligious dialogue skills he learned as a KAICIID fellow.

“To achieve conflict transformation, we need trauma healing,” he said. “When people don’t understand other religions, this is very hard to achieve. Trauma healing needs to be part of the interreligious dialogue process, just as we need interreligious dialogue to end conflicts.”

He thanks KAICIID for inspiring him to collaborate with other faith leaders and promote intercultural and interreligious understanding.

“We have to make peace in our home, but we also have to be peace messengers,” Mandalarlankara said. “In order to understand and accept each other, in order to achieve peace and harmony, we have to communicate with people of different religious backgrounds. KAICIID has made that happen.”

“ In order to understand and accept each other, in order to achieve peace and harmony, we have to communicate with people of different religious **BACKGROUNDS**”





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BATTAMBANG,
Cambodia

Dr. Emma Leslie:

THE POWER OF RESILIENCE

The Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies (CPCS) new Peace Museum sits in an old Khmer school in a small village on the edge of Battambang in northwestern Cambodia. Cows wander by this state-of-the-art facility as curious villagers and tourists stop in to learn more about Cambodia's turbulent past and hopes for the future.

Emma Leslie, co-founder and executive director at CPCS, opened the museum with her husband and colleagues in October 2018 after traumatising visits to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh.

"The Genocide Museum is important in that it documents one point in history that was very painful, but it doesn't talk about how people came out of that experience and went on with their lives," Emma said. "Our Peace Museum shows Cambodians' extraordinary capacity for resilience, reconciliation, rebuilding, and looking towards the future. It's saying, 'here are some terrible things that happened, and here is how we as a country are dealing with them.'"

More than 1.5 million people, approximately 25 percent of Cambodia's population, perished during the Khmer Rouge regime's brutal genocide in the late-1970s.

Emma was just a child at the time, 7,000 kilometers away in rural Australia. She grew up learning about the genocide and moved to Cambodia in 1997 to work with the Campaign to Ban Landmines. After marrying local peacebuilder Soth Plai Ngarm and settling into her new life in Siem Reap, she founded the Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies in 2008 to help share her adopted home's unique conflict transformation lessons with other countries in crisis.

"Cambodia experienced carpet bombings, genocide, civil war, a regionally led peace process, then an extraordinary peace agreement. It was the first independent country to be administered by the United Nations and then experienced this massive internationalism that happens to a country that was isolated for so long. It witnessed disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, the return of refugees, elections, then a period of rehabilitation, reconstruction, relief, development, and now ongoing reconcili-

ation. So we have 40 to 50 years of extraordinary history here that people have lived through and are somehow still resilient, hospitable, generous, and smiling. We chose to base the Centre here because Cambodia has so much to teach the world," Emma said.

Before moving to Cambodia, Emma led intercultural exchanges between Australia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Fiji and took a Responding to Conflict course in the U.K. where she met inspiring peacebuilders from around the globe.

"On one side of me was a man from Somaliland who had been in solitary confinement for 10 years and kept himself sane by tapping Morse code verses of the Qur'an on pipes to his fellow inmates. On the other side was a Catholic nun from Ireland who lived in Liberia and took care of kids who had limbs chopped off during the civil war. I decided in that moment that I wanted to spend my life working to end violent conflict," Emma said. "During the course, I realised that alleviating poverty is important, human rights violations are important, but unless we deeply understand the root causes of conflict and strategise around addressing them, we won't change anything."

CPCS now leads master's and PhD programmes in Applied Conflict Transformation with the Pannasastra University of Cambodia and undertakes various peacebuilding interventions in the Philippines, North Korea, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and beyond to enhance the sustainability and efficiency of regional peace work.

CPCS's newest initiative, the Cambodia Peace Museum, focuses on reconciliation efforts. It was envisioned by Emma's husband Ngarm, a Khmer Rouge survivor who spent 13 years as a soldier.

"As someone who had survived genocide, been a child soldier, then chose peace work, he has a unique story," Emma said. "When Ngarm visited the Genocide Museum in 1999, he realised it wasn't contributing to healing but was retraumatizing people. The Peace Museum was born out of this

problem of not knowing how to talk about the past in a way that helps you to move forward into the future."

One exhibit documents Cambodia's demining and disarmament efforts. Another focuses on the more than 5,000 Cambodian peacekeepers who have served in Eritrea, Mali, the Congo, Lebanon, and other conflict zones. Another highlights the annual Dhammayietra peace walk that began in the 1990s with Buddhist monks and laypersons venturing into parts of Cambodia that had been isolated for decades by mines or inadequate infrastructure.

"One of the centerpieces of that exhibit is about the Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda who said, 'from deep suffering comes deep compassion.' The Peace Museum offers us a chance to discuss what compassion looks like today and how we can foster it," Emma said.

Young community leaders and monks serve as museum guides, leading visitors from one exhibit to the next and engaging with them to discuss ongoing conflict transformation.

"One of the guides recently said, 'I've started to fall in love with my country by working at this place.' It was extraordinary. That's what we're looking to foster -- positive, constructive nationalism. If we want to prevent future violence and dangerous forms of nationalism, we need spaces like this to talk about difficult issues in ways that help people move forward and that present positive stories of Cambodia without sanitising the past," Emma said.

Looking towards the Centre's and Cambodia's future, Emma sees a need to foster critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and transformative leadership.

"Realising our abundances as humans, our creativities, and the wellsprings we have to share with one other unlocks abilities to find new pathways to peace and move people in positive directions. Right now we're focused on spiraling. Not spiraling down negatively but spiraling upwards with energy towards a vision that empowers, excites, and inspires us."

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ABOUT KAICIID

KAICIID is the only intergovernmental organization governed by religious representatives and dedicated to the facilitation of dialogue between different cultures and faiths. Its unique mandate allows the Centre to bridge the gap between religious leaders and policymakers in order to advocate peace and combat violent extremism. This approach is motivated by the belief that religious leaders and policymakers must work together in order to effectively address the many conflicts and problems in which religious identity is manipulated to justify violence. We equip religious communities with skills such as an understanding of policy frameworks, human rights, and sustainable development, while also training policymakers on religious literacy, interreligious dialogue and inclusion.

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