

## **RELIGIOUS LEADERS PLEDGE JOINT EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF CHILDREN**

*[This document, together with other information on the Special Session on Children, is available on the official site:*

*<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession> ]*

The World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) convened two meetings of senior religious leaders on Monday and Tuesday preceding the official opening of the Special Session. The gatherings called to mind the themes and commitments of the 1989 Conference of World Religions for Children in Princeton, New Jersey (USA), in preparation for the 1990 World Summit for Children. Clergy of the world's major religions also officiated at an interfaith service on the eve of the Special Session, during which young people called for united action by religious communities in support of children's rights.

At the 7 May symposium entitled 'Commitment of the World's Religions to Children', Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim leaders discussed the role of religion in the lives of young people and the need for collaboration and partnerships within and across all faiths. Four young people addressed the major themes of the outcome document, calling on religious and spiritual leaders to affirm their key role as front-line actors taking and mobilizing actions in favor of children.

Moe Nagahama, a nine-year old girl from Japan called on the religious community to protect children from abuse violence and exploitation. "When a child is exploited it hurts them very much," she said. "Please treat us right." Johan Thelander, 13, from Sweden, said that promoting healthy lives is crucial. Doing anything less, he said, is "a violation of every child's right to survival and development."

UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy pointed to 30 years of partnerships with religious leaders and said that they are showing the way. "It is always gratifying to witness the hard work of religious communities in addressing such concerns as development, conflict resolution and caring for children suffering from malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and other diseases."

Throughout the Symposium, religious leaders affirmed the support of their own faiths for the dignity and human rights of children. They called on members of their communities to build an interfaith partnership with civil society organizations and UN agencies to ensure that every child is loved, protected and respected.

“As representatives of world religions we speak with a common voice,” said Dr. William Vendley, Secretary-General of WCRP. “Almost five of the six billion people in the world are members of religious communities, he said. “Religious communities have the largest social infrastructure for human care. Our capacities for action are substantial.”

“Every child is a gift from God and every child has a touch of divinity,” said Jayashree Athavale-Talwalkar from Tattwajna Vidyapeeth, a Hindu organization. Dr. Maher Hathout, a representative of Al-Azhar University in Egypt, said that in Islam children are viewed as the “harbingers of the future, the joy of the present and a reminder of our past.”

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a “political document and a moral statement with spiritual underpinnings,” said Bishop Gunnar Stalsett of the Church of Norway in Oslo. To support action on the Convention’s principles and standards, he stressed the obligation of religious leaders to zealously and honestly examine and reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors towards children. “It is the obligation of religion, which deals with the spiritual relationship that we have with God and with one another, to point out where and when the political and secular arenas have strayed from their true path, said Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo representing the Holy See.

“Religious leaders have a prophetic role that challenges them to push their governments and their societies. “It is our moral failure if we have the capacity to do good for children and don’t do so” said Dr.Vendley.

And Msgr. Carlos X. Belo, Bishop of Dili, East Timor and Nobel Laureate, said “I know the suffering of children. They are the hope of the world and we must open our minds to them.” The bishop promised that he would make every effort to see that the new nation of East Timor would ratify the CRC and its Optional Protocols.

Participants adopted a joint Declaration and Plan of Action (*see below*) and requested the WCRP to facilitate the ongoing engagement and collaboration of religious leaders to fulfill these commitments.

#### **PLAN OF ACTION, 7 MAY 2002, NEW YORK**

As senior representatives from the world’s religions, we pledge to work through out respective religious communities to carry out the following action steps to ensure a world fit for children. We commit ourselves to:

1. Strengthen multi-religious collaboration in the pursuit of peace to improve the environment in which all children live;
2. Endorse the broad priorities and goals established during the UN Special Session for Children and disseminate them widely through our religious communities worldwide. In particular, we appreciate the recognition of religious organizations as important partners and will work actively to fulfill our responsibilities in this regard;

3. Advocate at all levels on behalf of children both in terms of policies and greater resource mobilization and allocation;
4. Support greater partnerships with governments, UN agencies, and other sectors to fulfill the goals of the UNSSC, in particular the full ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols on involvement of children in armed conflict, and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.
5. Review existing teachings, programs and policies within our own religious communities that address children to ensure that their best interests are being promoted and to overcome past actions that might have fostered discrimination against children;
6. Work tirelessly to reduce the discrimination and stigma faced by children whether caused by disease, disability, gender, or minority status;
7. Call on WCRP/International, through its Standing Commission on the Child and Family and its network of national chapters and affiliates:
  - a) To facilitate the ongoing engagement of religious leaders and communities in support of the rights of children and their survival, protection, and development;
  - b) To serve as the liaison with UNICEF and other international agencies in Promoting stronger partnerships between them and religious organizations
  - c) To compile and share information on programs from among the world's religious communities that are particularly effective in addressing the needs of children;
  - d) To monitor the fulfillment of the commitments made in this declaration and plan of action;
8. Utilize the existing infrastructure and communications networks within our religious communities to disseminate information on the situation of the world's children and efforts to improve their welfare;
9. Encourage our religious communities at all levels to work for the goals of the Global Movement for Children and to seek partnerships with other stakeholders to achieve their realization.

#### **GLOBAL NETWORK OF RELIGIONS FOR CHILDREN**

The Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) was inaugurated in 2000 by the Arigatou Foundation of Japan to promote cooperation among religious peoples working for the rights and well-being of children. Some 300 religious leaders and grass-roots workers from every major world religion attended GNRC's first forum in that same year. The GNRC made the following commitments to the Special Session on Children:

- To establish a Council on Global Ethics Education for Children consisting of people of faith, educators and others. Focusing primarily on the primary-school years, its mandate will be to work in cooperation with the UN to make the development of spirituality in children – including ethical values and esteem for people of different religions and civilizations – an essential part of quality education.
- To further strengthen efforts to eradicate poverty, the root cause of the deteriorating environment experienced by children, giving attention not only to external causes but to those that stem from the human heart. Plans for specific actions will be formulated at the three-day GNRC Conference to be held immediately following the Special Session.

- To do the utmost to exercise leadership and set an example among the people, seeking to generate a universal moral force to propel implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in both industrialized and developing countries and mobilizing people from all walks of life to contribute to the Global Movement for Children.