

Role of religions in peace building in Africa

BY YACOB NEGUSSIE

The United Religions Initiative organized a two-day conference in Kampala, Uganda last week on the theme of "The Role of Religions to Build Peace, Security and Counter Violent Extremism in Africa." The conference was aimed at exploring constructive ways of resolving conflicts and building peace and security at local, national, regional and continental level by working in partnership with governments, African Union Commission and the United Nations. It also focused on helping different religions in Africa understand the important role they must play in promoting a culture of peace, security, reconciliation, harmony and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals as one practical action to bring peace and human security in Africa.

On the opening of the conference, Vice-President of Uganda, His Excellency Mr. Edward Ssekandi, condemned violence motivated by religion and urged religious leaders to work closely with governments to fight groups that continue to kill innocent people in the name of religion. About 80 people who were killed in twin bombs in Kampala in July 2010 by member of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group and families are still mourning their relatives death, the Vice-President said. He appealed to



Left to right Chief Fidel Ayogu, High Commissioner of Nigeria, Representative of African ambassadors, Ambassador Musie Hailu URI representative to ECA, His Excellency Mr. Edward Ssekandi Vice-President of Uganda, Bishop Pchola Board Chairman, URI Lakes Region

the participants of the conference and to the people of Africa to live according to the teaching of the Golden Rule of 'Love your neighbour the way you would want to be loved'. The Vice-President acknowledged the great work of URI in Africa and expressed his support for a positive initiative in promoting the teaching of the Golden Rule in Africa.

In his opening remarks, Ambassador Mussie Hailu, Representative of United Religions Initiative to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union and Board Chairman of Interfaith Peace-building Initiative said "Religion can no longer be an accomplice to war, or to any other forms of violence, organized or spontaneous, against any member of the human family and nobody should be killed in the name of God or religion.

Religions should provide a powerful example in their common rejection of violence and should stand for defence of values of respect for life and the dignity of human rights of all individuals as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Bearing in mind the role of religions to create a better world, people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions throughout the world established the United Religions Initiative to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings". Ambassador Mussie added "We support the aim and purpose of the African Union and welcome the initiative of the African Union

Commission and African Religious Leaders in launching the African Union Interfaith Dialogue Forum.

We want to join hands with the African Union as there is a strong need to foster partnership among different religions in Africa to work together with the African Union and its member countries and different organizations to advance peace, security, reconciliation, justice, healing and to counter violent extremism". Highlighting on the need of the Golden Rule Ambassador Mussie said "The Golden Rule which says 'Treat others the way you want to be treated' is affirmed in many religions, traditions, indigenous cultures, and secular philosophies as a fundamental principle of life and the foundation on which moral value and ethics is established and it is a fundamental principle that addresses critical issues such as democracy,

human rights, respect for each other, gender equality, social development, interfaith harmony, constructive dialogue among nations, conflict prevention, and building human relationships."

Without peace and security there can be no development, growth and tranquillity, Ambassador Mussie said. In his address, he acknowledged the efforts of Ethiopia to bring peace and security in Somalia and the role she played in Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia and now in Southern Sudan with peace keeping missions. He also acknowledged Burundi and Uganda for sending a peace keeping mission to Somalia to help the people of Somalia in their efforts to restore peace, security and the rule of law.

In his message sent for the conference on behalf of the URI global community, The Rev. Canon

Charles P. Gibbs, Executive Director of URI said "In these challenging days in Africa and around the world, where it is so easy to feel overwhelmed and defeated by forces of division, hatred and violence, I urge you to let your dreams of Africa and the world filled with peace, justice and healing soar like an eagle and roar like a lion. You are the light of a new day; this is dawning- a day when the practice of the Golden Rule-'Do for others what you would have others do for you'-has helped transform poverty into sufficiency, oppression into liberty, corruption into integrity, division into solidarity, hatred into love, and violence into peace."

On her message sent for the conference, H.E. Ambassador Epiphanie Kabushemeye-Ntamwana, Ambassador of Burundi and Chairperson of Peace and Security Council of African Union for the month of August said "I have attended different events organized by the Interfaith Peace-building Initiative and United Religions Initiative Africa at the African Union and I highly commend the work of the organizers of the conference for the values they continue to deploy in Africa in promoting interfaith harmony, peace and security. I share your motto that the Golden Rule is at the core of each religions and faith tradition and we need to highlight it more than ever. As the quest for peace, security and justice and the need to overcome violent extremism bind religions, interfaith organizations, governments and the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, we are looking forward to work in partnership with URI and IPI closely for peace to prevail in Africa".

The Dean of African Ambassadors in Uganda, H. E. Mr. Chief Fidel Ayogu, High Commissioner of Nigeria to Uganda, representing African Ambassadors said "The theme of the conference captured the dream of all African citizens and this could be easier achieved by direct application of the Golden Rule teaching in our dealings with each other and in our daily life. We support this initiative and look forward to working with you to make this happen".

The Director of Institute for Security Studies Addis Ababa Office, Ambassador Olusegun Akinsarya in the solidarity message he sent for the occasion said "The Institute is convinced that faith-based institutions need to be more pro-active in peace initiatives and efforts and that such forums will be a great opportunity to create a continental network for continental engagement. It is my deepest belief that the conference will be a platform for experience sharing and will help to lay more foundation for future laudable action".

In her message sent from the United Nations in New York, Mrs. Monica Willard, President of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations said "It is so important for us to recognize the many things we learn from our religions that help and guide us to choose and build peace. May the spirit of peace that is in every faith be something that you experience in a new way at this conference. Put your faith into action and live the Golden Rule by doing unto others what you would have them do to you".

In his closing remark Sheikh Ibrahim Ssali, Secretary General of Union of Muslim Council for East Central and Southern Africa expressed the commitment of his organization to work with URI Africa in promoting the teaching of the Golden Rule and interfaith harmony in Africa and also promoting constructive dialogue among different religions

Papers were presented on the role of religions in peace-building from the perspectives of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Bahai, Sikh and Hindu. H.E. Ambassador Sayd Ahmed Sheikh Dahir, Ambassador of Somalia to Uganda also presented a paper on the challenge of Al-Shabab for peace and Security in Somalia and its impact in Africa. Dr. Immanuel Ivogba also presented paper on the religious conflicts in Nigeria. Prof. Omona Andrew Davis presented on Religious Peace Efforts and Challenges in the Great Lakes Region. Religious leaders from over six different religions and the 80 participants who came from different parts of Africa pledged to commit to the effort of building peace, security and overcoming violent extremism in Africa.

In the Kampala Declaration all the participants welcomed the actions of Interfaith Peace-building Initiative in Ethiopia and endorsed Golden Rule Day Proclamation and agreed on the need of the teaching of Golden Rule as one practical action to promote interfaith harmony, respect among people and to build a culture of peace. The participants also committed to a personal pledge for peace and non-violence and agreed to work together to bring a positive change in Africa and create a better future for this generation and generations yet to come. In their declaration, the participants called upon mass media to avoid the wide dissemination of stereotypes and biased images, and to promote better understanding between different cultures and religions. They also agreed to take concrete action to bring positive change in Africa and called upon Africa religious leaders to

enhance and exercise their crucial role as actors of peace and to be a living example of the values they are teaching. In their declaration the participants also affirm the need of creating a platform to foster partnership among different religions in Africa to work together with African Union and its member countries and different organizations to advance peace, security, reconciliation, justice, development and to counter violent extremism in Africa

United Religions Initiative (URI) is an international interfaith organization working to build global interfaith cooperation for a better world. URI is NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It has representative at the United Nations in New York and at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

URI Africa currently has 95 member organizations (CC) in 25 African countries including Interfaith Peace-building Initiative in Ethiopia. Plans to establish URI CCs in all Member States of African Union are underway.

The vision of URI Africa is to see united, prosperous, and peaceful Africa where there is no religious strife and where followers of different religions live and work together in harmony so that future generations will inherit, with pride, a peaceful land that is rich with many possibilities and diversity. The mission of URI Africa is to create a platform in Africa where different religions followers could come together to make religions a healing force in Africa and build bridges of lasting peace, respect and harmony. The purpose of URI Africa is to promote interfaith cooperation, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, a culture of peace, healing, reconciliation, trust building, the teaching of the Golden Rule, to resolve religiously motivated violence and conflict in Africa in partnership with African Union, member states of African Union, different religions, Civil Societies and other organizations.