

**Keynote Speech to the
Consultation on a UN Decade of Interreligious Dialogue**

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Your Eminences, Excellencies, distinguished friends and colleagues, welcome to Bossey!

This is the pre-eminent institution for Christian ecumenical formation in the world. Church leaders and students from all over the world come here to learn why they should and how they could relate to other Christians from traditions that are different from their own. Indeed, this is what the World Council of Churches does. It brings together a wide diversity of Christian communions to become one fellowship of churches. This year we celebrate six decades of working at what we call the “visible unity of the church.” And we are not quite there yet. Most of our Orthodox communions celebrated Christmas this past week, long after Protestants have thrown away their dried-up Christmas trees! This, of course, is not the most urgent of our problems. But even on a matter like agreeing on a common date for Christmas or Easter we still have our disagreements.

Two and a half years ago, speaking at a conference entitled “A Critical Moment in Interfaith Dialogue” I made reference to an important principle that characterizes the Ecumenical Movement. The Lund principle, so called because it originated in the city of Lund in Sweden at a 1952 conference on Faith and Order movement, which affirms that we will act together in all things, except when deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately. This principle has held the ecumenical table together for all these decades. Despite age-old differences in tradition and even theological disagreements, there is a deep and abiding commitment to stay at the table and work together. At the Critical Moment conference, I said that it is time we took this principle which worked so well at the ecumenical table, and applied it to the interreligious arena. Indeed the time has come when Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, Bahai’s, Zoroastrians and people of native religious traditions say together with Christians, we will act together in all things, except when deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately.

The context of the world we are living in demands nothing less. So what if we begin right here at Bossey to train young people not just in Christian ecumenical formation, but also in interreligious formation, and perhaps create similar centers elsewhere in the world, so that 60 years from now – as far into the future as WCC and indeed the UN have existed – we have a strong cadre of leaders who are not only committed to working together interreligiously, but have the theological sophistication of their religious traditions and skills to do the necessary work of peace-building.

The present initiative to consult with senior religious and diplomatic leaders on the possibility of a UN Decade of Interreligious Dialogue is a necessary step in that direction. As we begin our deliberations here let me offer you a few points that will hopefully guide your discussion.

First, from the perspective of my native Kenya, let me bring you an agricultural image. In my growing up years, it was very obvious to me that if one is looking to get good fruit, grain or other kinds of produce, one must have a long term commitment to the cycles of nature. We do not plant today and expect a good harvest tomorrow, indeed not even next year. Smart farmers are patient. They know that it takes years, even decades for the ground to yield a good harvest. Now, of course, this is not easy, because children need to be fed today and not a decade from now. Farmers overcome this problem by doing their work together and cooperatively. In times of

difficulty and misfortune, a solid network supports them. And at harvest time they come together in great celebration. It is that attitude of coming together and working together that has led to the African saying: "If you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to go far, walk together with others."

The value of this gathering is your willingness to dream big. We are not talking about cultivating one person's land. We are not talking about planting one kind of produce. Similarly we are not talking about one religious community embracing interreligious dialogue. We are not talking about having only theological or philosophical conversations that have characterized interfaith dialogue for a generation. I hope we can agree that what we are here to try and figure out a new way of relating to each other across religions, cultures, ethnicities, national borders or political orientation. When we say interreligious dialogue today, we are not talking only about religious faith, but about identity. We now recognize that people's religious faith cannot be divorced from their cultural, ethnic, national identity or political orientation. Despite that complexity, I hope we can agree that what we are doing here is nothing less than finding new ways of relating -- new ways of bringing people together in community.

A project of that magnitude, let us agree, cannot be accomplished by any one of our religious communities, by any one country, or any one UN agency or by making this an emphasis for a year or two. What it would require is for the pre-eminent international and multi-lateral body, the United Nations itself, to make a commitment, not for a year or two, for that would be nothing other than paying lip-service to a nice idea, but for an entire decade, when the work of preparing the ground, planting, watering, pruning, watching it grow and harvesting can take place.

We have good experience in doing this. The WCC is presently in the middle of a Decade to Overcome Violence. From 2001 we have engaged in a sustained process of helping churches to understand why and how we must energetically engage in finding alternatives to violence. Before that, from 1988 – 1998, we engaged in a Decade of Churches in solidarity with women. Obviously the difficulty that women are faced with in their churches, including what is called the stained-glass ceiling, is still very much a fact of life. But the work that began with that decade has significantly advanced that cause. Similarly in 2011 at the culmination of the Decade to Overcome Violence, sadly, violence may still be with us, but we would have significantly advanced the cause of overcoming violence. These are ambitious projects, the results of which we will take generations to see. The present proposal is by no means less so, and indeed, because it engages a broader table that brings religious communities to participation with the UN and its hope of fundamentally changing the way we relate to each other as human beings and communities, one might say even more ambitious.

The UN too, has a history of decades. The UN decade for women (1976-85) and the UN decade for Indigenous peoples (1994 – 2003), UN decade for Human Rights Education (1995 – 2004), UN Decade for Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the world (2001 – 2010) are a few that immediately come to mind. Most recently, the UN has committed resources to a UN literacy decade (2003-2012) and a UN decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and a UN Decade for Action on water for life (2005 – 2015). These decades may not eradicate the

problems. But they will significantly raise consciousness, enhance education and encourage action that will lead towards real solutions.

Sometimes the UN gives leadership to an issue and civil society and the religious communities pick it up. So, for instance, the churches picked up on the question of women, eradication of poverty, culture of peace, sustainable development and now they are coming on board with issues of water. Similarly, the religious communities are getting on board with the recommendations of the Millennium Development Goals of the UN, working with civil society players towards achieving these goals.

But at other times, the religious community takes leadership on an issue and the UN then picks it up and raises its profile. So, for instance, back in 1966, influenced by the civil rights struggle in the United States and the intensified struggle of racially oppressed people of South Africa, WCC's Life and Work conference meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, drew emphatic attention to the relation between economic, political and racial oppression, and called for a radical structural change and open solidarity with the oppressed. This led in 1969, to the establishment of one of the most highly profiled programmes of the WCC, the Programme to Combat Racism. Initially designated for five years, it was extended for an entire decade, until the end of 1979. A significant body of theological work, holding that racism is a sin and is incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ, energized the churches to begin to work on challenging the racist structures in their own countries and to exert pressure on apartheid regimes like that of South Africa. It was following the churches' action that the UN General Assembly designated the decade beginning on 10 December 1973 (Human Rights Day) as the Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination.

This pattern is true of interreligious dialogue as well. Churches have struggled with this question for almost a century now. As far back as 36 years ago, the WCC formalized that commitment by establishing a department for interreligious dialogue. During that period we have begun to explore among Christian churches the particular theological value we place on our relationships with our neighbors of other religious traditions. Needless to say, we still have a long way to go. But now we are ready to take it to a body like the UN and have them pick it up, give it a significant boost of resources and broaden the platform of participation around the world. During my meeting with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon last October, I informed him of this initiative and that this meeting will finalize the proposal.

This brings me to my second point – timing. The time is right. Thirty six years ago, interreligious dialogue was mostly an academic exercise where religious leaders and scholars would gather to compare theological constructs and split philosophical hairs. Today, interreligious dialogue is an entirely different matter. Interreligious cooperation in real life contexts is being given greater currency.

Indeed, the 21st century has seen a significant resurgence of religion. The fears and anxieties with which most people have to struggle daily, have intensified in our time. As I travel the world and meet people of various stripes, I can feel a deep human yearning for meaning, a longing for something beyond.

We are also living at a time when science and technology have brought about a revolution in information. People are bombarded with information day in and day out, but not enough guidance to make sense of that information. So, people turn to religion looking to try and make meaning of this confusion. But what tools can religion provide?

Within all our religious traditions are those who thrive on certainty. They are absolutist and exclusivist in their orientation, and know for sure that they have the corner on the truth. They are able to say to those who experience the anxieties of our age something that they can easily get a handle on: certainty. There is no grey area here: only black or white. President Bush spoke to this sentiment when he said, you are either with us, or you are against us. Again, there is no possibility of grey here. There is no nuance that is possible.

Then there are other religious people, again, in all of our traditions, who are more moderate and pluralist in their orientation. Most of us in this room, I would venture to guess, have such an orientation. We understand that life is complex and ambiguous. We can see the possibilities of truth in this point of view and the other point of view. We understand nuance. We can see grey in most of the things. Such Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Bahai's and Zoroastrians can sit together with Christians and try to figure out how to live differently, while living together. We can learn how to affirm the others' dignity in their difference.

But that is a much more difficult process. Nuances don't translate into 8 second sound bites. We need to write a long essay to explain something with footnotes, when all that others do is to offer a catchy sentence or phrase to a TV camera. It is not that this is inherently impossible for pluralistic religion, it's just that we have not been very smart about how to do this in a way that communicates. So, much of the religious resurgence of the 21st century has been in extremist religion. And sometimes extremist religion turns violent or legitimizes violence. This is when religion becomes dangerous.

Eboo Patel, a young Muslim who leads an organization called Interfaith Youth Core points out in his recent book, "Acts of Faith," that most suicide bombers are between 15 and 30 years of age. At a time in their youthful lives when they are most adaptable to religious formation, they come under the influence of extremist religion. Those who are pluralistic in orientation don't reach these young people. It is true that each of our religious traditions must reach out to our young people. But it is also true that we are living in an age when we cannot do this alone. We need the support, the encouragement and the resources of each other's religious community. We are not trying to reach one young person here and another one there. We absolutely must reach large groups of young people and we can only do that if we are able to pool our resources and strategize together.

And then finally, but most importantly, we must recognize that we are not just another group of NGOs. We are religious communities. This means that we have at our disposal significant spiritual resources. We understand the search for meaning, we value our traditions, we know power of rituals and symbols, and we know the authority of scripture. Most of our communities gather every week, and through ritual and tradition re-enact the presence of the divine among us. We listen to one religious leader say to the gathering of 50 or 5000, something

similar to, “this is God’s will for you. Live this way.” And we collect money! And of course, this too is done ritually.

This is the added value that we bring to the table that NGOs are unable to bring. Too often because we find ourselves with governmental actors, we tend to sublimate our spiritual values in order to stay within a secular paradigm. We worry that governmental actors and UN leaders won’t give us the time of day if we do not appear secular. This is a fundamental mistake that religious communities often make. If governmental actors are not relating to us, that’s not because they are looking for those who are secular, but because they are looking for people who have access to power, and we don’t appear to have access to power! And when we sublimate our spiritual resources, we are immediately giving up on the power that is innately ours.

We need to recognize that governmental actors and UN leaders are also persons who have been schooled in religious traditions, and even if they function in a secular paradigm are people with religious sensibilities. When we act as people with access to power – indeed, to divine and spiritual power – we can connect with the governmental players.

It is very important that we ask ourselves about the spiritual resources that we as religious communities bring to the table. How do we ground our work in the spiritual life of our religious communities? How will our presence at this table spiritually impact those in public life at the UN? What added value can we offer because religious communities are taking the lead? These are critical questions that we must ask ourselves.

Friends, we need to find a different way to speak to this generation. We must discover a way to speak that is nuanced and thoughtful on the one hand, but succinct and clear on the other. We must find a way of speaking to our common values that helps people navigate the fears, anxieties and the information that bombard them with a compass that guides them through common values. But we cannot do this separately anymore. Indeed, we must not do separately anything other than those that deep differences of conviction compel us to do separately. We must find this way together. That is the value and the genius of a UN Decade on interreligious dialogue. The religious leaders of the world must find a way to convince the most august multi-lateral body in the world, the UN, to act in a way that will powerfully and significantly advance our journey towards a different way of relating as human beings in this world.