**UN World Interfaith Harmony Week commemorated in Nigeria**

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The Universal Peace Federation - Nigeria in collaboration with the United Religions Initiative -West Africa organized the Conference of Religious Educators, Leaders and Organizations on Interreligious Peace as part of activities to commemorate the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week 2017 on February 4 at the National Merit Award House, Maitama, Abuja with a resolution by participants to become interreligious citizens and proclamation of Nigeria as a multi-religious nation that should strive to become an interreligious nation by year 2020.

The conference brought together over 120 participants from across the country and representatives of various religious traditions in Nigeria. Beginning with the interfaith invocation, representatives of Christianity, Islam, Bahai, Krishna movement and the Unification movement offered prayers for peace and success of the conference as well as for religious groups in Nigeria to work together to save the nation.

Dr George Ikpot, UPF Director of International Affairs gave the welcome address which emphasized the significance of the event and the dedication of 2017 as National Year for Interreligious Harmony and Cooperation by UPF Nigeria. Ambassador Babatunde Adegbesan gave the Chairman’s opening remarks with calls for commitment to interreligious dialogue and actions and an appeal to all stakeholders to work together to bring religious impact on national policies in Nigeria “as our increasing religious organizations should lead to decreasing criminality and social ills”.

The Panel presentations were by representatives of the Krisha movement, Christianity, Islamic Movement of Nigeria, Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Nigeria, Africa Clergy Leadership Conference and United Religions Initiative. UPF Nigeria Secretary General, Dr. Raphael Ogar Oko gave the keynote address which was focused on **“Architecture for Interreligious Harmony and Cooperation”** with an explanation that “we need an interreligious ideology, interreligious citizens and interreligious environment to be able to arrive at the needed interreligious culture, structure and infrastructure for interreligious peace in Nigeria”.

The presentations were followed by the Interfaith Bridge of Peace ceremony where participants from different religious groups embraced each other and made a pledge never to support or take part of any form of interreligious violence but to work together transcending the borders of religions and denominations. Conference participants affirmed that they are “interreligious citizens” whose duty is to increase the number of Nigerians into the realm of interreligious citizenship and also proclaimed Nigeria as a multi-religious nation that should strive toward becoming an interreligious nation by 2020 and not be classified as a secular nation which denies the existence of the Divine Creator that all religious groups acknowledge.

The conference participants endorsed the UPF Nigeria and URI West Africa commitment of dedicating 2017 to the promotion of Interreligious Harmony and Cooperation in Nigeria as a response to overcoming the religious challenges facing the Nigeria nation.

Participants supported the call for the establishment of National Assembly Committees on Interreligious Affairs as well as the creation of the Federal Ministry of Interreligious Affairs, the introduction of Interreligious Studies in schools, the establishment of Interreligious Worship center in Abuja and the devotion of 10 percent of annual budget to religious matters in Nigeria. The conference participants representing the different religious groups in Nigeria affirmed that there is One Divine Creator of all people and that all human beings originated from One Creator and are therefore brothers and sisters who should live in peace on earth as a condition to rest in peace in the great beyond.

As a follow up to the conference, the UPF Nigeria and URI West Africa were mandated to coordinate the work on constituting an interfaith Study Committee on Interreligious Affairs to work on engaging critical stakeholders, especially scholars of religious studies in educational institutions on strategies for empowerment of religious organizations as well as promotion of interreligious cooperation.

The Study Committee on Interreligious Affairs is a representative group of religious and faith based educators, leaders and organizations as well as institutions and agencies committed to working together to develop and promote policies and programs for interreligious harmony and cooperation in Nigeria. It is open to religious people from the various religious traditions of the world.

Already, about ten scholars from different educational institutions have written to join the study committee in addition to other participants at the conference. They are Prof. Jacob Kehinde Ayantayo, Professor of Religious Ethics, Sociology of Religion, Interreligious Conflicts and Peace Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Emmanuel Osewe AKUBOR PhD, Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Helen Oyekanmi, Head of Department, Religious Education Department, Baptist College of Theology, Oyo, Philip A. Akinwande, Priest at the Anglican Diocese of Lagos, and Dr. Peter Ropo Awoniyi of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho. Others are Oni, Deborah Oluwapelumi, PhD student of sociology of religion, university of Ibadan, Oshomoh, Titus Ojo, PhD Student of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Rev. Dr Peter Awojobi, Ukeanchusim Chidinma Precious of the Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Professor Lateef Mobolaji Adetona, PhD Islamic (Contemporary) Studies and Head, Department of Religions and Peace Studies, Lagos State University.

The study committee will be working on guidelines that should be adopted in working toward an interreligious ideology that will inspire the development of interreligious code of conduct for all religions in Nigeria, the interreligious curriculum of education and the need for an interreligious constitution for Nigeria. The study committee will be examining the UPF Founders’ vision and teachings on interreligious relations in order to develop a “new expression of religious education for all Nigerians” in view of the fact Nigerians have more challenges in the expression of religions than in the intention of religions.

At the closing session of the conference, some distinguished Nigerians from different religious groups were appointed as Ambassadors for Peace dedicated to the promotion of interreligious affairs by the Universal Peace Federation and these included Hon. Elisha Buba Yero of the URI, Hajiya Gwamma Jaafaru, President of Prisons Officers Wives Association, Alhaji Isyaku Umar (Dan Amanar Daura), Sabo Abubakar Mamman, Mmanti Umoh, Saint Okechukwu Olise and Elizabeth Olise, Ivi Stanley Chukwuemeka, Stephen Ikenna Cyril and Ighiwiyisi Roland Osas. Others appointed were Egwu Alphonsus Toochi, Chidera Ahanonu Samuel, Amos Ayodele Akinmulewo, Dr Aderemi Olusegun, Okeke Fabian Toochukwu, Engr Abba Ibrhaim Makintami and Samuel E. Okoh

By the success of the conference to commemorate the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week 2017, organizers are hopeful that the follow up work of the Study Committee on Interreligious Affairs and the Interreligious Ambassadors for Peace, the several religious challenges facing Nigeria shall be addressed in professional ways. Follow up meetings are being planned to promote the architecture for interreligious harmony and cooperation among core stakeholders and working sessions of the study committee as well as interreligious pilgrimages to religious places and holy places are being discussed. The study committee on interreligious affairs shall be following up on letters to the National Assembly and the Federal Executive Council on the need for national assembly committee on interreligious affairs and the federal ministry for interreligious affairs endorsed at the conference.

Conference photos are available online via <https://goo.gl/photos/UdsAjY6kiMCivzeNA>