

# A Summary of the Global Faith Forum

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By Marianna Richardson

The Global Faith Forum was held the day before the IRF Summit at the same venue, the Washington DC Hilton. The conference focused on gathering faith leaders and advocates who will unite around the shared values of dignity and respect for others in a world where discord persists. In a world faced with polarization and conflict, the purpose of the messages of this conference was to engage in meaningful dialogue, to form relationships, to share ideas, and to inspire actions that will transform the communities we live in. The three founders of this organization are Imam Mohamed Magid, Ambassador Rabbi David Saperstein and Pastor Bob Roberts, Jr. The comment was made that the people at the conference represented average people trying to expand peace

## Comments by Ambassador Rabbi David Saperstein

Ambassador Rabbi David Saperstein emphasized the interconnectedness of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom. He highlighted the decline of democracy and the rise of authoritarian regimes since 2006, noting that these trends often lead to increased restrictions on religious freedom. Saperstein argued that religious freedom is essential for the exercise of other human rights and vice versa.

He pointed out the persecution faced by religious minorities in various countries, including the Uyghurs in China, Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar, and Muslims in India. Saperstein described how authoritarian governments and non-state actors use religious discrimination to maintain control, often targeting minority groups for persecution.

He also mentioned the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, where recent conflicts have displaced millions and worsened living conditions. Saperstein criticized the U.S. for withdrawing from its historic leadership role in promoting democracy and human rights, leaving a vacuum filled by destabilizing forces from countries like China and Russia.

Saperstein called for a renewed commitment to religious freedom and human rights, urging religious communities to work together to support peacebuilding and social service efforts. He stressed that the decisions made in the coming years will significantly impact the future of humanity, and it is crucial to use technology and resources wisely to promote peace and protect the environment for future generations.

## Nikki Roberts: Engaging Women

Nikki Roberts, Pastor Bob Roberts, Jr.'s wife, discussed her grass roots movement to bring women together from different backgrounds and faiths. She emphasized the vital role women play in building bridges of peace. She asserted that women are inherently relational and intentional in forming friendships, often acting as empathetic listeners. This emotional connection allows women to quickly bond and create lasting relationships.

Roberts highlighted the influential power of women, noting that they set the tone in their homes and significantly impact their children's attitudes towards multifaith work. A mother's passion for peace and interfaith collaboration can deeply influence her children, extending to schools and communities. She stressed that building bridges of peace is not only for the current generation but for future ones, making it essential for these values to be passed down.

Roberts shared a personal story about meeting a new supermarket checker wearing a hijab. By consistently choosing her line and smiling, Roberts formed a connection, demonstrating the importance of small, everyday actions in building relationships. She emphasized that community members notice these interactions, furthering the influence of women in fostering peace.

In her multifaith women's group, which has been active for 15 years, Roberts found one of the highlights of her life. The group, initially formed around cooking traditional meals together, evolved into a platform for sharing religious traditions and building strong, respectful relationships. These women have supported each other through significant life events, from mourning losses to celebrating births, and have collaborated on community service projects.

Roberts expressed her dream of expanding these multifaith groups, called Inspire, across the country and the world. These groups aim to form authentic relationships and increase understanding of diverse beliefs without compromising one's own. By uniting for peace, women empower each other and become exceptional peacemakers and community builders. Roberts concluded with an analogy about an eagle needing two strong wings to soar, symbolizing the importance of men and women working together for peace.

## Imam Mohamed Magid: The Sudan Crisis

Imam Mohamed Magid spoke passionately about the crisis in Sudan, where a civil war has caused devastating destruction. Hospitals and schools have been destroyed, and tens of thousands of people have died, leaving many as refugees. Imam Magid highlighted the tragedy that the crisis in Sudan is not widely discussed, emphasizing the need for awareness and action.

He shared his experiences working with multi-faith networks to build relationships among religious communities in the United States and around the world. Since 2014, he and his colleagues have been involved in peacebuilding efforts in 25 cities and 16 countries, including his birth country, Sudan.

Imam Magid recounted a retreat in Sudan that brought together Christian and Muslim religious leaders to build relationships and work on social services. Unfortunately, the outbreak of war shortly after the retreat led to significant loss of life, with around 150,000 people killed and millions displaced. He described how the same groups responsible for violence in 2003 have continued their attacks, causing widespread suffering.

Imam Magid called for the American public and faith communities to address the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. He urged people to support efforts to bring peace and help those in need by donating money and volunteering. He emphasized the importance of working together to make a

difference, not just in Sudan but globally, to combat persecution and uphold the rights of religious minorities.

Reflecting on the impact of the crisis on his own family, who were displaced from Sudan, Imam Magid expressed his hope for a united effort to address the suffering and work towards a better future for all. He concluded by encouraging everyone to get involved and support the cause, highlighting the motto, "We do stuff," to underscore the need for action and commitment.

## Pastor Bob Roberts, Jr.: Opportunities for Peacemaking

Pastor Bob Roberts, Jr. emphasized the importance of people getting along and working together. He shared the organization's mission to mobilize people around the world to serve others, including in places like Sudan, where Jews have joined their trips. Pastor Roberts highlighted the significance of living the gospel of Jesus through service and natural conversations to benefit humanity.

He identified two key aspects of their approach: "hyper relationships" and "hyper engagement." Hyper relationships involve forming genuine friendships with people who are different, breaking down barriers, and fostering mutual care. He illustrated this with examples of his friendships with individuals from various faiths, including Muslims in Afghanistan and Jews.

Hyper engagement focuses on collaborative civic engagement, addressing community needs, and making the world better. Pastor Roberts mentioned the importance of serving together and taking action to help those in need, regardless of religious differences. He shared his experiences in Vietnam and Afghanistan, where he learned to love and work with people of different faiths, emphasizing the importance of religious freedom for all.

Pastor Roberts also discussed the unexpected opportunities to engage in peacemaking and work with religious and political leaders. He highlighted the concept of the Kingdom of God, which includes caring about all aspects of life, from family to the economy. He stressed that his commitment to helping others is not dependent on political leadership but on a fundamental belief in serving humanity.

He concluded by encouraging everyone to embrace the idea of loving people and working together to achieve peace and understanding. He invited his friend Assad to join him on stage, illustrating the success of their collaborative efforts in Pakistan, where pastors and imams now openly visit each other's places of worship, fostering peaceful coexistence. Pastor Roberts emphasized that when people start loving each other, anything is possible.

## An Interview with Elder Ulisses Soares

Pastor Bob Roberts, Jr. led an informal conversation with Elder Ulisses Soares, an apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, on the large stage of the Washington Hilton Ballroom. Pastor Roberts started by talking about how he got to know the LDS people through his relationships with Brett Scharffs over freedom of religion issues and how it bridged the gap to his understanding of the LDS religion. Pastor Roberts stated that he knew that Elder Soares mattered to him and to God. He acknowledged that

they would disagree about points of doctrine and asked for forgiveness if Elder Soares had ever been wounded by an evangelical.

Pastor Roberts asked Elder Soares the question, “What do you admire about Baptists?” Elder Soares responded that he admired your desire to share your testimonies of Christ and spread the word of Jesus Christ. He was impressed with your knowledge of the Bible and how you share what you know with others. Elder Soares said that he loved your purpose and commitment to follow Christ and in everything you do, Christ is the focus of your life.

Then, Pastor Roberts answered the question, too, about what he admired most about Latter-day Saints. He admires the fact that the LDS people are good people, that they serve other people around the world, and they emphasize the issue of religious freedom. Pastor Roberts stated that he loved the Latter-day Saints’ spirit and heart.

The work of LDS missionaries was discussed. Elder Soares pointed out that these young people give up two years to eighteen months of their lives to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to people around the world. Retired senior couples also join in on the work of inviting others to follow Christ and His teachings.

Pastor Roberts invited Elder Soares to talk about temples. He explained that temples are sacred places of worship, and they are not places where we have regular Church activities. Instead, these are dedicated buildings to the Lord where only people who are faithful and have a special recommend may enter. Before a temple is dedicated, all may enter the temple and view the beauty and holiness of the building. He gave an invitation to all to visit the open house for the Salt Lake City Temple in 2026.

## Additional Highlights from the Forum

**Matius Ho** of the Leimena Institute in Jakarta, Indonesia discussed his work in training teachers about diversity and promoting positive interfaith dialogue. The Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) program in Indonesia aims to foster peaceful interfaith relations and productive collaborations. The program emphasizes three competencies: personal competency (understanding one's own religion), comparative competency (understanding other religions from their followers' perspectives), and collaborative competency (working together with respect for differences).

The CCRL program trains K-12 teachers from diverse religious backgrounds, including Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Confucianist educators. The program started online during the COVID-19 pandemic and combines live interactions with self-study. Participants engage in discussions with religious scholars and leaders, enhancing their understanding and empathy. Graduates have formed initiatives like student exchange visits between Christian and Islamic schools, promoting mutual respect and collaboration. The program has trained over 9,000 educators and continues to expand, aiming to combat prejudices and build bridging social capital vital for a diverse society's smooth functioning.

**Ambassador Rashad Hussain**, serving as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, emphasized that religious freedom is fundamental to human rights and at the heart of what it means to be human. He highlighted the critical role of civil society in defending religious freedom and the importance of addressing these issues with political leaders globally.

Hussain praised the contributions of various individuals, including Senators Brackbank and Saperstein, in advancing religious freedom.

He stressed that countries protecting religious freedom tend to be more prosperous and enjoy broader human rights. Hussain highlighted the importance of integrating religious freedom concerns into policy discussions, including at the National Security Council. He acknowledged the ongoing challenges and emphasized the need for long-term efforts to protect religious freedom and human rights.

Hussain noted the strong bipartisan support for religious freedom and the crucial role of multilateral institutions in addressing these concerns. He underscored the importance of consistency in upholding constitutional values and aggressively protecting people of all faiths.

For future ambassadors, Hussain advised persistence and consistency in defending religious freedom. He urged leaders to build relationships with others working in this field and to advocate for those experiencing religious persecution. Hussain highlighted the need for new strategies and substantive knowledge to continue this critical work.

**Ahmed Shehata**, CEO of Islamic Relief USA, spoke about the importance of working together across religious and cultural boundaries without compromising one's faith. He highlighted that people of different religions can collaborate on humanitarian efforts, such as addressing the global displacement crisis. Shehata shared examples of successful partnerships between Muslims and Christians, demonstrating how faith-based organizations can work together to support communities in need.

He stressed that helping others and building relationships are central to peacemaking and humanitarian work. Shehata pointed out that humanitarian efforts often involve lifesaving work for those on the brink of death due to conflict, persecution, or other crises. He encouraged faith-based organizations to educate their supporters about diverse communities and to travel globally to witness the impact of their work.

Shehata concluded by highlighting the need for good security, global health, and support for refugees as some of the top humanitarian priorities. He called for continued collaboration and commitment to helping others, regardless of religious or political differences.