

BELONGING - AFFIRMATIONS FOR FAITH LEADERS

BACKGROUND

Genesis of the document

Recognising that we all live in multi-religious societies, African church leaders gathered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during the 2016 World Council of Churches (WCC) Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) regional workshop on “Birth Registration and Gender Discriminatory Nationality Laws in Africa”, stressed the need to develop inter-faith strategies and affirmations in our advocacy work for the human rights of stateless people.

With the support of UNHCR as well as Council for World Mission, WCC/CCIA and the WCC Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation desk co-organised in 2017 an “Interfaith Symposium on Statelessness” in Rome, Italy. The event brought together scholars from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim traditions who reflected on what their respective traditions taught in relation to non-discrimination, gender equality, as well as birth registration, which are three important elements the lack of which can lead to statelessness. They also identified the need to develop Interfaith Affirmations on Belongingness.

After several discussions, and with the technical support of UNHCR colleagues, a small group of religious scholars from different traditions developed a first draft of the *Interfaith Affirmations on Belongingness* during the mid-2021. Additional inputs were then sought from colleagues at Religions for Peace, as well as the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion. The text was also shared with stateless people, in order to receive their guidance based on their own experiences and perspectives.

Purpose of the Affirmations

In many contexts globally, stateless people live in religiously diverse societies. Interfaith cooperation is therefore essential as we work to eradicate statelessness.

Although the world’s major religious traditions are each distinct and beautifully unique, with different sacred texts and ethical perspectives, they do share common values of solidarity, cooperation, equality and non-discrimination. Interfaith cooperation is essential for peaceful and sustainable societies, because it enables us to hold up shared values that are common across traditions in view of finding common ground for word and action.

In a world scarred by the evils of injustice, discrimination, inequality and poverty, we offer these shared *Interfaith Affirmations on Belongingness* as we strive together to address and eradicate statelessness.

May 6, 2022

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1. We recognize the special plight of stateless persons. Statelessness is the most extreme consequence of the denial of the right to nationality, and it impacts millions of people of all faiths and traditions from around the world. Bereft of the nationality of any country, stateless people are made vulnerable and are pushed to the margins of society, with minimal or no access to the basic human rights needed to live a dignified and fulfilling life.
2. Although the causes of statelessness are many, discrimination and exclusion lie at the heart of most experiences of statelessness. As religious leaders and people of different religions, we acknowledge that the statelessness of many minorities has been justified by discourses, stereotypes and prejudices perpetuated by majorities. Within our own traditions, there are understandings that privilege our own communities and marginalize others, causing their statelessness. We must stand against the use of religious teachings that often legitimize discrimination.
3. Our traditions affirm the dignity of every human being and the oneness of our human family. We commend the shared central tenets of all religions: of 'do no harm', compassion and the responsibility to care for the suffering among us. These shared teachings must become the basis of our advocacy to end statelessness.
4. Our understanding of the impacts of exclusion and discrimination must awaken us to the suffering of those who are stateless, both within and outside our faith communities. We affirm that no one is an 'alien' in our human family. We are all interconnected; when one is wounded, all are wounded.
5. We affirm that human beings should not have to flee their homes to enjoy basic rights and to have a sense of belongingness. These should be secured where they are born and anywhere they live. Everyone should feel secure and at home in our world.
6. We recognise the special vulnerability of women and girls in stateless circumstances and celebrate their contribution to life: including life-bearers and caregivers, and contributors to public service, among many other capacities. When stateless, women bear a disproportionate burden of discrimination. We affirm the need for ending systems and structures that undermine and discriminate against women and girls.
7. We affirm that children always belong and should never become victims of statelessness. Children are the expressions of innocence and hope. Stateless children inherit a world they did not create but that rejects them. We have an obligation as a global family to make this world worthy of them.
8. We all live under the same sky and all life is sacred. May we find practical ways to express and affirm that it should not be possible to be without the benefits of belonging to a country when the whole world is our home.
9. Our religious traditions affirm community and should in our time even more reckon with belongingness surpassing barriers that serve exclusion and denigration. May we find practical and lasting ways to enact and affirm that belonging is fundamental to being human.
10. We commit to cultivate the spiritual will and moral consciousness to translate the best values of our faith traditions into intentional actions for transformation. We refuse to surrender to suffering as having the final say. In the teachings of our religious traditions, we need to emphasize that there are no strangers and that no one is seen as the 'other'. May we find practical ways to support these sacred truths, so that all belong and know that they have a place of peace and security where they enjoy all fundamental human rights.