



In her speech Dr Snyder emphasised the importance of working with local leaders of religious communities — men, women and young people (including lay leaders). She highlighted the crucial role of women as active peace-builders, and the widespread authority, access and action of religious leaders, who can access vast percentages of populations in countries affected by conflict and extremism.

Dr Snyder was speaking in a panel debate entitled, 'How can open and plural societies help in peace-building? Why do we see extremist groups emerge in failed states?'

Read the speech:

It is an honour to be here today, and to see so many familiar faces from around the globe already pushing the frontiers of peace-building in challenging circumstances. Faith leaders play a vital role, every single day, in promoting and modelling the protection and dignity of all – to honour, forgive, respect and love the “other” in the midst of violence and despair. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt 5:44) – and as we know too well, that is an almost impossible task, humanly speaking.

But I bring you an example of hope from our very own Archbishop, and his third meeting with Pope Francis last month. Their growing friendship marks a historic moment for ecumenical relations, and a genuine opportunity for collaboration between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. Such a moment was unthinkable for many of us, even a generation ago. We have journeyed a long way in the last 50 years!

We sometimes forget here in the West that many of the states troubled by violent extremism are deeply religious societies. Religion is not an optional extra, or one dimension among many – it infuses every aspect of life, including the political. The co-operation of religious leaders is vital to the building of inclusive, plural – and peaceful - societies. While religion is rarely the foundational cause of violence, our sacred texts and traditions can be, and are, hijacked to promote extremist agendas. Religion – all religions – must be recognised overwhelmingly as a source of peace, not violence. And religious leaders play a critical role in drawing their communities back to these foundational principles.

Of course, 'religious leaders' are not a homogeneous group. In religion, as in politics, leaders have too often abused their power to further corruption, pernicious ideologies and even violence. Mercifully, such leaders are a small minority, and in any case I am not here to exalt the moral rectitude of religious leaders. Rather I want to show you how religious leaders occupy a unique position in their societies which, in my experience, can be pivotal to bringing lasting openness and peace.

First of all, in much of today's world, religious leaders have authority across large percentages of the population. As faith leaders, they speak to the heart of people's decision-making and identities. It is they who set the parameters of acceptable behaviour, who can initiate the transition from conflict to cooperation.

Committing acts of violence towards a fellow human being require de-facing the other, erasing their humanity and identity. Reconciliation is the process of re-humanising the other. Faith leaders have the authority and means to give communities in conflict the permission to do just that. In Egypt, for example, Bishop Mouneer and his diocese are running the Imam-Priest Exchange. This initiative brings together Muslim and Christian leaders, so they can meet face-to-face, modelling the same for their local communities . If we try to effect societal change without involving religious leaders, we are ignoring some of the most important catalysts for that process.

Of course, when including religious leaders at the peace-building tables, it is important to recognise the role they play straddling all dimensions of life, not just a small portion termed “religious”. It is equally important not to undermine the very authority which gives them influence and credibility. The beliefs and priorities which religious leaders hold must be heard and recognised. When this happens, and it is beginning to happen, these leaders are empowered as agents of change, not instrumentalised by politicians but motivated to act with conscience. In January of this year, I had the privilege of witnessing Muslim leaders lead the way in defending the rights of religious minorities at the landmark Marrakesh Declaration. Drawing on the earliest Islamic principles of the Medina Charter, this initiative recognises the responsibility to protect minority communities in Muslim-majority contexts. The challenge now is to move this through to action...

When I talk about religious leaders, I am not just talking about clergy, imams, rabbis, monks and the like. I am talking about the leaders of religious communities at every level, including men, women and youth. Although we work with the symbolic national and international figure-heads, who provide visible leadership for thousands, sometimes millions, we should not underestimate the extraordinary impact of local leaders – both religious and lay. Religious communities are listening to their leaders week in, week out, whether speaking from the pulpit or in their day-to-day interactions. These leaders are widely known, and hold positions of respect and authority in their community - their influence on attitudes and behaviour can be a profound motivator for non-violence.

And this points to a second important reality: religious leaders not only have authority, they have access. This is crucial. If violent extremism is to be tackled effectively, it must be challenged on all fronts. Religious leaders have access to all ages and all social strata. This is something I saw first-hand when he visited each of the Anglican provinces around the world. Faith communities have deep roots, permeating societies in a way that – in most countries – state apparatus simply cannot.

Open, peaceful societies are inclusive societies; they embrace everyone. And that is likewise the calling of religious leaders: to reach out to all. In 2013 the Archbishop visited Mexico, travelling with Bishop Francisco Moreno to a village in the Bishop’s own diocese of Northern Mexico. This was a challenging region where leaders rarely visited, but where an Anglican priest had worked with the community to provide access to education and employment. It was an area beyond state reach, inaccessible but for the presence of the Church.

As this example in Mexico illustrates, the presence of faith communities spreads far beyond places of worship. Across the Anglican Communion,

Anglican schools play a very important political and societal role. A large proportion of Pakistan's current political elite were educated in Anglican schools. The same is true in Sri Lanka where Trinity College in Kandy produces many of that nation's Members of Parliament. By working with faith leaders you are accessing both the educational systems which nurture the future political class, and the grassroots communities in which open, peaceful societies are made or broken.

The access of religious leaders not only crosses socioeconomic barriers but extends to both genders. As you will know, peace-building without women is impossible, and women are usually on the front-line of peace-building in their communities. Time and again it has been demonstrated that women are the 'early warning system' for violence, spotting shifts in attitude and behaviour far ahead of trends picked up externally.

Open, plural societies cannot exist without the active participation and flourishing of women. Faith communities at the grassroots level are largely driven by the efforts of women – and in the Anglican Church they are playing key roles at the highest levels. One of the largest women's network in the world is a Christian organisation – the Mothers' Union, with four million members. Both the Anglican Communion and the Mothers Union operate on the same provincial, diocesan and parish system which gives them far-reaching access.

The Mothers Union are leading the way in enabling women to move from being the victims of violence to active agents of conflict transformation. In Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, members are working to challenge gender-based violence. They run local advocacy initiatives and also contributed to the "Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict" summit held here in London two years ago.

So working with religious leaders is imperative because of their authority and their access and, finally, because of their action on the ground. As Christians, we start with Jesus Christ, who said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.' Reconciliation with God is what Jesus offers to us through Himself, that we might be reconciled with one another. Reconciliation is at the heart of our faith, and has been at the heart of the Church's work for a very long time.

Two weeks ago we were celebrating the faithful life of nonviolence of St Francis of Assisi, whose meeting with the Sultan Malik al-Kamil is an early example of peaceful Christian-Muslim encounter. In more recent history, we can look to the reconciliation ministry of Coventry Cathedral which was devastated by bombing in the Second World War, and reached out in reconciliation instead of retaliation. Since then, Coventry has gone on to promote reconciliation work globally with an ever-growing Community of the Cross of Nails bringing together people and institutions of peace worldwide, from Germany to Burundi.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Community of Sant'Egidio has worked throughout Mozambique for many years and played a leading role in the negotiations which brought peace there in 1992. In northern Nigeria, the Emir of Kano is bringing to a fruition a project which is likely benefit around a million farmers, thus depriving extremist groups of their foot soldiers. I could go on. What I hope this shows is that religious leaders are

already working in so many different contexts both to prevent violent extremism and to re-build trust in the wake of conflict.

This is because people of faith, and those who lead them, are living in the midst of conflict. For them, peace and violence are not abstract concepts – they are daily realities. The largest single Mothers’ Union group in the world is in Baghdad, where over 3000 members have been working for years to build hope and stability in communities continually under threat. So many of our bishops, including Archbishop Ben, have spent their lives walking in the midst of conflict, seeking to understand its drivers and transformative potential. When you work with faith leaders, you engage the people with first-hand experience to resource and enact peaceful transformation.

Many faith communities across the world are modelling openness, inclusivity and peace every day. We have ample opportunity to build on that work so that not only communities but whole societies become open, inclusive and peaceful places where violent extremism is given less oxygen.

Religious leaders have the *authority* to speak into existing conflicts and divisions. Through their presence, they have unrivalled *access* across boundaries of age, gender, geography, education. And they have the capacity and vocation for *action*. To engage with religious leaders, of course, requires theological and cultural sensitivity. But the possibilities when we do so are transformative and offer authentic hope.

9 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/why-all-kinds-religious-leaders-are-essential-building-peaceful-societies>