



**Fostering a culture of tolerance and diversity**

**World Evangelical Alliance response to:**

**The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

**Call for inputs on combating intolerance against persons based on religion or belief**

**16 April 2024**

**Submitted by:**

**The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)**

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## Introduction

1. We wish to thank the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for addressing the important issue of combating intolerance against persons based on religion or belief. In this submission, we stress the urgency of fostering a global dialogue for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs. We make a number of recommendations, which we hope will assist the High Commissioner in responding to General Assembly resolution 78/214.
2. The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), established in 1846, represents some 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide. These Christians live in a wide range of circumstances. Some live where Christians are in a majority and where government policy may reflect that reality. Others live in secret under government regimes where it is illegal to practice their faith. It is therefore difficult to make generalizations about their collective experience of marginalization and exclusion. However, we would like to take the opportunity to respond to this call for input and urge urgent action by all member States to encourage dialogue to promote of a culture of tolerance and peace, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs.
3. The WEA has long addressed issues of tolerance based on religion or belief. We have engaged in inter-faith dialogue in many contexts, with an intention of fostering tolerance and peace. Some examples include:
  - The Abrahamic Faiths Initiative
  - The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development
  - Religions for Peace
  - The WEA Peace and Reconciliation Network, which equips Christian leaders for inter-religious and inter-political peacemaking and resources community leaders to respond to conflict and hate that divides communities and nations
4. Our members also contribute to various multi-faith councils and forums, such as:
  - The Inter-religious Council of Kenya
  - The Interfaith Peace Platform in the Central African Republic
  - The Council of Confessions in Uzbekistan
  - The Swiss Council of Religions
  - The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka recently brought together lawyers from all religious communities to advocate jointly for religious freedom for all
  - The European Evangelical Alliance contributes to the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination
5. From our experience, these opportunities for inter-faith dialogue and engagement are effective in fostering a culture of tolerance and peace. When States support and encourage these dialogues, they are more effective and can reach a broader audience.

**Recommendation 1: Encourage all States to foster and facilitate inter-faith dialogue.**

**Hatred targeting religious minorities**

7. We have identified a pattern that leads to discrimination and persecution on the basis of religion or belief. This pattern generally starts with disinformation and hate speech. Once the majority society accepts the disinformation and spread of hatred towards a minority religious group, policies of discrimination are facilitated. Discrimination is then followed by persecution. There are many examples of the use of disinformation campaigns to spread hatred against minority religious groups. This is currently facilitated by social media.
8. In Myanmar, the government used propaganda to assert that the Rohingya Muslims are not Burmese. Rather, the state said that they were Bengali immigrants from Bangladesh dating back to colonial times. This narrative was promoted through social media<sup>i</sup> and used to justify expelling citizens from the country.

**Recommendation 2: States must refrain from inciting hatred and violence against minority groups on the basis of religion or belief.**

9. It is also common for other groups in society to spread hatred in order to marginalize another group.
10. In Pakistan, for example, the recent outbreak of violence in Jaranwala started with Muslims inciting hatred against Christians. Two Christian men allegedly defaced pages of the Quran, thereby violating blasphemy laws. However, the evidence was very flimsy.<sup>ii</sup> Rather than the matter being referred to the police for them to investigate and consider whether to bring charges against the Christian men, certain Muslims went on a violent rampage against Christians, destroying churches and homes. The Pakistan government is conducting an investigation and has compensated Christians for their losses. But this does not address the social factors that allow such violence to spread rapidly in Pakistan, fanned by the flames of hatred.
11. This incident highlights the inherent problems with blasphemy laws. Currently, 10 countries have the death penalty for blasphemy on their books. When USCIRF surveyed blasphemy laws in 2017, it defined them as “provisions that sanction insulting or defaming religion and seek to punish individuals for allegedly offending, insulting, or denigrating religious doctrines, deities, symbols, or ‘the sacred,’ or for wounding or insulting religious feelings.”<sup>iii</sup> Pakistan, for example, has laws that penalize insulting religion or wounding religious feelings. These concepts are very vague and subject to abuse. Rather than protecting religions, they are used to stir up hatred against religious minorities who are seen as a threat to the majority religion. IRFBA recently called for the repeal of blasphemy laws, particularly where the death penalty can be imposed.<sup>iv</sup>

**Recommendation 3: We urge the High Commissioner to condemn blasphemy laws and urge States to repeal them.**

13. We are aware that some clergy of different religions promote hatred in their religious communities. Buddhist leaders promote violence against Christians in Sri Lanka. Christians in Sweden, Germany and the USA have promoted hatred against Muslims by burning the Quran. The WEA was encouraged by the High Commissioner for Human Rights to publicly condemn Christians who engage in such promotion of hatred, and we did so in a joint statement with the World Council of Churches and Caritas.<sup>v</sup>

**Recommendation 4: We encourage the High Commissioner to encourage all religious leaders to publicly condemn their own adherents and leaders when they promote hatred against other religions.**

14. Since the 7 October 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas and the ensuing siege and bombing of Gaza, hate speech, including genocidal discourse, on social media as well as by politicians, media and social influencers spiked all over the world with real world consequences. In Canada, Jews have been targeted by violent protests, including one at a Jewish school. In the United States, a 6-year old Palestinian-American was killed by his neighbor. In Germany, both Jews and Muslims have been attacked.
15. It is bad enough that those in Israel and Gaza are in fear for their lives, but the fact that Jews and Palestinians living elsewhere are also at risk shows how urgently we need avenues for inter-faith dialogue and peace-building.

**Recommendation 5: We encourage the High Commissioner to foster inter-faith dialogue globally to foster peace-building in the Holy Land.**

#### **Destruction of places of worship and holy sites**

16. We are particularly concerned for the protection of places of worship and religious sites. Destruction of places of worship and religious sites strike at the heart of the lives of religious communities. Religious sites have been destroyed in many countries. While they are sometimes “collateral damage” in times of war or armed conflict, many times they are targeted specifically to strike at religious communities.
  - In 2001, the Taliban destroyed giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan because they found them offensive to Islam.
  - In China, crosses have been removed from churches since 2014. Several churches have been destroyed to make way for commercial development.<sup>vi</sup> This shows a lack of sensitivity to the importance of church buildings to religious communities.
  - In the ongoing violent conflict in Nigeria, armed Islamic extremists have destroyed dozens of churches.<sup>vii</sup> This is part of a pattern of intimidation of Christian minorities in northern Nigeria.
  - In the example given above of the violence against the Christian minority in Jaranwala, Pakistan, 26 churches were burned during the violent attacks on the Christian community in August 2023.<sup>viii</sup> The mob also burned and desecrated Bibles.<sup>ix</sup>
  - In Canada, more than 80 churches have been burned since 2021 and more have been vandalized.<sup>x</sup> The original impetus for the church burnings was the finding of unmarked

graves of Indigenous children at former residential schools. But the government has not made any arrests or denounced the destruction of houses of worship.

17. The above list gives a variety of examples of destruction of religious sites. Each of these had a significant impact on a particular religious community. There are many more that could be added to this list.

**Recommendation 6: The WEA strongly urges States to make protection and preservation of religious sites a high priority.**

**Final comments**

18. In this submission, we have sought to highlight the importance of inter-faith dialogue in order to promote a culture of tolerance and peace, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs. We urge States to make this a high priority within their states. We also urge these initiatives at regional and international levels.
19. The WEA and our members stand ready to engage in inter-faith dialogue and in peace-building.

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<sup>i</sup> See “Twitter Rage from Myanmar,” *The World*, 11 June 2012. Online: <https://theworld.org/stories/2012-06-11/twitter-rage-myanmar>.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, Bilal Ahmad Tantray, “Jaranwala Church Attacks Another Example of the Misuse of Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan,” *The Diplomat*, 6 September 2023. Online: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/jaranwala-church-attacks-another-example-of-the-misuse-of-blasphemy-laws-in-pakistan/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Joelle Fiss and Jocelyn Getgen Kestenbaum, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Respecting Rights? Measuring the World’s Blasphemy Laws*, July 2017. Online: <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf>, p. 5.

<sup>iv</sup> International Religious Freedom Belief Alliance, *IRFBA Statement on Blasphemy and Related Offenses*, 7 Nov. 2022. Online: <https://www.state.gov/irfa-statement-on-blasphemy-and-related-offences/>.

<sup>v</sup> 11 July 2023. Online: <https://un.worldea.org/wea-wcc-and-caritas-jointly-condemn-religious-hatred-in-urgent-debate-at-the-human-rights-council/>.

<sup>vi</sup> China Aid, “Armed Police Demolish Nangang Church Overnight,” 14 January 2023. Online: <https://chinaaid.org/news/stories-by-issue/religious-freedom/armed-police-demolish-nangang-church-overnight/>.

<sup>vii</sup> Diana Chandler, “Hundreds of Nigerians Killed in Recent Attacks,” *Christianity Today*, 22 June 2023. Online: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/june/nigeria-christians-killed-persecution-churches-destroyed.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Asif Aqeel and Brian Isaac Asaph, “After 26 Churches Burned, Pakistan Christians Brace for More Blasphemy Accusations,” *Christianity Today*, 23 August 2024. Online: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/august/pakistan-church-attack-blasphemy-tlp-faisalabad-jaranwala.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Caroline Davies, “Pakistan: More than 100 arrested after churches burned,” *BBC News*, 17 August 2023. Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66517901>

<sup>x</sup> Tristan Hopper, “The Canadian church arsons never stopped,” *National Post*, 14 February 2024. Online: <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/canadian-church-arsons-never-stopped>