

# Evangelicals join interfaith leaders in Washington to promote religious tolerance

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—When hundreds of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith leaders from the United States and abroad descended on Washington for a recent conference on religious tolerance, participants were quick to note an unexpectedly large delegation of evangelical Christians.

Speakers at the Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good event repeatedly highlighted their surprise and delight over the noticeable contingent of evangelicals among the more than 400 participants at the three-day series of discussions and speeches.

Hamza Yusuf, president of Zaytuna College, America's first accredited Muslim college, said the evangelical presence was notable given recent polling. According to a 2017 poll from Pew Research, nearly three-quarters of white evangelicals say there is a natural conflict between Islam and democracy, compared with roughly half or fewer of those in other major religious groups who express the same view.

White evangelicals also were the major religious group most supportive of President Trump's 2017 travel ban barring immigrants and refugees from several Muslim-majority countries, according to a 2017 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute.

"The evangelicals coming took great courage, because of a lot of the attitudes within that community," Yusuf said.

# **‘Tribal way’ will lead to destruction**

At one point, Bob Roberts, pastor at Northwood Church in Keller, a Texas Baptist congregation, asked evangelicals in the crowd to clap if they were excited about the conference and its message.

“This is new for us. It shouldn’t be new for us,” he said over the applause. “I’m not a Muslim, but I just really care about religious freedom. ... The tribal way we are doing religion today is going to destroy us.”

In an interview, Roberts said the “older, higher levels” of evangelicalism are unlikely to embrace the message of the conference, because they “have an old worldview.” But he argued younger evangelicals have “realized the world has shifted” and the Washington Declaration issued at the conference is a model for future efforts to protect religious liberty.

“Here’s something that’s really problematic about how we think about religious freedom: We get Christians together and say, ‘Here’s how we’re going to do it.’ That day is over,” he said. “If we don’t have conversations on religious freedom with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews—they’re wasted conversations.”

## **Challenges noted**

Deborah Fikes, a Texas Baptist and former permanent representative from the World Evangelical Alliance to the United Nations, also discussed the challenges of interfaith work among conservative Christian groups.

“Growing up, Catholics were criticized, Muslims were criticized ... the Methodists were criticized. ... It was always such a focus on our differences,” she said during a panel. “Yes, there are definitely obstacles (to tolerance) for evangelicals because of that culture.”

Fikes said in her U.N. work, she observed American military actions abroad can foster negative perceptions of America, especially when conflated with the belief that the United States is a “Christian nation.”

She expressed concern that in America, the “conservative political party’s policies” are “really hurting the most vulnerable,” pointing to evangelical support for the Trump administration’s recent decision to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel, despite widespread objection among Middle Eastern Christians.

“I know that conservative Christians ... are so passionate about protecting Christian minorities in the Middle East, but that one decision has greatly harmed and compromised the Christian minorities we want to protect,” she said.

## **Group issues Washington Declaration**

The conference touted its Washington Declaration at the end of the gathering, which said in part: “Recognizing that our shared values are more important than our differences, and that we are strongest when we act together, we pledge to combine our best efforts to foster unity where there is discord, aid the impoverished, tend the vulnerable, heal the poor in spirit, and support measures that will ensure respect for the dignity of every human being.”

It later adds: “There is no room for compulsion in religion, just as there are no legitimate grounds for excluding the followers of any religion from full and fair participation in society.”

In addition, the Washington Declaration called for concrete steps: serving a billion meals to victims of violence and conflict and proposing the creation of a “multireligious body” that would “support mediation and reconciliation that will act in accordance with our shared values to build peace in the

world.”

The declaration did not mention Trump’s travel ban, and it was not clear how many attendees, if any, hailed from the Muslim-majority countries listed in the most recent iteration of the ban—Syria, Iran, Chad, Libya, Yemen and Somalia.

The conference also included the first public address by newly appointed U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback. The former Kansas governor—confirmed by the Senate last month after Vice President Mike Pence cast a tie-breaking vote—described the conference as a model and spoke of religious freedom as the “most important foreign relations topic today.”

“This is the big one,” said Brownback, who grew up Methodist, converted to Catholicism and reportedly also attends an evangelical church. He said later: “The administration has made clear this is a foreign policy and national security objective.”