

# UNIVERSAL CODE OF CONDUCT ON HOLY SITES



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Holy sites are of great significance to billions of people across the globe providing spiritual and cultural meaning to those who identify with them. Yet history repeatedly demonstrates how easy it is for sacred places to become inextricably caught up in political, territorial and religious tensions, becoming themselves pawns of conflicts. There is a crucial need for an implementable system that can protect sacred places and provide for their safe use by adherents worldwide. Moreover faith leaders have a crucial role and responsibility in ensuring that this takes place.

In 2009, representatives of four non-profit organizations, Search for Common Ground, the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, One World in Dialogue, and Religions for Peace, created a working group to develop a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. In consultation with senior religious leaders from over fifteen faiths, the Universal Code was finalized in January 2011. While not a legal document, the Universal Code offers practical guidelines for safeguarding holy sites and for promoting peace and reconciliation between people of different ethnic and religious communities. It includes clauses relating to definitions, access, preservation, sharing, expropriation and education, calls for cooperation among relevant authorities, and encourages the setting up of monitoring mechanisms for the safe protection of holy places.

The Universal Code, available in 14 languages, has been endorsed by interfaith networks, religious communities and leaders world-wide among them: Religions for Peace World Council, the World Sikh Leadership, President of the All India Imam Organization, World Council of Churches, The Hindu Forum of Europe and the Muslim Council of Gt. Britain.

A two-year pilot project in Bosnia Herzegovina, under the auspices of its Interreligious Council, was implemented to test the efficacy of the Universal Code. The pilot's success is reflected in a newly created systematic reporting and recording of desecrations, joint visits of religious leaders to sites, multi-religious condemnation followed by repairs to the site and the active engagement of multi-stakeholders including police, media and municipality leaders. A second two-year pilot has successfully unified conflicting North American indigenous tribes who utilized the Universal Code for peace-building purposes and adapted it to their needs.

In addition a pilot is being implemented in the Holy Land, in partnership with the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land and the Council of Heads of Religions in Israel. It includes research, monitoring and educational activities as well as the building of cooperation among relevant authorities for the protection of holy sites. A further pilot has begun in Indonesia focusing on research and education and more are anticipated in Nigeria, India and Sri Lanka. We encourage the establishment of pilot projects in different contexts around the world to test the practical value of the Universal Code.

We are also working towards the development of a U.N. resolution on Holy Sites based on the Universal Code. Political acceptance for the principles underlying the Universal Code, together with support for interreligious efforts to implement them, is an essential component in preventing sacred places from becoming pawns in times of conflict.