

An Interfaith Generation Unwilling to Wait



By Frank Fredericks

Executive Director, World Faith (<http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/news/>, 12 July 2011)

When religious tension between Muslims and Christians rocked northern Nigeria on January 8th of this year, the refrain of religiously fuelled violence sounded so much like it had before. The ‘other’ was at fault for the problems of a region, country, and world. But when the tensions boiled over and violence broke out, resulting in burning down of churches and mosques and the death over 100 people, the response was profoundly different.

This time, young volunteers from World Faith Nigeria took action. Responding to a distress call, they rescued seventy-two passengers from a bus that was set on fire by young attackers. On both sides were young adults taking action. But this time one set of young adults was responding to save lives and, ideally, prevent future violence.

Nigeria, like many countries around the world, hosts interfaith dialogues marked by the convening of religious leaders to counter acts of violence. While this work is groundbreaking and necessary, it alone is not enough to turn the trends of religious violence. Violence perpetrated by youth can best be countered by equally motivated youth working toward the greater good.

World Faith helps answer the challenge of engaging young people internationally who have the potential to either cause or resolve inter-religious tensions. Mobilizing religiously diverse youth to engage in community service projects in conflict-prone regions, World Faith enables local youth leaders to address the local needs of their communities and resolve underlying sources of strife — which are often economic or social rather than religious. World Faith has chapters in nine countries and is continuing to rapidly expand.

Not convinced that youth are the answer? The Arab Spring stands as the greatest example of what happens when young people take action. Movements for democratic reform have been led by the youth, who organize, mobilize, and remain endlessly resilient. Egypt stands out as a defining example of this, with Tahrir Square becoming the epicenter for Millennials with a mission.

I have spent a good amount of time in Egypt, developing World Faith’s Cairo Chapter. As I watched the events unfold, I realized that Tahrir Square not only represented a historic moment for the power of the youth, but also stood as the greatest example of pluralism in our generation. Most of these young people have little interest in theology, ideology, or religious

separatism. Rather than trumping secularism, they embraced pluralism. While Muslim protesters prayed, the Christian protesters stood guard. In short, youth worked together, took action, and transcended religious boundaries that their parents could not.

World Faith is utilizing the social entrepreneurship capacity of young people across the world. In particular, those from the marginalized communities have stepped forward to develop and lead projects in their communities. These projects are in direct competition with the allure of violence. Violence, after all, is often the act of last resort — when youth feel they have no other way of being heard and have little stake in their communities.

The world is no longer the same as it was before the Arab Spring. Young people have demonstrated their potential to initiate change and profoundly impact world politics — beginning at the local level. The interfaith movement must adapt and catch up, and not only engage religiously diverse youth, but let them take the lead. We must empower the youth, a generation unwilling to wait.