

## World Reformed Fellowship

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The World Reformed Fellowship was formed in October 2000 by the merger of two ecumenical associations operating among conservative churches of the Reformed tradition: the World Fellowship of Reformed Churches (WFRC) and the International Reformed Fellowship (IRF). The World Fellowship of Reformed Churches, formed in 1992, brought together the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, and the Presbyterian Church of America. The World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) was a catalyst for the formation of the World Fellowship as it existed under the WEF umbrella, and it held its meetings in conjunction with WEF assemblies. The organization considered the situation of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition in the Western Hemisphere. Among the affiliated Spanish-speaking churches, 14 formed the *Confraternidad Latinoamericana de Iglesias Reformadas*, which initiated several missionary consultations concerning Latin America.

The International Reformed Fellowship was formed in 1992 in Pasadena, California, and was in its early years notable for the strong participation of Korean Presbyterian churches. Like the WFRC, the IRF assumed a conservative theological stance and opposed the contemporary theological trends it saw embedded in the World Council of Churches and the associated World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The new fellowship found agreement in adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the formative document of the Presbyterian tradition, and in contemporary standards accepted by many conservative evangelicals concerning the authority of scripture, affirming the Bible's infallibility and inerrancy. The 23 original member churches were drawn from 23 countries. In 2009, the fellowship reported 42 member churches from around the world; in addition there are a number of organizations and local churches that have affiliated.

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*See also:* Reformed Ecumenical Council; World Alliance of Reformed Churches; World Council of Churches.

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## World Religion Day

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World Religion Day, observed worldwide on the third Sunday of January each year, is a Baha'i-inspired idea that has taken on a life of its own. In 2009, for instance, the Halifax (Nova Scotia) Regional Municipality in Canada celebrated its sixth annual World Religion Day in the Cathedral of All Saints, in recognition of which the mayor and councilors of the Halifax Regional Municipality issued a proclamation. In 2007, at the World Religion Day event hosted by the Entebbe Municipal Council of Entebbe, Uganda (situated on the northern shores of Lake Victoria, Africa's largest lake), participating religious leaders signed a joint declaration to establish the Entebbe Inter-Faith Coalition. The signatories pledged to use "the unifying power of religion to instill in the hearts and minds of all people of faith the fundamental facts and spiritual standards that have been laid down by our Creator to bring them together as members of one family."

As these examples illustrate, World Religion Day is now observed internationally, its American Baha'i origins notwithstanding. The history of World Religion Day dates back to 1949, when the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States (the national Baha'i governing council) instituted an annual World Religion Day "to be observed publicly by the Baha'i Communities wherever possible throughout the United States." Then as now, the third Sunday of January each year was designated for this celebration. The first World Religion Day event took place on January 15, 1950, and was observed by Baha'i communities across the United States.

The Baha'i Faith, among the younger of the independent world religions, emphasizes unity in the human community, and the inauguration of World Religion

Day could be seen simply as a natural expression of the Baha'i focus on the unity of religions, races, and nations. However, interfaith association was not the exclusive, nor even the primary original purpose of World Religion Day. In 1968, the Universal House of Justice, the international Baha'i governing body established in 1963, wrote: "Your letter of September 30, with the suggestion that 'there should be one day in the year in which all of the religions should agree' is a happy thought, and one which persons of good will throughout the world might well hail. However, this is not the underlying concept of World Religion Day, which is a celebration of the need for and the coming of a world religion for mankind, the Baha'i Faith itself. Although there have been many ways of expressing the meaning of this celebration in Baha'i communities in the United States, the Day was not meant primarily to provide a platform for all religions and their emergent ecumenical ideas. In practice, there is no harm in the Baha'i communities' inviting the persons of other religions to share their platforms on this Day, providing the universality of the Baha'i Faith as the fulfillment of the hopes of mankind for a universal religion are clearly brought forth" (*Lights of Guidance*, no. 1710).

While proclaiming the Baha'i Faith as the advent of a "universal religion" for humankind remains a constant among Baha'i sponsors of World Religion Day, the emphasis has slowly shifted over time. In a sample press release for Baha'i communities to use as a model, the following statement is made: "Baha'is celebrate the day by hosting discussions, conferences, and other events which foster understanding and communication between the followers of all religions. The purpose of World Religion Day is to call attention to the harmony of spiritual principles and the oneness of the world's religions and to emphasize that world religion is the motivating force for world unity." The wording of this model press release was likely based on a 2002 story on World Religion Day, published by the Baha'i World News Service.

In April 2002, the Universal House of Justice issued a letter addressed "To the World's Religious Leaders," in which interfaith dialogue is highly regarded. However, the letter states that the initiatives of the interfaith movement of the 20th century—as the progeny of the historic World's Columbian Exposition's

World's Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893) did, in fact, "lack both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment." For its part, "the Baha'i community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception" and will continue to assist, valuing the "cherished associations" that these activities create. The letter stresses the paramount importance of the universally recognizing that "religion is one" as a unific truth that can effectively dispel religious prejudice: "We owe it to our partners in this common effort, however, to state clearly our conviction that interfaith discourse, if it is to contribute meaningfully to healing the ills that afflict a desperate humanity, must now address honestly . . . the implications of the overarching truth . . . that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one."

While neither the Universal House of Justice nor the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States currently plays an active role in promoting World Religion Day events, the Baha'i International Community (an official organ of the Universal House of Justice) has consistently reported on such events, with obvious appreciation.

The process of World Religion Day taking on a life of its own has been punctuated by several notable events. On January 20, 2007, in Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo became the second country to issue a postage stamp for World Religion Day. Featuring a globe surrounded by the symbols of 11 religions, the stamp bears a French superscription which, translated, reads: "God is the source of all religions." Following a World Religion Day program that drew more than 250 participants from 8 faith-communities, agents were present to sell both the stamps and first-day covers. In 1985, Sri Lanka had become the first country to issue a World Religion Day stamp.

The purpose of World Religion Day today is to highlight the essential harmony of the world's religions; to foster their trans-confessional affinity through interfaith ecumenism; and to promote the idea and ideal of world unity, in which the world's religions can play a potentially significant role. This generalization is based on observations of how World Religion Day is celebrated in events that are sponsored by organizations that are not Baha'i, whether in concert with local

Baha'i sponsorship or entirely independent of it. (In most cases, the Baha'is continue to play a vital role in the orchestration and success of these events.) The day is celebrated with interfaith dialogue, conferences, and other events that advance not only mutual understanding (or what scholars call "spiritual literacy"), but recognition, respect, and reciprocity among the followers of all religions who join together in celebrating World Religion Day.

Where observed, World Religion Day events typically do not attract representatives and participants from *all* local faith communities, primarily for religious reasons. As such, World Religion Day provides an insightful social barometer of the extent to which various religious groups are willing to formally associate with each other. While World Religion Day events are still sponsored and co-sponsored by local members of the Baha'i Faith worldwide, an increasing number of World Religion Day events are independently organized by interfaith or multi-faith coalitions. For instance, in Tralee, Ireland, the local World Religion Day observance was organized by the Kerry Diocesan Justice, Peace and Creation Committee, a Member Organisation of Pax Christi International in Ireland. In 2009 the third annual observance of World Religion Day in Greensboro, North Carolina, was organized by FaithAction and the Piedmont Interfaith Council. Also in 2009, World Religion Day was celebrated by Vadamalayan Hospitals and Vadamalayan Institute of Paramedical Sciences, in which a quiz competition was held to mark the occasion.

In certain cases, civic governments, both national and local, have tended to recognize the positive social value of World Religion Day events, perhaps more than the non-participating religious communities themselves, taken together, have been willing to admit. In 2004, for instance, the House of Representatives of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky proclaimed January 17–18, 2004, as "World Religion Weekend" and went on to "urge the Commonwealth's citizens to participate in the observance of World Religion Weekend." In 2007, the Republic of Ghana's Secretariat organized a symposium themed "The Unity of the Faiths" on World Religion Day on Sunday, February 18, 2007. In January 2008, the City Council of Duncan, British Columbia (Canada) proclaimed Janu-

ary 20, 2008, as World Religion Day. In a 2009 World Religion Day event in Australia, Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services Laurie Ferguson declared, on behalf of the government of Australia: "Interfaith dialogue plays an important role in increasing understanding of our nation's religious and cultural diversity and bringing Australians closer together. The Australian Government supports interfaith dialogue at the highest levels." Many World Religion Day Events are associated with mayoral or municipal proclamations.

World Religion Day is self-perpetuating, thanks to the initiatives of progressive individuals and institutions who share a vision of religious confraternity. It is an inspired idea, with widespread appeal and remarkable longevity.

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*See also:* Baha'i Faith.

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