

Pepperdine University  
Château d'Hauteville  
Vevey, Switzerland



15 MARCH 2024

# SACRED SITES PROMOTING PLURALISM



# CONFERENCE READOUT

On March 15, 2024, Pepperdine University's Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies convened a formal launch event for the Sacred Sites Promoting Pluralism (SSPP) initiative after a year of preliminary research. Held at the University's historic Château d'Hauteville campus, the conference gathered over forty experts and practitioners across the fields of human rights, interfaith engagement, and cultural heritage protection to discuss the challenges faced at the nexus of their work and shed light on areas of potential collaboration. The first-of-its-kind convening was a success, solidifying a collective sentiment that synergies across these focus areas exist and are critical to progress in each.

**The conference was made possible through the support of the  
Templeton Religion Trust.**







## CONFERENCE SUMMARY

The Sacred Sites Promoting Pluralism (SSPP) initiative was developed by the Program in early 2023 in response to growing awareness that while diversity is a 21st century reality, faith-based persecution is still at historic highs. If not countered, instability, violence, and human rights abuses will continue. The Program explores how to leverage local histories of sacred sites to promote religious pluralism, peace, and respect for the beliefs of others and their holy places. Challenges to this effort are multifaceted, and the conference aimed to discuss them thematically by drawing out similarities between projects in different social, religious, and cultural contexts.

To that end, the day-long conference started with a framing presentation and overview followed by five thematic panels. Knox Thames, who directs the Program at Pepperdine, set the stage for the day's discussions. Based on the Program's research, he highlighted the potential of sacred sites, at a time of increasing diversity and increasing intolerance, to promote pluralism in a locally acceptable, flexible, and sustainable way. Sacred sites, embodying not only cultural heritage but also contemporary places of worship, pilgrimage, and gathering, are present in every society. However, they are often overlooked and have yet to be viewed as an asset to advance mutually reinforcing goals. The SSPP approach fosters cooperation and synergistic action that is context-specific and thus more effective.



***“Sacred Sites Promoting Pluralism is a framework for promoting pluralism, diversity, and respect for others’ beliefs through sacred places in a locally acceptable, durable, and sustainable way.”***

- **Knox Thames**

## CONFERENCE SUMMARY CONTINUED

Following, the first panel focused on case study presentations of heritage work engaging religious actors; Brian Michael Lione (Smithsonian Institution) discussed the work of the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage in Erbil with religious minorities, and Andy Vaughn (ASOR) discussed heritage documentation and conservation efforts with faith communities in Tunisia. The second panel featured presentations of interfaith actors engaging sacred sites; Sharon Rosen (Search for Common Ground) showcased current projects in Jerusalem and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Matius Ho (Leimena Institute) highlighted the organization’s cross-cultural religious literacy program in Indonesia.

The conference’s third panel focused on efforts to protect sacred sites in times of conflict, with presentations from Peter Stone (Blue Shield International) on institutional approaches to preventing heritage destruction and Elke Selter (ALIPH Foundation), who brought a distinct perspective to preservation work as a donor, but one sensitive to the unique character of religious sites.



The fourth panel offered case studies of sacred sites promoting pluralism in the UK and the UAE, with models presented by Reverend Mary Gregory of Coventry Cathedral and Abdulla Al-Shehhi of the Abrahamic Family House, respectively. Notably, the day’s final panel looked to the future with discussions of potential opportunities for SSPP, featuring presentations by Nayla Tabbara (Adyan Foundation) highlighting the potential for the approach in Lebanon and Mike Gabriel (NCEASL) in Sri Lanka.

Overall, the conference created a unique interdisciplinary discussion between academic experts, diplomats, implementing organizations, donors, faith leaders, heritage specialists, and political actors from around the world. The convergence of this diverse group around interest in sacred sites, representing a wide range of expertise, showcased the overlap between heritage, interfaith, and human rights issues. The conference fostered intra- and inter-sector partnerships, highlighting the potential for impactful collaboration through the SSPP approach.





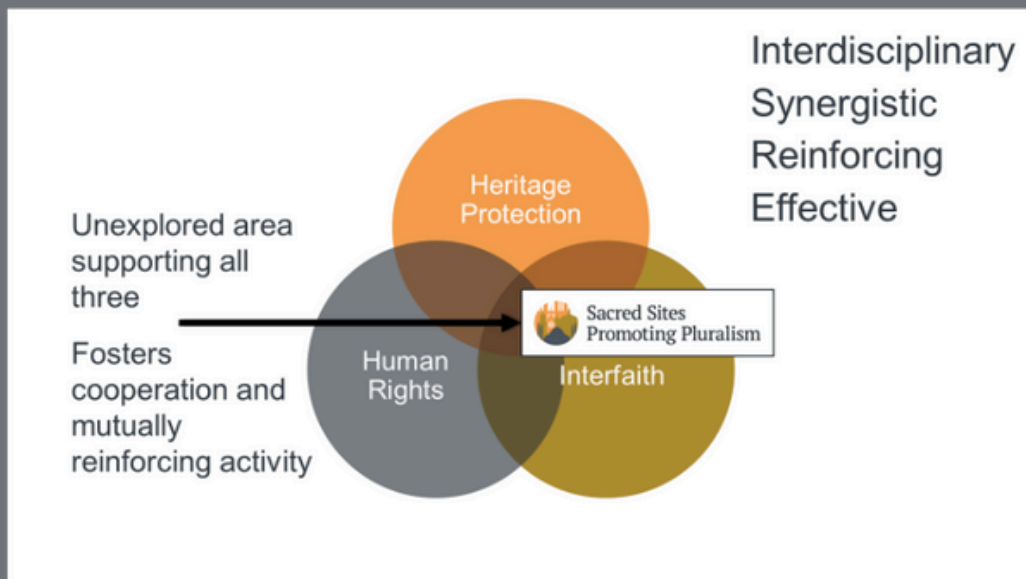
# KEY THEMES



Sacred Sites  
Promoting Pluralism

- Adaptability and Flexibility
- Trust and Partnership
- Empathy
- Proactive Measures





### Adaptability and Flexibility

The conversations found SSPP as an adaptable and flexible framework for approaching interconnected issues around cultural heritage, interfaith, and human rights concerns. The SSPP approach can work through dialogue, thus creating successful, sustainable, collaborative interventions in distinct social, religious, and political environments.

In this vein, cooperation must reflect how faith communities view the most appropriate way to safeguard their sacred sites. As Nayla Tabbara, who leads the Adyan Foundation in Lebanon, observed, recognition of three key heritage characteristics—that it is specific to one community, shared between two or more communities, and contested—makes an engaged approach critical.

Similarly, to be most effective, there was consensus that projects should partner with heritage site caretakers and the broader community. Each sacred site has a distinct past and a unique relationship with those who worship or venerate it; there is no one-size-fits-all model to address the challenges they collectively face. Elke Selter of the ALIPH Foundation emphasized the need for flexibility in understanding heritage itself; she vocalized the importance of looking beyond monumental and national sites to grasp how the communities they seek to work with understand and relate to their cultures and past.

In this context, speakers agreed that SSPP provides practitioners with a local narrative to support cultural heritage preservation, freedom of religion or belief advocacy, and interfaith engagement. Sacred Sites Promoting Pluralism cannot fix everything, but its customizable approach emphasizes local histories to address contemporary problems with their stories. Its flexibility and interdisciplinary approach promise significant impact, durability, and longevity.



## Trust and Partnership

“Trust” came up repeatedly in speaker presentations and group discussions. Many agreed organizations must not overlook the role and importance of trust within faith communities and between faith communities and outside actors. Understanding the importance of trust in the SSPP approach is critical in light of inter-religious suspicions or suspicion of outside actors’ intentions in proposals for collaborative work.

Conceptualizing trust highlights important questions: Where is buy-in needed for this approach to succeed? Is it faith communities that need to be persuaded of its potential, governments who preside over pluralist societies and whose voice is viewed with authority, or multi-sector organizers and implementers who must choose to accept and embrace the synergies in their work? The answer is a combination calibrated to the local context.

Many presenters, speaking of the faith groups with whom they work, discussed how some religious minorities fear rejection when visiting the sacred sites of others. Consequently, this approach requires early buy-in from all parties. Where social tensions are high, and the threat of conflict is real, cultivating relations of trust is crucial to dispel misconceptions and achieve collaboration and mutual understanding.



Sacred sites, while often divisive, can spark conversations that provide an opportunity for inclusive cooperation.

Through such engagement, SSPP can improve religious literacy and cross-cultural competencies by reminding communities of their pluralistic path and emphasizing learning from their stories of diversity, both good and bad. For instance, in his presentation, Matius Ho of Indonesia’s Leimena Institute shared how they explain to visitors arriving at different faith sites that “we are different and will remain different during and after we work together.” He stressed that respecting the beliefs of others does not mean changing your own beliefs; it means recognizing the rights of others to hold different beliefs.



## Empathy

Appreciating the experiences of others can be a challenge, particularly where relations between faith groups are fraught with historical and political tensions. Empathy is critical to developing peaceful relations in these contexts, where recognition of the struggles of others may involve overcoming entrenched and often politicized biases and beliefs.

Reverend Mary Gregory explained how the history of Coventry Cathedral's destruction during World War II provides a physical reminder of reconciliation and engagement. Their community art program, held within the restored walls of the cathedral, "can reveal common ground between people; [it] can reveal feelings that allow us to better understand others and break through walls."



Cultural heritage, as an expression of the artistic traditions of the past, can evoke reflection and understanding. Accordingly, Abdulla Al-Shehhi discussed the importance of promoting these values in youth, and conveyed the distinct role of the Abrahamic Family House in providing a space for younger generations "to come of age with [an] inspirational model of peaceful coexistence." Cultivating this state of empathy through sacred sites, where there is recognition of a common ground for dialogue, is a foundational step for building the trust necessary for faith communities to work together and erode the fears and misconceptions about others.





## Proactive Measures

Developing a community of practice was a clear area of agreement from the day's conversations. Multi-sector presentations showcased the overlaps between fields and highlighted common challenges to address through a synergetic approach. Lione, speaking of the Smithsonian's work in Iraq, expressed that "though pluralism was not a goal, it was an outcome"; his words speak to the often-overlooked nature of the issues that sit at the heart of heritage protection, human rights, and interfaith work of the SSPP initiative. Participants suggested that a future multi-day conference would facilitate networking with an expanded group, thus providing wider opportunities to exchange ideas and connect with potential partners and collaborators.

To get upstream of violations against religious freedom and violence against sacred sites, organizations should embrace the Sacred Sites Promoting Pluralism framework not only in times of conflict but, most importantly, in times of peace. Proactively cultivating interfaith dialogue and trust and a shared recognition of the value of sacred sites can play a pivotal role in preventing conflict in multi-faith societies.



Peacetime measures are crucial not only for local engagement but also for governments and organizations that can develop foundational relationships of trust and collaboration that can withstand and mitigate conflict if and when it arises. Sharon Rosen from Search for Common Ground, based in Jerusalem, articulated how sacred sites can be a powerful tool for developing relationships with relevant actors across sectors and governments who do not usually interact or do not see their role in this space. She also shared the SFCG video "Holy Sites: Safeguarding Places of Worship in Northern Nigeria," which can be viewed in its entirety [here](#).



Sacred Sites  
Promoting Pluralism



# NEXT STEPS

The Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies embraces a three-pronged approach to its SSPP work: **knowledge advancement**, **grassroots engagement**, and **capacity building**. Looking ahead, the Program will pursue next steps that align with these areas of work and build on the momentum and findings of the event.

# PROGRAM ON GLOBAL FAITH and INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

## Knowledge Advancement

The Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies will continue to research how to leverage the local histories of sacred sites to promote interfaith peace in pluralist societies. This involves staying connected with partner organizations to understand their experiences utilizing this framework. Potential areas of additional investigation include Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States, depending on partners and funding. Insights from these and other opportunities will inform a publication that expands on the initiative's research and highlights partner projects.

The Program plans to convene a follow-up SSPP conference in late 2025 or early 2026 to showcase progress made in current research, elevate the work of existing partners, and bring new actors into the community of practice it is working to cultivate. In addition, the Program is planning a smaller discussion for fall 2024 in Washington, DC.

## Grassroots Engagement

The Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies will continue to engage with and learn from SSPP partner organizations, supporting where resources allow to develop pilot projects that speak to the SSPP approach. The initiative will also identify and connect with new organizations whose work operates at the intersection of human rights, interfaith, and cultural heritage work; this will enable continued learning of how SSPP operates in different contexts and provide new opportunities for the development of projects to research the effectiveness of the approach in diverse environments.







## Capacity Building

The Program's dedication to SSPP capacity building includes that of partner organizations as well as growing a network of interested human rights, interfaith, and cultural heritage actors. The Program will continue to support its collaborating partners by facilitating the creation of pilot programs, developing grant proposals, and creating training materials, including classroom and workshop teaching guides. It will also develop trainings on cultural heritage protection, human rights, and interfaith engagement to equip organizations to identify opportunities and understand which institutional mechanisms exist for partnerships.

The Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies will also facilitate networking within this broader community of practice. It will create a distribution list to keep partners updated with SSPP opportunities and create a shareable resource that includes information on partners and their relevant projects. Finally, the Program will create a Plan of Action to expand respect for pluralism through sacred heritage sites and incorporate this ethos into other programs that engage with the cultural heritage-interfaith-human rights nexus.

