



**Religious Freedom &
Human Dignity Initiative**
at BYU–Hawaii

2026 Religious Freedom & Human Dignity Conference

Impact Report

*Religion and Human Flourishing: Building Pathways to Peaceful Societies in
South Asia*

Brigham Young University–Hawaii
April 21–24, 2026

Executive Summary

From April 21–24, 2026, the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity (RFHD) Initiative at Brigham Young University–Hawaii (BYU–Hawaii), in partnership with the International Center for Law and Religion Studies (ICLRS), hosted the 4th Annual RFHD Conference: *Religion and Human Flourishing: Building Pathways to Peaceful Societies in South Asia*.

The conference was made possible through the collaborative partnership and support of BYU–Hawaii, ICLRS, and regional partners committed to advancing peaceful engagement, religious freedom, and intercultural cooperation across Asia and Oceania.

The conference brought together judges, scholars, policymakers, religious leaders, civil society practitioners, humanitarian organizations, and students in meaningful discussions centered on peacebuilding, human dignity, and peaceful coexistence across religious and cultural differences.

Conference Reach and Participation

- **150+ participants**
- **52 speakers and moderators**
- **30+ represented regions**
- **20+ universities, governments, NGOs, religious organizations, and humanitarian groups represented**
- **70+ BYU–Hawaii student volunteers and RFHD Fellows**
- **53% of BYU–Hawaii student volunteers from South Asian countries**

Student Outcomes and Professional Pathways

- **120+ meaningful professional or mentoring connections**
- **75+ direct networking relationships with judges, scholars, policymakers, humanitarian leaders, and faith representatives**
- **18+ mentorship or long-term professional relationship pathways**
- **12+ research or academic collaboration pathways**
- **8+ internship pathways**
- **5+ employment or career-related pathways**
- **4+ graduate school or advanced education pathways**

For many BYU–Hawaii students, particularly those from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania and developing regions, opportunities to personally interact with Supreme Court justices, senators, international scholars, humanitarian leaders, and global faith representatives are extraordinarily rare. The conference provided direct experiential learning opportunities that expanded professional pathways, strengthened leadership confidence, and helped prepare students to become peacebuilders and disciple leaders within their home communities and professions.

The conference also reflected the mission and values of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through respectful engagement, bridge-building, service, compassion, and cross-cultural understanding. Delegates repeatedly praised the professionalism, kindness, humility, hospitality, and aloha spirit demonstrated by students and conference organizers throughout the conference.

The conference further reflected the unique mission and vision of Brigham Young University–Hawaii. As a university established to prepare students of Oceania and the Asian Rim to become lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ and leaders in their families, communities, and professions, the university occupies a unique role as both an academic and spiritual gathering place for intercultural understanding and global relationship-building. By bringing together students and leaders from across Asia, Oceania, and the international community, the conference strengthened the growing partnership between BYU–Hawaii, ICLRS, and regional organizations in fostering intercultural peace, bridge-building, and dialogue rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Conference Overview and Global Reach

Centered on the theme “*Ek Parivaar, Ek Maanavta*” (“*One Family. One Humanity.*”), the conference explored how religion, law, education, public policy, humanitarian work, and intercultural cooperation can contribute to peaceful and flourishing societies that transcend religious, cultural, and national boundaries.

The conference created a rare environment where individuals from nations, faith traditions, and communities often divided by political, ethnic, or religious tensions gathered together in mutual respect, friendship, learning, and collaboration.

Key Participants

The conference convened distinguished leaders from government, academia, civil society, humanitarian organizations, and diverse faith traditions across South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, Europe, and North America. Participants included senior government officials, Supreme Court judges, internationally recognized scholars, interfaith leaders, humanitarian practitioners, and organizational directors engaged in peacebuilding, religious freedom, education, and human dignity initiatives throughout the region.

Government Leaders and Public Officials

Highlighted participants included:

- **Justice Hari Prasad Phuyal**, Supreme Court Justice of Nepal
- **The Honorable Ashok Lavasa**, Former Election Commissioner and Finance Secretary of India and Former Vice President of the Asian Development Bank
- **Senator Khalil Tahir Sandhu**, Senator and Minority Rights Advocate, Pakistan
- **Asiya Nasir**, Former Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan and Chairperson of the Resilient Women Network, Pakistan

Religious Leaders and Interfaith Representatives

Highlighted religious and interfaith representatives included:

- **Elder David L. Buckner**, General Authority Seventy and Second Counselor in the Asia Area Presidency, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- **Father James Channan OP**, Director of the Peace Center in Lahore, Pakistan and longtime interfaith peacebuilding advocate
- **Reverend Dr. Wadinagala Pannaloka**, Secretary General of the Sri Lanka Council of Religions for Peace
- **Sayyid Ibraheemul Khaleel Al Bukhari**, Founder and Chairman of Ma'din Academy in India, serving approximately 30,000 students across more than 50 educational institutions

Civil Society, NGO, and Humanitarian Representatives

Highlighted organizational and humanitarian leaders included:

- **Matius Ho**, Executive Director of the Leimena Institute, Indonesia, which trains thousands of educators and civic leaders in cross-cultural religious literacy, interfaith collaboration, and civic education initiatives
- **Samuel Jayakumar**, Founding Director of the South Asia Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief (SAFFoRB)
- **Desmond Lim**, Regional Faith & Development Senior Advisor, World Vision International
- **Sobia Batool Shah**, Vice Chair of the South Asia Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief and Director of Programs for Human Friends Organisation, Pakistan

Student Impact and Measurable Outcomes

Students were not passive observers. They actively shaped the conference experience as:

- **Emcees** guiding sessions and introducing distinguished delegates and speakers
- **Talanoa facilitators** fostering respectful dialogue rooted in Pacific traditions of listening, empathy, and mutual understanding
- **Transportation, logistics, and hospitality leaders** coordinating airport pickups, meals, transportation, tech and presentation support, and helping delegates
- **Media and communications representatives** documenting the conference through photography, videography, podcast hosting, social media, digital storytelling, and maintaining a conference app
- **Delegate hosts and cultural ambassadors** building meaningful relationships through service, cultural exchange, and the aloha spirit of BYU–Hawaii

Students repeatedly reflected that the conference strengthened their confidence, intercultural communication skills, professional aspirations, and understanding of leadership, peacebuilding, and human dignity.

Student Impact Stories

Gwyneth Angel Valerio (Philippines)

Gwyneth Angel Valerio developed meaningful professional relationships with several international delegates, including **Father James Channan**, Director of the Peace Center in Pakistan, who encouraged her to remain connected regarding future research collaboration and assistance with international survey distribution beyond BYU–Hawaii. She also connected with **King Husein**, Chairman and CEO of Span Construction & Engineering, who invited her to apply for opportunities within his company. Through these interactions, Gwyneth gained direct exposure to international professional and research pathways that would have otherwise been difficult to access. She reflected that the conference expanded both her confidence and her vision for how she could contribute professionally and academically in international settings.

Thresha Punzalan (Philippines)

Thresha Punzalan established a strong mentoring connection with **Matius Ho**, Executive Director of the Leimena Institute in Indonesia, who expressed interest in continued communication regarding potential internship and mentorship opportunities connected to interfaith literacy and civic engagement initiatives in Southeast Asia. Through these interactions, Thresha gained exposure to international humanitarian, interfaith, and civic engagement efforts that strengthened her interest in peacebuilding work and helped her better envision future opportunities in international service and leadership.

Thanush Prathapan (India)

Thanush Prathapan engaged directly with multiple delegates from India and abroad, including **Jasbir Singh Dhody** and **Dr. Kirtan Patel**, sharing his resume and discussing future academic and professional opportunities. Beyond networking, Thanush reflected that the conference helped him recognize the importance of respectful interfaith dialogue and strengthened his confidence in engaging with international scholars and leaders. As a student from South Asia, he described the experience as personally meaningful because it allowed him to participate in conversations directly connected to issues affecting his home region.

Timothy Mason Duffie (United States)

Timothy Mason Duffie presented original interdisciplinary research during the conference and described the experience as both “gratifying and motivating.” Following his presentation, two academics approached him regarding possible future collaboration and publication opportunities connected to his research. Timothy reflected that presenting before an international audience of scholars, faith leaders, and practitioners strengthened his confidence as a researcher and demonstrated that BYU–Hawaii students are capable of contributing meaningfully to global academic and policy conversations surrounding religion, peacebuilding, and human dignity.

Lavanya Mungamuri (India)

Lavanya Mungamuri reflected that one of the most transformative moments of the conference came through informal conversations with **Justice Hari Prasad Phuyal** of the Supreme Court of Nepal and attorney **Anju Upreti** outside the formal conference sessions. She shared that she had never imagined personally interacting with a Supreme Court justice and was deeply impacted by the humility, kindness, and encouragement shown during those conversations. Rather than focusing on status or position, the delegates spoke with students about leadership, education, family, public service, and the importance of using professional opportunities to strengthen communities and promote peace. Lavanya reflected that these interactions expanded how she viewed her own future potential and strengthened her desire to become a leader who serves others with compassion, humility, and a commitment to humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts.

Student Research and Academic Growth

Selected BYU–Hawaii students presented interdisciplinary research during the conference focused on religious freedom, human dignity, interfaith collaboration, peacebuilding, and social responsibility in pluralistic societies. Research topics included cross-national studies on religiosity and violence, religious duty and society in Pakistan, and the role of diverse religions in promoting peace and social improvement in India.

Several students described the experience of presenting before international scholars, faith leaders, and practitioners as both intellectually challenging and professionally transformative. **Neelima Spandana Mungamuri (India)** reflected that presenting her research strengthened her confidence in participating in international academic conversations surrounding religion, peacebuilding, and social responsibility. She also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with scholars and practitioners from across South Asia and the international community, including conversations surrounding future academic collaboration and continued research opportunities.

Britlyn Pike (U.S.) reflected that the conference created a space where difficult issues could be explored “with dignity, honesty, and mutual respect using good data and research as the basis for change.”

The conference reinforced the ability of BYU–Hawaii students to contribute meaningfully to international academic and policy conversations surrounding religion, peacebuilding, and human dignity.

Delegate Reflections & Conference Impact

Delegates repeatedly described the conference as far more than a short-term academic gathering. Many reflected that the relationships, conversations, and collaborative opportunities developed during the conference would continue well beyond BYU–Hawaii through future partnerships, ongoing dialogue, research collaboration, mentorship, humanitarian engagement, and peacebuilding efforts across Asia and Oceania. Delegates particularly emphasized the rare opportunity to build meaningful relationships across religious, cultural, professional, and national boundaries in an atmosphere of trust, respect, and genuine friendship.

Shahid Rehmat (Pakistan)

Shahid Rehmat, Executive Director of the Youth Development Foundation, described the conference as “meaningful” and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to “engage with inspiring leaders while contributing to discussions surrounding religious freedom and human flourishing.” He also expressed interest in “maintaining relationships and exploring future collaboration opportunities connected to peacebuilding and youth development initiatives,” reflecting the conference’s role in creating ongoing international partnerships and networks beyond the event itself.

Father James Channan (Pakistan)

Father James Channan, Director of the Peace Center in Lahore, described the conference as “impressive and inspiring” and emphasized the importance of “continuing initiatives that bring together religious leaders, scholars, and students to strengthen understanding and peaceful coexistence across communities.” His reflections reinforced the conference’s influence as an ongoing platform for relationship-building, interfaith engagement, and long-term peacebuilding efforts.

Samuel Jayakumar (India)

Samuel Jayakumar, Founding Director of the South Asia Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief, described the conference as “a really enriching experience” and praised both the “quality of the discussions” and the “hospitality of the BYU–Hawaii community.” He emphasized the value of bringing together scholars, faith leaders, and civil society representatives for meaningful engagement surrounding religious freedom and peaceful coexistence, while also expressing interest in continued engagement and future collaboration connected to regional humanitarian and interfaith efforts.

Sayyid Ibraheemul Khaleel Al Bukhari (India)

Sayyid Ibraheemul Khaleel Al Bukhari, Founder and Chairman of Ma’din Academy, reflected that the conference successfully promoted “building peaceful societies based on religious freedom and cooperation” and emphasized the importance of interreligious understanding and peace. He also praised BYU–Hawaii’s peaceful campus environment and described the university’s I-WORK program as “very exemplary” for the educational and leadership opportunities it provides students from Asia and the Pacific.

Sobia Batool Shah (Pakistan)

Sobia Batool Shah, Vice Chair of the South Asia Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief and Director of Programs with Human Friends Organisation, thanked the organizers for hosting a “highly successful conference” and recognized the dedication and planning invested in making the event “exceptionally meaningful and impactful for delegates from across the region.” She later expressed appreciation for the relationships formed during the conference and the opportunity to continue conversations surrounding collaboration, religious freedom, and human dignity initiatives in South Asia.

Lira Goswami (India)

Lira Goswami of Associated Law Advisers described the symposium as “extremely well conducted and carefully thought-out” and expressed appreciation for the “hospitality, friendship, and warmth” shown throughout the conference. She specifically highlighted the quality of the discussions and meaningful engagement among delegates and participants, noting that the relationships formed during the conference created opportunities for continued professional and international connection beyond the formal sessions themselves.

Institutional and Church Impact

The conference further demonstrated the unique ability of BYU–Hawaii, in partnership with ICLRS and regional organizations, to serve as an international gathering place for dialogue surrounding religious freedom, peaceful coexistence, and intercultural cooperation. It also reflected the mission and values of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through bridge-building, service, compassion, hospitality, and respectful engagement across religious and cultural differences.

Some of the most meaningful moments of the conference occurred outside the formal sessions during transportation assignments, shared meals, and informal conversations between students and delegates. Students repeatedly reflected that these interactions allowed them to move beyond titles and positions and connect personally with leaders from different nations, faith traditions, and professional backgrounds.

One student described meaningful conversations with **Reverend Dr. Wadinagala Pannaloka** and **Dr. Kirtan Patel** during transportation assignments and meals, explaining that hearing individuals from different religious traditions speak about shared values strengthened her hope for greater understanding across faith communities. She reflected that the conference helped her realize that “we can bond about our values even if our religions are different,” describing the experience as deeply hopeful and inspiring.

Several students also reflected on the impact of witnessing Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, and Latter-day Saint leaders engage one another with humility and mutual respect despite coming from regions often shaped by political, religious, or social tensions. Students described these interactions as a powerful example of what peaceful dialogue and intercultural understanding can look like in practice.

The conference also expanded long-term relationships between BYU–Hawaii, ICLRS, universities, NGOs, faith communities, humanitarian organizations, and international leaders. Multiple delegates expressed interest in future collaboration, continued dialogue, student engagement opportunities, and ongoing institutional partnerships extending beyond the conference itself.

Conclusion

The 2026 Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Conference demonstrated the extraordinary potential of partnerships between BYU–Hawaii, ICLRS, and regional leaders to create meaningful spaces for relationship-building, religious freedom, human dignity, and peaceful engagement across differences. More than an academic conference, the event became a living example of what can happen when education, faith, leadership, and genuine human connection come together in pursuit of the common good.

The conference created meaningful relationships, mentorship opportunities, professional pathways, and intercultural experiences that expanded students' confidence, leadership capacity, and vision for future service and leadership. Through direct engagement with international scholars, faith leaders, policymakers, and humanitarian practitioners, BYU–Hawaii students gained experiences and relationships that will continue influencing their academic, professional, and personal development long after the conference concluded.

Delegates repeatedly reflected on the warmth, humility, professionalism, and aloha spirit demonstrated by BYU–Hawaii students and organizers. In a world often marked by division and distrust, the conference created a rare environment where leaders from diverse religious, cultural, and national backgrounds gathered together to listen, learn, build friendships, and strengthen shared commitments to peaceful and flourishing societies.

The conference reflected the mission and vision of BYU–Hawaii and the values of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It also demonstrated how BYU–Hawaii's unique geographic, cultural, and spiritual identity allows the university to convene conversations and relationships that few institutions in the world are positioned to facilitate. As participants return to their countries, professions, and communities, the influence of the conference continues through the relationships formed, the perspectives gained, and the strengthened commitment to building more peaceful and flourishing societies.