

**ODIHR 2013 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING
WORKING SESSION 6**

**Stein Villumstad, General Secretary
European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace (ECRL)**

The European Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace (ECRL) brings together senior religious leaders from Europe's historical religions. ECRL is one of five regional Interreligious Councils with the Religions for Peace network. Religions for Peace is the world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition advancing common action for peace since 1970. ECRL deeply appreciates and fully supports ODIHR comprehensive human dimensions programmes, and expresses particular appreciation to the OSCE Chair-in-office Ukraine for our partnership during the joint roundtable "Inter-Religious Dialogue for promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief" in Vienna in May of this year.

The annotated agenda for this session includes the discussion on "disruption or prohibition of worship even in private homes as well as attack or restrictions on places of worship." In line with this expressed concern I want to suggest support for the "Universal Code on Holy Sites", developed by Religions for Peace and three partner organisations, and endorsed by a major body of religious and interfaith institutions and their leaders around the world. Some of you participated in a side-event about the Code last year.

The main purpose of the Code is to help safeguard sacred places for the use of religious adherents world-wide and to promote peace and reconciliation between people of different ethnic and religious communities. The Code is not a legal document, but a Code of Conduct to which religious communities and their leaders are urged to commit to.

The Code of conduct is currently being tested out in Bosnia and by Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders. Pilot projects are being prepared in Nigeria, Indonesia and India. Further local implementation efforts are being explored.

Holy sites are situated within societies, and local and national authorities have responsibilities to protect and safeguard these sites regardless of religion. We therefore encourage Participating states to support religious leaders in implementing the Universal Code on Holy Sites and cooperate with them through appropriate measures under the responsibility of the state.

A process has been initiated at the United Nations to pass a General Assembly resolution in the spirit of the Code's articles. We appeal to OSCE Participating states to support this resolution through their respective UN delegations.

We further encourage OSCE to include language in the draft Ministerial Council Decision on Freedom of Religion or Belief in support of the principles of the Code as expressed in the introductory words of the Code:

"Holy sites are places of profound significance and sacred religious attachment whose special character and integrity are to be preserved and protected against all violence and desecration.

In focusing on issues of definitions, access, education, sharing, establishment, reconstruction, memorialisation, expropriation and excavation of holy sites, this Universal Code lays out the foundation for a cooperative, concrete implementation plan for preventing and ending conflict in relation to sacred places. May it inspire the hearts and minds of all who read and support it to advance the path of peace, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation."

The language could call upon all Participating States to support these principles and take measures to strengthen their application.

The Holy Sites working group would stand ready to offer suggestions for appropriate wording.

We believe that the Code, which benefits all religions, will improve collaboration among faiths around holy sites and is likely to prevent conflicts from erupting or escalating. We would therefore encourage all Participating states to support interfaith initiatives for implementation of the Code in their respective countries and worldwide.

The Code is available in several languages on <http://www.oslocenter.no/en/projects/a-universal-code-on-holy-sites/>

European Council of Religious Leaders: www.rfp-europe.eu