How will History Remember Us?

*Taking Responsibility. Taking Action. Together*

# A Message by HH Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati to the Religion and Sustainable Development Conference, Washington DC, July 2015

63 years ago, when I was born, only 2.3 billion people lived on this fragile planet of ours. In my short lifetime, less than a blink of God's eye, the population has skyrocketed by some 5 billion more. Our world, as economist, Paul Krugman, so famously said, is growing ever-increasingly more hot, flat and crowded. The result: our water is drying up while becoming more polluted; our air, in cities such as Delhi--which is close to where I live-- is rapidly growing unbreathable; natural disasters are mounting in intensity; farms are failing and the great and historic strides achieved by the Millennium Development Goals stand to be reversed if we don't act quickly... If we don't act together.

I would say, our world is at a tipping point, perhaps the most significant humanity has ever witnessed. Because of this, a great and urgent moral responsibility rests on our shoulders. And we must ask ourselves this one important question: "how will history remember us?" Shall we band together, as an impenetrable force, to bring incredible change, or shall we serve as single, divided battalions, bringing what may be only end in divided results?

Truly, I would say, at this great crossroad of history, hope is in our hands.

Right now, the subject of water, sanitation and hygiene, or WASH, in particular is becoming an increasingly-crucial issue. Every day, some 1,800 young children worldwide die mostly-preventable deaths for the lack of healthy WASH, and I point to water as perhaps the most important key to our combined futures, for where is agriculture without it? Where are our cities, such as Sao Paolo, without it? Where can we live for more than a handful of days without it? Where is our peace without it? Said former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “it’s not every day you find an issue where effective diplomacy and development will allow you to save millions of lives... Water is that issue.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

This is why faith communities across the world are coming together through the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, or GIWA, to make sure that everyone, everywhere has access to WASH, for now and for the future. I believe we can win the war for WASH through the coming together of people from all backgrounds and all faiths, and because of this, GIWA is the world's first interfaith network that is working diligently with faith communities, NGOs, multilateral organizations, corporate leaders, politicians and others for a new revolution: a WASH revolution. For this, faith leaders are playing a central role in bringing forth messages that are crucial for change.

Why is this? It is because our world is a world of faith. 84 percent of us across the planet belong to an organized religion... It's actually about 99% in India. And it is to faith leaders that people turn in times of joy and sorrow, calm and crisis. We are here at the World Bank, so I will borrow from behavioural economics and say that faith forms the bedrock of society, influencing how countless people eat, live, dress, marry and even vote. In other words, faith shapes the decisions we make. Faith has influenced our past. Faith will influence our future. Faith influences us as a global family.

That is why it is crucial, if we are to solve the glaring crises of our future, that faith-based organizations and leaders play a central role, in partnership with the private sector and civil society, hand-in-hand, as one.

 ***Here are some of my recommendations for how we can come together, and stay together:***

**ONE: We must rise above the separation of faiths, backgrounds and castes to act as one.** To do so, setting guiding principles is key: including agreeing ahead of time that we won't proselytize and we won't divide. Instead, we will share knowledge and resources... we will work in an environmentally-sustainable way, we will adhere to human rights conventions, such as the rights of the child... We will learn together, and we will work transparently, together

**TWO: Let us join forces to build the capacities of faith-based organizations**, so we can do more together. A little training can go a long way towards lasting change.

**THREE: Consider faith organizations and leaders as essential partners in all sustainable development programmes, from the first design phases onwards.** In such a way, meaningful new messages for change can be created and great and far-reaching networks for good can be sustained. For this, faith organizations should also be enabled to play more central roles in meetings where policy agendas, from the SDGs to PRSPs, are set.

**FOUR: Broaden the Network:** Let us map out our world's faith organizations, according to capacities, locations and contact details, so that we can find each-other, so that we can serve together, and so that we can bring about a more sustainable and peaceful world. Together.

***In Conclusion***

As I mentioned near the beginning of this message: right now, this very minute, and forever more, hope is in our hands. Let us not let it run through our fingers, as water does through those of a single left hand, which is weak without the support of the right. Instead, let us reach for and grasp the hands of all members of our global family, of all faiths, backgrounds, philosophies, genders and creeds, and let us together, as Mahatma Gandhi so beautifully said, "be the change we wish to see in this world."

The future begins now. The future begins together.

1. US Department of State Report to US Congress, "Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act," 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)