

The Global Interfaith WASH Alliance
presents:

INDIA'S MULTI FAITH ACTION COORDINATING COMMITTEE (MFACC)

MEETING REPORT

We are pleased to present the report of the inaugural meeting of the MFACC which took place on May 29, 2025 at the Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh, Uttarakhand.



1. Introduction

The National Multi-Faith Action Coordinating Committee (MFACC) in India—a vital platform that brought together a diverse group of faith leaders and faith-based organizations for united, impactful action in service of children, families, and communities across the country. This initiative aims to promote a collaborative and systemic way of working with the faith communities for sustainable positive change through joint priority setting and joint action planning to work collectively for national interests and social welfare.

During the first meeting on the 29th May, 2025 at Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, all participants emphasized the need for multi-faith unity in strengthening the social fabric of India and discussed actionable ways to reach the most vulnerable communities with messages and initiatives related to health, education, and child protection. This spirit was vividly present throughout the meeting, where faith leaders from diverse traditions committed to a shared vision and collaborative action for national welfare.

As the convenor of the MFACC, the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) was glad to lead this initiative, which is being launched in close partnership with UNICEF.

Since its inception in 2013 at UNICEF Headquarters in New York, GIWA has worked closely with faith leaders and faith-based organisations to inspire real change on the ground. Together, GIWA has made significant strides in areas such as health, nutrition, WASH, climate change, child protection, and education, and now looks forward to widening its impact through the formation of MFACC.

For full list of Participants see Annexure A ‘List of participants’

Picture highlights from this inspiring event: bit.ly/45hYP5T



Event Overview

2.1 Opening Ceremony & Spiritual Invocation

The meeting commenced with sacred prayers led by a diverse group of faith leaders, united in their commitment to child welfare, community development, and collective service. The gathering invoked divine blessings to guide the **joint efforts of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) and UNICEF India** in promoting WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), health, and well-being across the nation.

The MFACC was introduced by **GIWA's Project Director Ganga Nandini** as a new national platform for sustained, systemic collaboration between religious leaders, faith-based institutions, and humanitarian organizations—aimed at coordinated action, joint planning, and long-term social transformation.



2.2 Keynote Reflection – Puja Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji

Puja Swamiji emphasized that religion is not only a spiritual path but also a means of social responsibility. “When representatives of all faiths come together to serve society,” he said, “it enhances not just interfaith harmony but also ensures the holistic progress of the nation”. Puja Swamiji offered a powerful call for cooperation over competition - unity over division, emphasizing the spiritual and practical need for cooperation across faith lines. Puja Swamiji stressed that collective service should move beyond narrow or personal agendas, focusing instead on serving the entirety of humanity. He invited participants to engage in deep introspection, asking why individuals and communities allow animosity to take root in their hearts, stating that true climate and development action begins with the cleansing of the inner self stating “Let us shift from asking, “What is for me?” to “What can flow through me?”



He highlighted that clean water, hygiene, and public health are not just technical tasks, but spiritual duties. These common challenges that humanity faces are all part of a larger, shared responsibility that transcends religious or social boundaries. Concluding his remarks, he invoked the Vedic mantra “Ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ” (Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions), calling for peace, harmony, and unified service across all faith traditions to be the guiding force behind MFACC.

2.3 Setting the Context - Dennis Larsen SBCC Chief UUNCEF INDIA

Dennis Larsen shared details of ongoing programs in child protection, nutrition, and education, and highlighted how multi-faith collaboration can amplify the impact of these initiatives. He stressed that the protection and holistic development of children is the foremost priority today, and it requires the support of all communities.



2.4 Keynote Reflection – Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati Ji

Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati Ji emphasized that religion is not just about reaching heaven after death—it is about creating heaven here on Earth. “When we, as faith leaders, come together not as representatives of different religions, but as one voice for humanity, we send a message that transcends boundaries - this is not a Hindu message, a Muslim message, or a Sikh message. It is a human message for the future of our children and our world.”

She reflected on the need for both grand-level unity-coming together publicly to show shared commitment-and ground-level action, where faith leaders "walk the talk" in the communities they serve. “This generation has the strongest radar for inauthenticity,” she shared. “If our youth see their spiritual guides speak one message on stage and live another off stage, their faith is broken—not in God, but in us.”

Sadhviji highlighted that ending open defecation, child marriage, and gender inequality are sacred duties-modern-day dharmas were **“A picture of unity in action is worth a thousand sermons.”**



2.5 Technical Session 1: Social Behavior Change for Child Welfare

Speaker: Mr Yash Dhamija – Youth Interfaith Member, Religions for Peace India

A guided Reflection: Raabta-e-MHD Meditation led by Mr. Yash, a trainer in Mind Heart Dialogue (MHD), this meditative session invited participants to reflect on difficult truths such as climate change and religious intolerance, utilising factual data alongside statements of hope for contemplation. Participants were guided through a silent process of connecting their inner emotional world with outer realities, strengthening resolve for action.

Speaker: Ms. Lopamudra Tripathy, SBC Specialist, UNICEF

Ms. Tripathy skillfully bridged inner reflection with outer action, drawing attention to the power of faith in advancing nutrition, hygiene, and maternal health. She underscored that for messages to be effective, they must move from external campaigns to internal convictions, fostered through trust-based dialogue.

She particularly highlighted breastfeeding as a priority area, with only 62% of children in India receiving adequate breastfeeding. She emphasized the health, emotional, and developmental benefits, and called on faith leaders to normalize and promote this behavior in their communities.

Speaker: Mr. Sadique Ahmad, SBC Specialist, UNICEF

Mr. Ahmad presented real-world barriers from the Mewat region in Haryana, such as religious fatalism, misinformation about vaccines, and economic constraints of mothers. He emphasized the importance of building trust and culturally sensitive messaging to address such deep-rooted beliefs and behaviors.



2.6. Technical Session 2: Faith & Ending Child Marriage

Speaker: Mr. Suresh Parmar, UNICEF Assam

Mr. Parmar discussed the role of faith leaders in addressing child marriage, a pressing issue in India's Northeast and beyond. He outlined UNICEF's three-pillar strategy:

1. Policy advocacy
2. Community mobilization
3. Family-level behavior change

He emphasized the need to move beyond punitive enforcement to provide positive alternatives for families, such as education and economic opportunity for girls. Faith leaders were identified as crucial in reframing early marriage as a violation of dignity and rights.

2.7 Joint Visit to the Shri Ram Katha graced by His Excellency Former President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind Ji

All delegates made their way to the Shri Ram Katha given by Murlidharji Maharaj at the Ashram. The katha was graced by His Excellency Former President Shri Ram Nath Kovind Ji who stated, “India’s strength lies in its diversity. The confluence of different religions, languages, and cultures makes our nation unique and extraordinary before the world. We must continue to strengthen this harmony so that every citizen can access justice, equality, and opportunities for development.” He further praised the formation of the National Multi-Faith Action Coordination Committee as a crucial step toward reinforcing India’s social cohesion.



2.8 Session 3: Reflections and Commitments from Faith Leaders

The intense discussions around health, nutrition, sanitation, child protection, and education emphasized the urgent need for collaborative, cross-sectoral action. It became evident that these are not issues one group can solve alone—every section of society, every faith tradition, and every organization must come together. These are precisely the areas where the Multi-Faith Action Coordination Committee (MFACC) can play a pivotal role, offering a united, values-driven platform for addressing shared challenges.

Faith leaders from diverse traditions shared real-life challenges facing their communities—from child marriage and menstrual hygiene, to lack of access to education and health services. They also reflected on faith-rooted approaches they have been using to address these issues at the grassroots level, demonstrating how spiritual values can drive meaningful change.

Dr Markenday Rai spoke about the unity of mankind quoting the verse Ayam Nijah Paro Vetu Ganana Laghucetasam, Udarcharitanam Tu Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.” This is mine, that is yours – such thinking is for the narrow-minded. For the noble-hearted, the whole world is one family.”

Navneet Yadav from Caritas International gave the statement that mental health and suicide risk in children is a part of humanitarian aid and disaster risk prevention. This perspective aligns closely with the growing need to integrate Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) into the work of spiritual and faith-based organizations, enabling them to support emotional and psychological well-being alongside physical needs.

Pujya Vivek Muniji shared profound spiritual truth, extolling Dhammo Mangal Mukkitam, Ahimsa Sanjamo Tavo, Deva vittam namam santi, Jassa dhamme sayamaṇo “Religion is the highest blessing; non-violence, self-restraint, and penance are its essence. Even the gods revere the one whose life is anchored in righteousness.”

His message called on faith leaders to embody these virtues—non-violence, discipline, and spiritual commitment—as a foundation for promoting the well-being of all living beings.

2.9. Session 4: Voting and Joint Agreements

Organisations and their Work Areas:

Work Area	Number of organisations
WASH	6
Nutrition	5
Climate Change and Sustainability	4
Education	7
Health	7
Ending Violence against Children	5

Further questions and voting results:

1. Will you Integrate key behaviours after today's meeting - 11
2. How will you mobilize to adopt key positive behaviours?
 - a. Storytelling – 5
 - b. Spiritual/Prayer meeting - 5
3. Did you find the meeting helpful?
 - a. Unanimous
4. Would you like to be a member of MFACC – 10
5. Would you be open to hosting a meeting? – 6
6. Meeting frequency?
 - a. Quarterly (in-person or online)

3. Way Forward & Strategic Suggestions

At the end of the sessions, the Participants agreed to a forward work plan to set the stage for the next meeting and concluded the meeting with a signed Declaration (**Annex B**) affirming their support of the MFACC initiative.

At the conclusion, all delegates took a collective pledge for social welfare and committed to carrying forward their responsibilities with unity and purpose signing a collective pledge. H.E Shri Ram Nath Kovind Ji, H.H Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji, and all the faith leaders lit the ceremonial lamp, reaffirming their collective resolve. A sacred Rudraksha sapling was also presented as a green gift, symbolizing harmony, hope, and a sustainable future, values which underpin the forming of the MFACC.

This initiative not only reinforces the timeless message of “unity in diversity” within the Indian social fabric but also stands as a beacon of inspiration to the world. India’s multi-faith model demonstrates how dialogue, understanding, and collaboration among differing viewpoints can lead to the creation of a prosperous, empowered, and peaceful society.

4. Annexures

- **Annex A: List of Participants**
- **Annex B: Signed Declaration**

Annex A: Confirmed Participants at the First Convening of the MFACC

Faith Leaders and Institutional Representatives

1. Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji– Co-Founder, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) (Hindu)
2. Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati Ji – Secretary-General, GIWA (Hindu)
3. Pujya Sant Murlidhar Ji – Renowned Kathakar, Manas Parivar (Hindu)
4. Swami Bhaktvatsal Dasa Ji – Senior Monk, Swaminarayan Gurukul Parivar (Hindu)
5. Swami Gunsagar Dasa Ji – Senior Monk, Swaminarayan Gurukul Parivar (Hindu)
6. Sardar Paramjit Singh Chandhok Ji – Chairman, Delhi Gurudwara Bangla Sahib (Sikh)
7. Guru Sahib Singh Ji – Founder Director, Team 1699 (Sikh)
8. Parampal Singh Ji – Sikh Scholar and Mentor, Team 1699; representing Jathedar Singh Sahib Giani Raghbir Singh Ji, Sri Akal Takhat (Sikh)
9. Mufti Shamoon Qasmi Ji – Chairman, Madrasa Board of Uttarakhand (Muslim)
10. Syed Abbas Murtaza Shamsi Ji– Joint Secretary, Shia Degree College, Lucknow; Managing Trustee, Bharat Ratna Ustad Bismillah Khan Foundation (Muslim)
11. Vivek Muni Maharaj Ji – Bhartiya Sarv Dharm Sansad (Jain)
12. Anil Kumar Jain Ji, Director Mahabodhi International Meditation Center, Delhi (Buddhist)
13. Sankar Kumar Sanyal Ji– President, Harijan Sevak Sangh (Scheduled Caste)
14. Father Thumma Ji - Secretary of CBCI Office for Inter Religious Dialogue and Desk for Ecumenism of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (Christian)
15. Navneet Yadav Ji – Lead, Humanitarian Aid & Disaster Risk, Caritas International (Christian)
16. A.K. Merchant Ji– National Trustee, Lotus Temple; Representative of the Baha’i Community of India and Moksh Trust (Baha’i)
17. Markandey Rai Ji – Chairman, Global Peace Foundation, India (Interfaith)
18. Shri Ashok Kesang Wangdi Ji– Coordinator, Samvad Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environment Consciousness, Vivekananda International Foundation; Former First Secretary (Consular), Embassy of India in Thailand; Advisor, Buddha Jyoti Foundation (Buddhist)
19. Dr. Bibharani Swargiary Ji – Assistant Professor, Assam Don Bosco University (Academia)
20. Yash Dhamija Ji – Youth Interfaith Member, Religions for Peace India (Youth)
21. Bhavya Srivastava Ji – Regional Director for Asia, United Religions Initiative (URI) (Interfaith Network)

UNICEF Representatives

1. Dennis Christian Larsen – Chief, Social and Behaviour Change, UNICEF India Country Office
2. Suresh Parmar – SBC Specialist, UNICEF Assam Office
3. Sadique Ahmad – SBC Specialist, UNICEF India Country Office
4. Lopamudra Tripathy – SBC Specialist, UNICEF India Country Office
5. Shalini Prasad – SBC Specialist, UNICEF India Country Office

Joining Online

1. Brigitte Madeleine van Baren, Seiko-An, Founder & Chairman, Living Peace Foundation (Buddhist)
2. Sumit Jindal – Representative, International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS)
3. Sister Lucy Kurien – Founder, Maher (Christian)
4. Dr. Supreet Kaur – President, EcoSikh India (Sikh)

