

[Frank Fredericks](#)

Founder of World Faith and Conar  
Records, Co-Founder Religious  
Freedom USA

## Youth Redefine Interfaith Activism -- Globally

Posted: 03/27/2012 10:57 am

I've never found an easy way to explain how an evangelical Christian from rural America came to found an interfaith youth organization with chapters across the world. It began in the summer of 2006.

It was past midnight when I flew into the airport in Alexandria, Egypt, not knowing a word of Arabic. My host from [Couchsurfing](#), an international hospitality club, whom I'd never met, was waiting beyond customs. I was having a Tower-of-Babel moment at the immigration desk. "Enta men fain?" he asked.

"I don't speak Arabic. ... Do you speak English?" After a few rounds of this, an Egyptian in line behind me, hearing me try out different languages, came to my rescue, translating my Italian into Arabic.

I came to Egypt to do independent research on Christian-Islamic relations. I was under-prepared. As a student at New York University, my friends were puzzled by my move. I was studying Music Business and managing an unknown singer named Stefani Germanotta (who later donned the stage-name Lady Gaga), so I was better known for booking rock acts than religion.

Those who know me better recognized the pivotal role my faith as an evangelical Christian has for me, and know of my insatiable curiosity about "the other." What started as a month-long trip became a lifetime journey.

That visit to Egypt, observing both interfaith collaboration and some rare instances of violence, inspired me to pursue interfaith work. A month later, I moved to Cyprus for the summer, working the night shift as a cook in a small restaurant in Larnaka, a small and calm town on the Cypriot coast. A month later the Hezbollah-Israeli War broke out. With the Beirut Airport bombed, the U.S. evacuation of Lebanese Americans was conducted by boat to the nearest port -- Larnaka.

My relaxing beach summer rapidly unraveled as I volunteered with the U.S. State Department's efforts to evacuate more than 10,000 people in eight days. I left on the last plane of evacuees, returning to the U.S. in mid-August. If Egypt inspired me to do interfaith work, the Lebanese evacuation gave me a sense of urgency.

Back in New York, I became determined to join the interfaith world. I met with several organizations but was troubled: the interfaith events I attended were primarily religious leaders talking about their different points of view. Remembering the conflicts I saw in Egypt, it was primarily young people, both as victims and perpetrators of violence. I became convinced that old people talking can't counter young people taking action. As expected, I didn't win too many allies early on with this perspective.

That fall we had our first World Faith meeting at NYU. My best friend Florentina, her dorm mate Vinita, a Hindu student, a Muslim freshmen named Tanzila, who read about us on Facebook, a Bahraini student named Dalal I'd met the week before, my friend Rob, who lived next door in our dorm, and I got together. I was idealistic, but not convinced that the six of us were enough to change the world.

Being "social entrepreneurs" means taking great risks to create positive social change. In this vein, World Faith is run by volunteers, some of whom serve fulltime. They serve without salaries, though the ultimate goal is to generate a sustainable level of support for local chapters and the global network.

I became an Interfaith Youth Core Fellow, meeting interfaith leaders like Eboo Patel and Joshua Stanton, graduating from New York University, and working on [World Faith](#) nearly fulltime. This entailed traveling the world to find like-minded young people to start World Faith chapters in places like India and Lebanon.

Up to this point, World Faith was largely a story about me. From here on, I suddenly became a small part of the World Faith story.



Abdul Shakeel Basha still recalls when the Babri Mosque in Mumbai was demolished, leading to widespread violence across India. He showed up at a relief camp for victims with a plan to volunteer for five days. He stayed for five years. When the similar religiously fueled violence broke out in Gujarat that left thousands dead, he moved to Gujarat to volunteer in relief efforts, at times putting his own life at risk.

Shakeel and I met for the first time in 2009. As an activist in Delhi, he was frustrated by the systemic marginalization of poor Indians, especially homeless youth. "They have rights and protections by law," he explained, "but the very institutions that are supposed to protect and support them actually suppress and abuse them."

Soon after, Shakeel decided to join World Faith, taking on the social entrepreneurial role of national director for [World Faith India](#). Three years later, he has built two schools in Delhi slums that provide education for 150 children. He has convinced the local government to hire 14 World Faith volunteers to staff and run these schools, while they work in the homeless communities of Delhi, providing emergency response, finding pro-bono legal help to end unlawful slum demolitions, and mobilizing religiously diverse volunteers to give more than 6,000 volunteer hours last year. Shakeel, like all World Faith regional directors, did all this without a salary.

While Shakeel's story is truly remarkable, it is no longer unusual. The same social entrepreneurship that inspired Shakeel to build World Faith India drives thousands of others to build interfaith development and service projects across the world. I've been lucky enough to meet a handful, leaders of World Faith chapters in Bangladesh, Egypt, Lebanon, Kenya, Nigeria and Pakistan, along

with leaders in 10 other countries we're talking to. World Faith has essentially doubled in size every year, which is why we feel we are only at the beginning of building a world movement of interfaith action.

World Faith has become a cutting edge of the intersection between interfaith peacebuilding and international development. Too often global challenges intertwine these issues, but we address them separately, as if they weren't connected.

Take Nigeria as an example. Few places need interfaith peacebuilding more than Nigeria, but peacebuilding itself will not be enough. Specifically, the British Council found that the most significant factor in avoiding a possible Nigerian civil war is providing 25 million additional jobs, primarily for the youth. Essentially, no peacebuilding efforts will end a seeming religious conflict with economic issues at its roots.

Similarly, economic development is dependent on a viable society. Nothing scares away investment and squashes opportunity like communal violence or political instability. Both of these forces, violence and economic stagnation, disproportionately affect the youth. We see this as a global trend. In places like Nigeria, as [World Faith Nigeria](#)'s national director Obi Peter attests, peacebuilding and development efforts cannot viably function separately.

Herein lies the problem and the answer. Both peacebuilding and development efforts typically see young people as the problem. It's a tempting conclusion when you see the young unemployed and the young perpetrating violence. But youth represent the most under-utilized asset in such communities. Entrepreneurism, unused higher education, social and geographical mobility, and widely expansive social networks are just a few of the crucial characteristics that represent the key ingredients to progress. That is why World Faith chapters are each created and led by social entrepreneurs, usually young adults themselves, who mobilize their fellow youth to action. They provide solutions. Are these solutions innovative? Are they really helpful?



Meet Jared Akama Ondieki, the national director of [World Faith Kenya](#), operating as a nonprofit called [CEPACET](#) (Center for Partnership and Civic Engagement). Jared witnessed development projects in Kenya failing because they typically only addressed one of the many stacked and intertwined issues. Take the plight of widows at Lake Victoria, near his hometown of Kisii.



Thousands of widows have resorted to the informal industry of buying the day's catch from the all-male fisherman at the docks. Culturally women aren't permitted to fish. Reselling the fish at the town market, they often can barely feed themselves and their children. Along with the poverty, the fishermen often require the widows to sleep with them. Most fisherman sell to more than one widow, and many widows have several fisherman they buy from. The result is an HIV rate of 10-40 percent, much higher than the national average of 6.3 percent. It's a challenge that spans poverty, public health, culture, education and

women's empowerment.

Jared and a group of Muslim and Christian young people in Kenya had an idea. During a closure on the lake due to overfishing, they approached 100 widows who wanted an alternative income. These women and their children moved to a community farm, were taught to farm and harvest seed, and within a year became self-sufficient. They even had loaned money out into the surrounding community. Last week, we heard they are breaking ground on a second farm.

With more than 500 activists volunteering more than 16,000 hours in 10 countries last year, impacting the lives of more than 50,000 people, we see a global trend becoming the foundation of a world movement. This is the beginning. World Faith has doubled in impact every year for the past three years. With interest bubbling right now for new chapters in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America and South Asia, I have no doubt about exponential growth this coming year.

It means constantly adapting to the realities on the ground. They are always unique. But it turns out that the imagination, curiosity and generosity of young people in every religious tradition, confronting global issues in their own backyard, can create interfaith action anytime, anywhere. It is transformative and contagious and a blessing.

*Originally published in the [Interfaith Observer](#).*

**Follow Frank Fredericks on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/frankiefreds](https://www.twitter.com/frankiefreds)**