A United Faith Against Modern Slavery

The Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery
It’s one thing to know about a terrible problem and not be able to fix it; it is another to know about the problem and have the means to do something about it.

– Dr Andrew Forrest AO
An estimated 49.6 million people around the world are trapped in modern slavery, more than at any time in our history and in spite of the fact that slavery is illegal in almost every country.

Those enslaved have had their rights and freedom stolen from them in horrendous circumstances. They are often subjected to abuse, both physical and mental, and are treated as commodities to be bought, sold and traded. They can be found in factories, fields and brothels, on fishing boats, within private residences and a multitude of other places where greed and corruption have overridden human values.

People trapped in slavery live brutal existences in cities and villages, slums and rural areas. From Thai fisherman trawling fish, to the Congolese boy mining diamonds; from the Uzbek child picking cotton to the Indian girl stitching footballs - modern slavery is big business. Acknowledging the problem, and advocating against it is our responsibility.

Change is long overdue, and that change has begun.

Jaipur, India, 2019. This image was taken at a brick kiln where local women are often trapped in a cycle of bonded labour and their wages are regularly withheld. Photo Credit: Grace Forrest.

Global Freedom Network

Global Freedom Network (GFN) is the faith-based arm of Walk Free, an international human rights group working to eradicate modern slavery in all its forms.

We recognise that faith can play a vital role in fighting modern slavery because faith leaders are in a unique position to see into the hearts of their communities.

With a philosophy built on interfaith collaboration, GFN is grateful to the faith leaders who have come together to tackle modern slavery — an issue which strikes at the heart of human dignity.

GFN was founded in 2014, with the signing of the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery at the Vatican, a world-first event which brought together leaders of many of the world’s biggest faiths in a common cause.

Since then, GFN has expanded around the globe, working with faith leaders who are building bridges between victims and law enforcement, cooperative connections with governments, social workers and victim support groups, especially in countries of strong faith and high prevalence of modern slavery.
Our Approach

We empower faith leaders to work in collaboration with government, business, and civil sectors to fight modern slavery. By building relationships and collaborating with faith leaders and faith-based organisations we believe we can increase awareness, understanding, impact, and action.

We are grateful to faith communities and their leaders for their generous support of our joint efforts to protect human rights and strengthen communities.

Our Impact

Eleven signings of the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery over eight years, on five continents across the world.

More than 100 signatories have pledged to fight modern slavery. Representatives from all major faiths have participated including: Christians (Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Methodists, Baptists, Orthodox, Presbyterians and Quakers), Muslims (Shias and Sunnis), Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahá’ís, Sikhs.

Our Goals

• Faith leaders government engagement workshops launched in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa in August 2022.
• The Federation of Faith Leaders to launch in October 2022.
• Expand the ‘Faith For Freedom’ smart phone app in Ghana and Kenya.
• Planning for the 10th anniversary of the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery, an opportunity to commemorate the impact of faith leaders’ fight against modern slavery and expand and amplify our joint efforts in the future.

• In partnership with the Religious Council of Ethiopia, the Global Freedom Network is planning a signing of the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery in 2023.

We, the undersigned, are gathered here today for a historical initiative to inspire spiritual and practical action by all global faiths and people of good will everywhere to eradicate modern slavery across the world by 2020 and for all time.

In the eyes of God, each human being is a free person, whether girl, boy, woman or man, and is destined to exist for the good of all in equality and fraternity. Modern slavery, in terms of human trafficking, forced labor and prostitution, organ trafficking, and any relationship that fails to respect the fundamental conviction that all people are equal and have the same freedom and dignity, is a crime against humanity.

We pledge ourselves here today to do all in our power, within our faith communities and beyond, to work together for the freedom of all those who are enslaved and trafficked so that their future may be restored. Today we have the opportunity, awareness, wisdom, innovation and technology to achieve this human and moral imperative.

His Holiness Pope Francis

On Tuesday 2 December 2014, the world’s leading faith leaders gathered together with representatives from public and private organisations, and other influential individuals, at the Casina Pio IV in Vatican City. Global leaders from the Christian, Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox religions, as well as Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim faiths signed the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery.

Initiated and coordinated by the Global Freedom Network, the event was historic not only for its definitive commitment to work across religions to eradicate modern slavery, but also because it was possibly the first time ever that these faith leaders had met as a group, unified in a common cause, signing their names on the same document. It was the first time since the establishment of the Catholic Church that the Pope had met with a Grand Ayatollah in person. In addition, it was the first time post the Reformation that the Catholic Church and Anglican Communion had reached an agreement on a global initiative. Furthermore, it was a rare joint initiative between Sunni and Shia Muslim leaders. They were joined by leaders from many countries of the world, representing the business, political and civil sectors.
Canberra, Australia
2 December 2015

“This is the beginning of a remarkable journey. Together we can combat human trafficking and slavery.”

The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs Australia

In early 2015, Salvation Army Commissioners James Condon and Floyd Tidd had a vision, inspired by the Global Freedom Network’s 2 December 2014 event hosted in Vatican City. They appreciated the unique point of difference that the Global Freedom Network was founded upon, whereby religious faith can be a powerful motivating force to inspire individual and community action, both spiritually and practically, in the fight against modern slavery. Based on this, the Commissioners sought to create a similar initiative for the faith leaders of Australia.

On Wednesday, 2 December 2015, the second signing of the Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery took place at Parliament House, Canberra, precisely one year after the inaugural signing in Vatican City. On this occasion, it was Australian faith leaders who were pledging to do all that they could to take spiritual practical action to end slavery. This initiative was led by the Salvation Army with the support and endorsement of the Global Freedom Network. Christian Evangelical, Baptist, Salvation Army, Presbyterian, Coptic Orthodox, Anglican, Catholic, Muslim Sunni and Shia, Lutheran, Jewish, Hindu, Quakers, Uniting Church and Buddhist leaders took part in the event.

Since 2015, the Australian Freedom Network has participated in these initiatives:

- Raising awareness about slavery in Australia amongst faith communities and continuing to provide ongoing support, strategic alliances and identifying opportunities for joined up practical and spiritual action.
- Unifying faith-based organisations to collaborate on ending slavery in Australia.
- Inspiring people to engage with the issue of modern slavery as an extension of their faith in Australia.
- Encouraging faith communities to take meaningful actions to end slavery in Australia.
- Supporting and amplifying existing anti-slavery work in Australia.

Opposite: Dr Andrew Forrest with the Hon. Julie Bishop, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia
Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.

Below: The official party at the Australian faith leaders
Photo Credit: Global Freedom Network.
“While service is the best form of worship, slavery is the worst insult you can ever give to God. So, anyone who believes in the existence of a higher power should wake up and say no to slavery, no to enslaving human beings. For divine dwells in every heart, in every one.”

His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

On 3 December 2015, eight Indian religious and spiritual leaders signed a Joint Declaration to end modern slavery at the Global Freedom Network gathering in New Delhi. This landmark declaration was signed by religious and spiritual leaders from the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Bahá’í and Jewish religions, whom together represent more than 95% of the Indian population.

The Joint Declaration ceremony began with the religious leaders gathered on stage for the lighting of the candle, followed by the formal introductions of each religious leader. The Global Freedom Network Chairman, Dr Andrew Forrest, then officially opened the proceedings. Andrew explained why they were all gathered on that special day, 3 December 2015, in the Stein Auditorium. He stated in Hindi, “human life is sacred” and gave personal testimony of his learnings about modern slavery through his daughter’s experience in Nepal some years ago. Faith leaders were invited to speak about their commitment to ending modern slavery, with all speakers united in the belief that collaboration and solidarity, through the Joint Declaration, would make a difference.

Following the Joint Declaration signing, the Global Freedom Network facilitated a Roundtable discussion.

This occurred in New Delhi on the afternoon of the signing. Subject experts in modern slavery, a survivor, influencers and Global Freedom Network team members convened to better understand and discuss more deeply the eradication of bonded and forced labour in India.

Above: Faith Leaders at the ceremony in India and His Holiness Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji. Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.
Jakarta, Indonesia
14 March 2017

“To fight against modern slavery, we need not only advocacy, but also real action to not fall into the trap of modern slavery.”

Vice President Jusuf Kalla

On 14 March 2017, seven religious leaders who represent all religions constitutionally admitted in Indonesia; Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism gathered and expressed their commitment to stand united against modern slavery in an event hosted by the Vice President, Jusuf Kalla, at the Vice Presidential Palace, Merdeka Selatan, Jakarta. During the Ceremonial Act, Vice President Jusuf Kalla explained what this declaration meant for the Indonesian people and the importance of the Indonesian government to lead in the global fight on modern slavery.

The event also saw a launch of the Global Freedom Network in Indonesia, with singer and youth leader Maudy Ayunda appointed as an Ambassador for the Network.

In 2017 the Global Freedom Network in partnership with Paramadina University conducted a half day seminar for Indonesian religious leaders. During the workshop, the group developed a strategy for the curriculum of a training program for local faith leaders in Indonesia. The training program was delivered in three locations and each program was held over three days. The program included training delivered by subject matter experts from Indonesian universities and government agencies, international organisations including the International Organisation for Migration, religious, and non-government organisations. Over 80 participants attended the programs and they have been empowered to create further networks. The training program resulted in strengthening the capability of the religious leaders and local organisations including how to reduce the risk of modern slavery in their communities.

Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla, singer Maudy Ayunda and Grace Forrest. Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.
Buenos Aires, Argentina
16 November 2017

“We celebrate and accompany the commitment of the various religious expressions here present to work together on the task of securing the freedom of all the victims of slavery and trafficking in people.”

Ambassador Santiago de Estrada, Secretary for Worship

In November 2017, the Argentine government hosted the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) IV Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour. During this major global event leading experts and organisations from civil society, government and business sectors came together to discuss important issues for the international community. The Global Freedom Network hosted a ceremony in which 10 religious leaders from the major faiths in Argentina came together to sign the Religious Leaders Joint Declaration on Modern Slavery. Represented at the event was the Catholic Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, the Evangelical faith, the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish communities, the Sikh Dharma Community and the Argentinean Islamic Community.

The event also saw the participation of the civil sector, with the attendance of the leaders of the Instituto de Diálogo Interreligioso (IDI), the leading Argentinean CSO working on interfaith relations in the country.

The Argentine Government, represented by the Secretary of Worship Ambassador Santiago de Estrada, celebrated the commitment from all the religious leaders to end modern slavery as well as highlighting the strength of interfaith relations in the country.

Above: Dr Andrew Forrest together with religious leaders and Archbishop Tarasios, Metropolitan Archbishop of Buenos Aires and Exarch for South America of the Greek Orthodox Church. Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.
On 26 August 2018, eight Latin American faith leaders have united to jointly declare their commitment to stand against modern slavery.

The religious leaders were brought together at a historic event in Medellin, Colombia, organised by the Global Freedom Network, in collaboration with the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM). The event united religious leaders from the region to commit to eradicating modern slavery through spiritual and practical actions.

The new signatories join 63 other Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Buddhist, Hindu, Evangelical, Jewish, Sikh, Bahá’í and Muslim leaders who have signed the Joint Declaration at historic events in Vatican City (2014), Canberra (2015), New Delhi (2015), Jakarta (2017) and Buenos Aires (2017).

Dr Andrew Forrest, Chairman of Global Freedom Network, called on all Latin American religious leaders to join governments and businesses in the fight against modern slavery.

“We face a mighty foe in slavery and if we work alone we will not succeed, no matter how influential or powerful we may be. But if we recognise this as an urgent cause to unite all leaders, across faiths, borders and industries, we can end suffering for tens of millions of people,” Dr Forrest said.

“I call on all faith leaders to raise awareness of this horrible abuse of human rights, to shape positive social values in line with your teachings, and inspire hope.”

The event was held following the Congreso Eclesial which gathered to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Medellin Conference.

Above: Religious Leaders together with Dr Andrew Forrest and Hieromonk Simeon Lopez, Representative of Bishop Kirilo, Serbian Orthodox Bishop for Central and South America signing the Book of Declaration. Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.
Auckland, New Zealand
1 November 2018

“I didn’t know how much money my cousin was getting from my labour... There was never any contract or accounting for my work. I jumped on a truck at 6am and pruned and picked grapes until 6pm or dusk, seven days a week. These grapes went to supermarkets and farmers markets in Melbourne and Sydney... After about two years, I was finally able to contact my mother and found out that my cousin had never sent any money to her. I couldn’t believe this, and I was emotionally devastated. I felt cheated and deceived by this man, who I and our community trusted, but I also felt trapped.”

Moe Turaga, Freedom Advocate

On 1 November 2018 HRH Queen Nanasipau’u of Tonga, together with senior church leaders from 17 Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand, have gathered in Auckland, New Zealand for the signing ceremony of the Joint Declaration Against Modern Slavery.

This event brought together faith leaders, heads of councils of churches and government representatives representing 15 denominations to attend proceedings and mark the launching of the Pacific Freedom Network.


This event took place alongside the Pacific Conference of Churches’ General Assembly, where leaders and key representatives across the Pacific gathered in Auckland, New Zealand from 29 October-1 November.

The assembly meets once every five years and one of the main agenda items is for delegates to determine their priority areas for the next five years. Modern day slavery was unanimously supported as one of these priorities and has been put forward by the secretariat to the council. It is anticipated that this will be adopted, and focus groups established in the coming months.

“Today’s development by the Pacific Conference of Churches is really important in strengthening that support mechanism for the Pacific Islander diaspora, and we’re working with faith leaders in Australia and NZ to make sure we can support those people, and end the abuses,” Walk Free Government Strategist Chris Evans said.

Freedom Advocate Moe Turaga told of his own experience being held in modern slavery in Australia, where he was promised work, study and the opportunity to earn an income for his mother in Fiji.

At the event, leaders spoke of their duty to care for the needs of those who have been discriminated against and treated unfairly.

Above: Religious Leaders together with Walk Free’s The Hon. Chris Evans and Freedom Advocate Moe Turaga
Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.
A coalition of 14 faith leaders from many of the world’s biggest religions united in the Ghanaian capital Accra for the first African signing of the declaration.

The location in Western Africa was poignant because it was the site of such inhumanity during the Transatlantic slave trade hundreds of years earlier. The buildings and remnants of that period are still visible in Ghana, and are a stark reminder that we must never let such an appalling human rights abuses happen again.

Grace Forrest, founding director of Walk Free, told the meeting that while in the past, humans in forced labour were traded across the seas, now we trade the products of forced labour across the seas. There was still so much work to do to eradicate modern slavery and religious leaders could play a vital role in this cooperative effort, she said.

Sheikh Armiyawo Shaibu, spokesperson for Ghana’s national chief Imam, said:

“As faith leaders, you have a very special position in Ghanaian society. You can see changes in people that would pass many others by. And you understand what poverty and desperation can do to men, women and children. So you are uniquely placed to identify victims and help them and who can help deal with the perpetrators.”

The signing event was attended by religious leaders from Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d’Ivoire and Nigeria, as well as government and law enforcement officials.

The declaration ceremony was preceded by workshops and roundtables during which faith leaders shared their experiences of working with their congregations and pledged to come together to tackle modern slavery.

The warm bonds that were created in Accra have resulted in continuing collaboration since the historic signing.
In a landmark event with the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, faith leaders came together to agree to do what was in their power to fight modern slavery in their country. The ICRK’s tradition of interfaith cooperation was hailed as a model for tackling such tough problems which affect communities stricken by inequality and poverty. IRCK Secretary-General Dr Francis Kuria Kagema said faith leaders condemned modern slavery and would use all the resources available to them to end the practice.

“As faith leaders, the society holds us to account given the unique position that has been bestowed on us. We will use our connections and resources to address the root causes of this vice and ensure that it is completely eradicated from our society and perpetrators brought to book.”

Dr Francis Kuria Kagema

GFN director Franca Pellegrini said faith leaders were best-placed to fight modern slavery because they occupied a prominent position in their communities

“The philosophy of Global Freedom Network is built on interfaith collaboration. We are honoured to work in Kenya with the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya.

“The Global Freedom Network believes passionately that in the interconnected, divisive and unequal world we live in, faith leaders can play a crucial role in supporting governments and societies navigate the most complex problems that the 21st century throws at us.

“Our philosophy is that we have to learn from each other and listen to community and faith leaders from as many parts of the world as possible if we are to stand a chance of addressing the root causes of modern slavery, including poverty and inequality. We are living at a particularly fragile time, when the need to listen to solve the world’s most complex problems could not be more important.

“We thank the Kenyan faith leaders for signing this declaration today, joining the community of faith leaders across the world who have endorsed this pledge.”

Above: Reverend Fr Joseph Mutie, Chairman of the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, signs the declaration. Photo credit: Global Freedom Network
Faith leaders from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) gathered in the capital Kinshasa in a show of unity and dedication to upholding the human rights and dignity of their congregations.

The meeting of religious leaders was the first of its kind in the DRC and acknowledged that the country faced some extreme challenges, including poverty and the remnants of conflict.

This could result in some DRC citizens feeling as though submitting to situations of extreme exploitation such as modern slavery was their only option.

GFN director Franca Pellegrini said that the Global Freedom Network was “acutely aware that poverty and inequality were driving forces of many forms of modern slavery.” She said that because of this, “countries recovering from war and instability, like DRC, faced a much harder fight against such crimes.”

However, the positive and powerful influence of faith and faith leaders was a vital force that could protect congregations from modern slavery, especially with support and cooperation.

"The philosophy of the Global Freedom Network is built on interfaith collaboration. We are honoured to be here with faith leaders from so many religions, from across the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Franca Pellegrini

Leaders of Muslim, Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal and Kimbanguist denominations came together to sign the declaration, on a landmark day for religious cooperation in the DRC.

South African religious leaders gathered at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg to endorse the declaration in a ceremony which acknowledged the history of a country which has emerged from apartheid, a period of legalised exploitation.

Fittingly, the signing ceremony took place at a site once used to house political prisoners and human rights activists and which is now home to South Africa’s Constitutional Court.

“Where we stand today – at the Women’s Jail at Constitution Hill – is a stark reminder of a recent past where the majority of the country was deprived of the most basic freedoms. And how the empathy and vision of a generation of leaders can make dramatic changes to a society in a relatively short space of time.

“It is therefore a particular honour for Global Freedom Network that South Africa now joins the international community of faith leaders – united through the declaration – who can work together in the fight against modern slavery.”

Franca Pellegrini

The gathering heard that the root causes of labour exploitation were often poverty and inequality. Faith leaders were uniquely suited to tackling modern slavery because of the prominent role they played in their communities.

Above: Signatories at the signing in Johannesburg, South Africa, in March 2022.
Photo credit: Global Freedom Network.
I first discovered slavery when I was only a child myself. I was working with children who had been rescued and were going through rehabilitation. Despite the fact we were all just girls spending time together, their physical and emotional scars – from the torture they had endured – fundamentally changed my view of the world and my place in it.

Grace Forrest

Modern slavery is a complex and often hidden crime that crosses borders, sectors and jurisdictions. Walk Free believes that a strong multifaceted approach is needed to end modern slavery. This includes building a robust knowledge base to inform action, driving legislative change in key countries and harnessing the power of businesses and faiths.

Walk Free’s Global Slavery Index (GSI) is the world’s leading data set on modern slavery and provides detailed assessments of the size and scale of modern slavery, as well as country-level vulnerability and government responses. Walk Free also works with United Nations agencies International Labour Organization and International Organization for Migration to create the Global Estimates of Modern Slavery.

The Global Freedom Network is the faith-based arm of Walk Free and was established in 2014 to catalyse world faiths in the fight against modern slavery.

More broadly, Walk Free works with governments and businesses around the world in a range of initiatives to change legislation and address supply chain issues. Walk Free works closely with the Australian Government on the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, and champions business sector engagement in tackles modern slavery.

It also successfully advocated for an Australian Modern Slavery Act and works to encourage all leading global economies to enact laws to ensure all organisations are held accountable for taking proactive steps to remove modern slavery from their supply chains. Walk Free also works with partners, such the Freedom Fund, to scale effective antislavery responses.

Through a combination of direct implementation, grassroots community engagement and working in partnership with faiths, businesses, academics, NGOs and governments around the world, Walk Free believes we can eradicate modern slavery in all its forms.
A smart phone app for faith leaders

The Faith for Freedom App is a practical information tool for faith leaders, clergy and their staff to help identify modern slavery and human trafficking and safeguard their communities.

Produced by the Global Freedom Network, this free app provides clear, concise information about the crimes of modern slavery. It explains what modern slavery is, how to detect it, how to respond to people affected by it, and how and where to find help to address it.

The App has country-specific information as well as an international mode.

The Faith For Freedom app was developed in collaboration with a panel of faith leaders and creates an information bridge between those who may witness human trafficking and those in authority who can take action.

Franca Pellegrini, director of the Global Freedom Network, the faith-based arm of international human rights group Walk Free, said faith leaders were in a unique position to see into the hearts of their communities.

“This is a practical tool designed for and developed by faith leaders to assist with their important work addressing modern slavery in their congregations and communities,” Ms Pellegrini said.

“We are using modern technology to address an age-old problem.”

The close consultation resulted in an app which suited the unique needs of religious leaders, their assistants and staff.

“This app links faith leaders with social workers and law enforcement and provides practical advice on how to identify, assess and act on instances of modern slavery, and how to engage with congregations on this subject.

“I am very grateful for the deep insights and advice from the panel of faith leaders who advised on the app’s design and content.”
The Faith For Freedom App is a trailblazer in the engagement of faith-based organisations in joint action against all forms of human trafficking, which is a crime against humanity.

Thank you Global Freedom Network for all you are doing in God’s name for humanity.

– Very Rev Opeyemi Awe, General Secretary, Africa Methodist Council
#EndModernSlavery

globalfreedomnetwork.org