

Travel Report of W. Cole Durham, Jr.
Ethiopia, April 13-17, 2026

The primary purposes of traveling to Ethiopia were as follows:

1. Attendance at a joint conference of the African Council of Religious Leaders and Religions for Peace (April 15-16) on “Expanding Religious Freedom Through Self-Regulation: Situational Analysis and Stakeholder Mapping in Preparation for the Continental Interfaith Convening on FoRB and Civic Space in Africa.”
2. Participation in planning for the Continental Interfaith Convening (fully titled above)
3. Meetings with members of the newly established Interreligious Council of Rwanda.
4. Meetings with Ambassador Mussie Hailu and African Union Leaders and representative of Interreligious Council of Ethiopia. (It turned out that many of the key AU and Ethiopian IRCE were traveling, so the main (and productive) meeting was with Ambassador Hailu.
5. Extend early invitations to dignitaries from AU, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and others for October G20 Interfaith Forum in Salt Lake City.

Reflections on the Joint Conference of the African Council of Religious Leaders and Religions for Peace

The joint meeting was impressive. It was conducted by Dr. Francis Kuria, the General Secretary of Religions for Peace (“RfP”) , and also a key leader of the African Council of Religious Leaders (“ACRL”). The meeting went far toward advancing ACRL’s mission of “mobilizing religious leaders and their communities to build peaceful, just, hopeful and harmonious societies in Africa.”

A key focus of the joint conference was on interreligious councils (“IRC’s”) around Africa. It was noted during the conference that thirty-four African countries currently have IRCs, that exist at various levels of organizational strength, with structures extending from national to local levels. A major purpose of the joint conference was to provide training for members of IRCs around Africa, including the newly established body in Rwanda that was in attendance. To this end, the organizers provided an overview session, led by Dr. Kuria, that focused on structural foundations of functioning IRCs, including descriptions of governance and leadership structures, membership criteria, legal status and institutional positioning, and accountability and transparency mechanisms. Impressive during this session (and others) was the candid discussion of the role of IRCs in promoting religious freedom, noting among other things that there is a significant risk that because IRCs inevitably include a country’s dominant religions, each IRC needs to be cautious to assure that the religious freedom of minority and non-dominant groups is assured. Opportunities for IRCs to influence the AU, the AU Interfaith Forum, other AU institutions, as well as ECOWAS and similar regional bodies were highlighted.

During the joint conference, three prominent IRCs had the opportunity to describe at a practical level how they functioned, so that others could benefit from their experience. The

representative from Sierra Leone noted that their IRC had emerged against the background of eleven years of civil war, from 1991-2002. Faith actors including both Christians and Muslims played a key role in peace building. The IRC in Sierra Leone was actually established in April of 1997, at the peak of the civil war. The IRC had several key objectives at the time: (1) promoting dialogue between communities; (2) Mobilizing moral authority; and (3) providing a humanitarian and reconciliation role. The highest governing body of Sierra Leone's IRC has a triannual conference. There are 14 umbrella bodies—six Christian and 8 Muslim. There is a requirement that a woman must be among the top positions in the organization. The factors that explained the success of the IRC were: (1) traditional tolerance among religions; (2) moral legitimacy: the fact that religious leaders were trusted; (3) cultural conditions conducive to dialogue; and (4) government reliance on the IRC. Financial challenges remain a problem, but there is now greater understanding that faith actors can serve as mediators and can identify models for faith-based peace building.

The representative from Uganda noted that RfP had played a key role in creating its IRC. They were instantly involved in dealing with the Lord Resistance Army and also with combating AIDS. IRC Presidents provide overall leadership for the organization and act as a national moral authority. They work with the president of the country, the prime minister, ambassadors, and so. They have a quarterly meeting with the President. Leadership rotates, with a maximum of two three-year terms. IRC Committees are strong at the local level. The country is divided in 146 districts, with 9 people in each district. There was some discussion of effective fundraising programs, such as forestry planting, a poultry farm, a youth steering center, and support from various denominations. A key is developing partnership with government.

The spokesman from Kenya described the history of their IRC. It was founded in 1983, with a focus on HIV and conflicts. In 2005, the IRC was formally registered as an IRC. It has nine bodies, including Christian, Muslim, and Hindu organizations. The organization has thematic areas of focus. There is a major focus on peacemaking, especially at the time of elections, especially after elections.

The experiences of other countries, such as Nigeria and Zambia were also shared.

Dr. Kuria emphasized the importance of pursuing unity. Too often, individual faith communities do not make good members of a national IRC. As he put it, however, "hunting together is better than hunting as one." He emphasized the importance of developing partnerships with electoral commissions, with the national parliament, and with funding agencies. There is a need for leadership that is visible and transparent.

Certain themes emerged in the process, such as the importance for IRCs of obtaining legal entity status so that they have legitimacy in dealing with public affairs. ACRL noted its emphasis on peace building and conflict transformation, and also efforts to stop hate speech. It has been critical to peace efforts in several parts of Africa. Practical problems of involving a number of minority groups were discussed. Challenges of involving indigenous

or traditional religions were noted, but the fact that these challenges can be overcome in interfaith space was emphasized.

With respect to planning for the Africa-wide meeting currently envisioned for August or September, a number of practical issues were discussed. Should countries in addition to the thirty-four who already have IRCs be invited? The original aim was to invite about 90 people. What percentage should be friends and partners. What should the outcome of the meeting be—a declaration, or a plan of action? A main objective will be to share experience. It would be helpful to develop a charter or model for self-regulation. It will also be significant to highlight the growing body of empirical evidence underscoring the value of religious freedom. It may make sense to draw on the experience of South Africa in terms of the South African Charter and also models of self-regulation that have been developed there. Address violence in the name of religion also needs to be a major focus.

Toward the end, there was an emphasis on translating analysis into strategy. This includes identifying priority themes, advocacy objectives and policy outcomes.

In general, the meeting was very helpful in deepening everyone's understanding of the structure, actual and potential roles, and possible areas of impact of IRCs. The potential scope and depth of IRC activities was highlighted in ways that assisted everyone in moving forward in practical ways

Other Outcomes.

In addition to the joint conference itself, the trip to Ethiopia provided important opportunities to lay plan for future work with the AU in particular. Ambassador Hailu will be key in this regard. Practical working sessions helped identify a range of contacts around Africa but also in AU structures that can be important partners for IF20 initiatives in the future.

Dr. Kuria himself agreed to attend the IF20 conference in Salt Lake City and to speak in the opening ceremony session.

General reflections:

IF20 played a role in recommending that the AU become a formal member of the G20. We have met regularly with leaders as the various roles the AU can play in this process continue to crystallize. It can also contribute to developing overall vision for the future of Africa. It is clear in this regard that Africa has vast potential accompanied by significant challenges. The G20 provides a structure that can allow interaction between Africa and major economic powers on earth. In this regard, the existence of IRCs across Africa provides great potential as an institutional link that can strengthen partnerships between religious voices and political processes in Africa. The potential of the AU in this regard

needs to continue to be cultivated. Upcoming Pan-African meetings provide an important context for these issues to be addressed.