

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa Opens G20 Interfaith Forum as Guest of Honor, Calling on Faith Leaders to Confront Hate Speech

Salt Lake City, October 15, 2026 — His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Mohammed bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, delivered the opening keynote as guest of honor at the G20 Interfaith Forum (IF20) on Thursday evening, urging faith leaders to be the first to confront hate speech that borrows the language of religion. He spoke at the Historic Tabernacle at Temple Square to what the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has confirmed is the largest gathering of interfaith leaders ever assembled in Utah, as the IF20 opened its first annual Forum held in the United States.

Al-Issa opened with a greeting of peace and drew a sharp line between optimism and hope.

“Optimism waits for things to improve on their own,” Al-Issa said. “Hope, however, is a decision taken by people of living conscience and a willingness to do hard work for tomorrow.”

That conviction, he said, is rooted in Islam.

“Our religion carries this teaching,” Al-Issa said. “Despair is considered a departure from faith. Hope is a duty and a sustainable endeavor.”

Today, he warned, that duty is being tested by escalating hate speech, now amplified by digital platforms.

“History teaches us, painfully and repeatedly, that violence against others begins with bad words, which serve as a gateway to hate,” he said.

Because hate speech “often borrows the language of religion,” Al-Issa said, faith leaders must be the first to reject it. He was equally direct about violence in God’s name.

“Any unjust war in human history, including those made in the name of religion, is not a divine banner, but a satanic one,” Al-Issa said.

The real threat, he said, lies in allowing our differences to “turn us into a wall of negative hatred.” He cautioned against hating any religion because of followers who err, and equally against using religion to shield wrongdoers and keep them on a pedestal.

Al-Issa pointed to the Muslim World League’s work to turn dialogue into impact, including its Building Bridges of Understanding and Peace Between East and West initiative, launched at UN Headquarters in New York in 2023, and his role representing Islam at the World Economic Forum’s dialogue on bringing people together in Davos, which he said was the first in that forum’s history. Lasting impact, he said, requires work that begins in the family and extends through education and society, with spiritual influence running through all three.

The evening also featured Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazadeh, Chairman of the Caucasus Muslims Board, who conveyed greetings from the President of Azerbaijan. Earlier on Thursday, Pashazadeh joined IF20 President W. Cole Durham, Elder Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon and other senior religious leaders in closed meetings on the Global Multifaith Advisory Council, a permanent body within the IF20 initiated under a memorandum of understanding adopted in Türkiye in May.

With multilateral institutions under strain, participants discussed how the council can give religious leaders a sustained voice in G20 policy on issues such as food security, modern slavery and artificial intelligence, and urged that it deliver practical results rather than more conferences.

“Facing the challenges of this world, dialogue among religions and civilizations, and joint action between religions and secular communities, matters more than ever,” Pashazadeh said.

He said the time has come to move from discussion to action.

“Now it’s time to establish the council and start its activity,” Pashazadeh said. “I hope the council’s recommendations on building global peace will prove useful to the political leaders.”

He thanked the United States and its people, and especially The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for hosting the Forum, and closed with a prayer that the Almighty Creator “bless and establish our efforts for peace.”

President Dallin H. Oaks of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hosted the ceremony, calling the assembly “the most prominent constellation of faith leaders that has ever gathered in Salt Lake City.” Michael O. Leavitt, President of The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, conducted.

Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, delivered a message on behalf of the Holy See, asking whether the progress G20 leaders seek will serve the human person.

“Technology offers extraordinary possibilities, but it does not tell us what is good,” Caccia said. “We still need to ask the questions of whom progress is serving and whether it is serving them well. This is where faith leaders have something to offer.”

Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, Secretary-General of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, said the gathering’s strength lies in harmony, not sameness.

“A choir is exquisite because every voice retains its distinctiveness but belongs to the same song,” Saraswati said.

Other speakers included IF20 Vice President Katherine Marshall, Rabbi Mark Dratch and Dr. Francis Kuria Kageka, Secretary General of Religions for Peace. Bishop Alastair Redfern and Lord Russell Rook offered the opening and closing prayers, and The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square performed throughout.

The Opening Ceremony took place October 15, 2026, from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m. MDT. The Forum continues October 16–17 at the University of Utah under the theme “Resilient Hope, Shared Future,” ahead of the

G20 Leaders' Summit in Miami on December 14–15. The full program is available at g20interfaith.org/2026-forum-program.

Speakers included:

- **His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Mohammed bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa (Guest of Honor and Opening Keynote)** — Secretary General, Muslim World League; Chairman, Organization of Muslim Scholars
- **Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazadeh** — Chairman, Caucasus Muslims Board
- **Michael O. Leavitt (Conducting)** — President, The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square; former Governor of Utah and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services
- **President Dallin H. Oaks** — President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- **Archbishop Gabriele Caccia** — Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Holy See
- **Prof. W. Cole Durham** — President, G20 Interfaith Forum Association
- **Prof. Katherine Marshall** — Vice President, G20 Interfaith Forum Association
- **Elder Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon** — Ecumenical Patriarchate
- **Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati** — Secretary-General, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance
- **Rabbi Mark Dratch** — Chair, International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations
- **Dr. Francis Kuria Kagema** — Secretary General, Religions for Peace

Full speaker bios are available in the [2026 Forum Directory](#).

About the G20 Process

The Group of Twenty, or G20, is the premier forum for international economic cooperation, bringing together the leaders of Earth's most prosperous economies. Collectively, G20 members represent around 80 percent of the world's economic output, two-thirds of the global population and three-quarters of international trade. Throughout the year, representatives from G20 countries gather to discuss financial and socioeconomic issues as well as broader humanitarian issues targeted by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

About the G20 Interfaith Forum

The G20 Interfaith Forum seeks global solutions by collaborating with religious thought leaders and political representatives to help shape the overall G20 agenda. It draws on the vital roles that religious institutions and beliefs play in world affairs, reflecting a rich diversity of institutions, ideas, and values. Through its extensive network of networks, it helps prioritize key global policy goals and point toward practical means of implementation at every level of society.

For more information, please visit www.g20interfaith.org.

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