

# Keeping the faith: still focused on goals

## The planned interfaith leaders' summit in 2014 may have been disrupted, but the joint focus on the Millennium Development Goals is unwavering

By Karen Hamilton, general secretary, Canadian Council of Churches

Since 2005, faith leaders of the G8 members have gathered prior to the summits. These interfaith leaders' summits have brought together senior leaders of a wide variety of faith traditions, representing those of the G8 countries, to meet, to engage each other on the issues facing their countries and the G8 summits, to involve the forum's political leaders and to issue a statement. The statements, all of which can be found at [www.faithchallengeg8.com](http://www.faithchallengeg8.com), emphasise the priorities of the faith leaders for the sake of the people of the world.

The interfaith leaders' summits, whether in the format of face-to-face meetings, as most of them are, or via the 2012 Twitter campaign and the 2013 open letter to the *Financial Times*, are intended to engage not only the faith leaders but also the G8 political leaders and the general public. The faith leaders commit themselves to ongoing, detailed efforts in terms of such life-giving and life-changing global strategies as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), climate change, and peace and security challenges. They also call upon the G8 political leaders to take action in these vital areas and to keep the promises that they have already made for the sake of the world's people.

### Unique challenges

These interfaith leaders' summits have been held in whichever country is hosting the G8 political leaders every year since 2005. This year, 2014, has some unique challenges. The G8 political leaders were to meet in Sochi in Russia, following the Winter Olympics held there. However, the tension between Russia and Ukraine and the response of the G7 members has meant that the G7 will now meet alone. On 2 March, the G7

leaders announced the suspension of their participation in preparations for the Sochi Summit. On 24 March, they announced that a G7 meeting would instead be held in Brussels on the scheduled dates.

This has had an effect on the interfaith leaders' summit for 2014. However, the commitments to the past interfaith leaders' statements remain strong, clear and extremely focused. With 2015 being the final year for the MDGs to be reached, attention to these goals has increased as one of the key issues very consistently addressed by the

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world's faith leaders since 2005. The faith communities of the globe are aware that the commitments of the G8 members to meeting these goals have, in many cases, not been met.

The result has been a higher profile and renewed focus on the MDGs themselves and their successors. The term 'sustainable' has been used extensively in thinking ahead to a framework to succeed the MDGs.

### Change in ethos hard to measure

Harder to measure but clear to see has been a change in ethos. It is now much more common than it was in 2005 for faith leaders simply to assume that when they address such issues as the MDGs, for the health, well-being and flourishing of the people of the world, they will do so in a multi-faith way. It is much easier for global faith leaders to issue

consensus statements and be in agreement on what needs to be done to address climate change, nuclear weapons or the small arms trade, doing so with a clear level of studied expertise, than it is for them to be in agreement with political leadership.

This does not necessarily indicate any growing polarisation between faith leaders and political leaders. It indicates the growing relationship and use of common terms and language that faith communities in many places around the globe are finding with each other.

It must, of course, be recognised that there are religious and polarising aspects to many of the current conflicts in the world. In some cases there is a polarisation within the faith community. This does not change the fact that interfaith convergence is growing on issues such as poverty, healthcare, the eradication of disease and the education of children.

While there are fewer concrete details of the interfaith leaders' summit process this year, because of the challenging situation in Ukraine, the process is continuing in very concrete ways for 2015. In the eight-year cycle of summits, Germany is due to host the G7/8 political leaders in 2015. The faith groups of Germany have been planning their response and their gathering since 2012.

### Strength and momentum

Spearheaded by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, substantial planning has already taken place for an interfaith youth event for 2015 to highlight the anticipated failure to achieve the MDGs. The determination to focus on the final year of the MDGs is noteworthy; so too is the growing priority of the youth of the world's faith traditions to jointly witness and engage in the issues before the G8.

While a 2014 interfaith leaders' summit in Russia would have been an important opportunity to strengthen global faith relationships and to make a strong statement about future directions for the faith leaders and the G7/8 in pursuit of sustainable living and equity for all people, the interfaith leaders' summit process has gained such strength and momentum that its continuity, consistency and persistency will carry its statements and priorities into 2015 and beyond. ■



Slum dwellers in New Delhi, India. Interfaith convergence is growing on issues such as poverty, healthcare and the education of children