



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

2017 IOP: EAST AFRICA - CREDIBLE VOICES EXCHANGE PROGRAM REPORT

**DIVERSITY AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH
INTERFAITH, COMMUNITY AND INCLUSIVENESS**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH: UGANDA MUSLIM YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FORUM (UMYDF)

(UGANDA, TANZANIA, KENYA, SOMALIA)

**MD, NY, VA AND DC
OCTOBER 9-26, 2017**



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation (CECF)

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DIVERSITY AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH: INTERFAITH COMMUNITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

Partnership-building between individuals, groups, and cultures, is of greater importance than ever before to assure safety and stability in our politically and economically volatile world of today. Therefore, it is the guiding principle by which we tailor our International Observer Programs (IOPs). Establishing positive, productive, relationships begins by fostering mutual understanding and trust, through appreciation of one another's culture, history, religion, social order, customs, and way of life. Personal and professional dialogue that gives a name and a face to "the other" based on personal experience and direct interaction is indispensable in breaking down barriers and stereotypes, and is a necessary precondition for real and lasting peace. Shifting from a "them and us" dynamic to a "we" dynamic can make all the difference in our ability to embrace our common humanity and our inherent interdependence. We're all in this together.

Clergy, scholars, educators, community leaders, and policy makers are essential players in this endeavor. They are in a position to reach the hearts, souls, and minds of those with and to whom they engage and minister. Our IOPs help equip these leaders to venture out and actively engage in this process themselves.

IOPs are two- or three-week journeys of intensive intellectual and experiential learning. Participants are invited through U.S. Embassies in foreign countries to take part in and observe communities in the United States. Throughout the program, the delegates travel with an American Imam, Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat, and a highly qualified team, who have a great deal of experience with various Muslim cultures from around the world, and are able to help the delegates make connections between each part of the program and their own unique religious, cultural, and professional backgrounds. Participants in IOPs offered between February and April, may, in addition to their own program, also be able to observe the international, intercultural, and interfaith youth leadership conference called Better Understanding for a Better World, known to high school exchange students as the BUBW.

This particular IOP, entitled **DIVERSITY AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH: INTERFAITH COMMUNITY AND INCLUSIVENESS**, was developed to introduce participants to various experiences and issues with a wide variety of vibrant, rapidly growing Muslim communities, and their fruitful interfaith relationships with the wider American society. Education is critical to address the need for understanding both within and between religious groups, who are often ignorant of both their own traditions and of those of others. Too often this includes a dearth of proper training of religious leaders themselves. Cross-cultural learning must be emphasized to inspire people to engage in collaborative efforts that positively impact every aspect of society, ranging from their community's most basic needs, to civic and international involvement.

The United States offers countless examples of the importance of both the individual and collective success achievable through interfaith community and active, inclusive participation in democracy.

The 2017 IOP: East Africa Credible Voices Exchange Program: DIVERSITY AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH: INTERFAITH COMMUNITY AND INCLUSIVENESS provided opportunities for delegation members to gain a deeper understanding about religious and cultural pluralism in America. They were able to see first-hand examples of faithful Muslims participating in the democratic process, and making positive contributions

to the larger American society without compromising their spiritual practice or religious integrity. The program enabled delegates to:

- **Explore** the history, growth, and importance of interfaith initiatives in the U.S.A.
- **Participate** actively in events with religious leaders and communities from diverse backgrounds and faith traditions.
- **Engage** in face - to - face dialogue with members of society through meetings, seminars, home visits, interfaith events, conferences, and other activities.
- **Examine** religious freedom, and discover how the American doctrine of the Separation of Church and State is intended to preserve religious freedom, and protect every individual's right to worship as they see fit.
- **Observe** American democracy through its social manifestations- especially as seen in freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press to point out, discuss, challenge and even disagree.



Visiting the Muslim Community Center (MCC) Medical Clinic in Silver Spring, MD

ITINERARY

OCTOBER 11-13 MARYLAND

- ORIENTATION
- DIYANET CENTER- TURKISH MOSQUE
- MUSLIM COMMUNITY CENTER

OCTOBER 14-16 NEW YORK

- THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTER OF NEW YORK (ICCN)
- CIRCLE LINE LANDMARKS CRUISE AROUND NEW YORK
- THE EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
- UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND (UNFPA)
- Tour of THE UNITED NATIONS COMPLEX
- UGANDA HOUSE, THE PERMANENT MISSION OF UGANDA TO THE UN

OCTOBER 17-21 WASHINGTON, DC

- EMBASSY OF SOMALIA
- BALTIMORE POLICE DEPARTMENT
- THE SUPREME COURT
- THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER
- WASHINGTON NATIONAL CATHEDRAL
- THE ISLAMIC CENTER OF WASHINGTON
- TEMPLE EMANUEL
- THE GLOBAL POLICY CENTER
- GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY'S PRINCE ALWALEED BIN TALAL CENTER FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING (ACMCU)
- THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
- THE CAPITOL BUILDING
- ISLAMIC EDUCATION CENTER (IEC)
- SIGHT-SEEING TOUR OF WASHINGTON
- ISWA CONFERENCE "THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN AMERICA"

OCTOBER 22-25 MARYLAND

- THE WORLD ORGANIZATION FOR RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION (WORDE)
- DEPARTURE

MARYLAND DIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY



Once settled into our hotel, the program began with an afternoon **Orientation Session**. Participants and staff introduced themselves, and each gave a brief statement of their roles or work and the country from which they came, whether in Africa, or for Al Basheer/CECF in the U.S.A. The Program Officer informed the delegates about what to expect and how to function during their stay- including local customs and manners, cultural attitudes and expectations, matters of personal hygiene, time management and punctuality, acceptable event specific attire, and the American concept of “professionalism”.



After welcoming the delegates, Imam Bashar shared a synopsis of the **Credible Voices Exchange Program**, its origins, goals, history, and its connections to their respective countries. Imam Bashar eloquently shared his vision of peace and intercultural harmony, frequently reinforcing them with quotations in Arabic from the Qur'an and Hadith.



Ms. Julianne Norman, CECF's BUBW Program Coordinator, explained the revelatory effectiveness and life-changing dynamics of the youth interfaith, intercultural and leadership program, **Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW)**- replete with testimonials from the youth alumni. It was made clear that our objective was not just to provide the delegates with a rewarding experience in America, but also to provide them with ideas, examples, specific information, and tools that can be used or adjusted and potentially applied to their lives and work back in their home countries.

Rob Stucky, the Program Officer, spoke on **Spirituality in America**. He prefaced his remarks by explaining how the harder we hold to our preferred paradigms, the more difficult, or even impossible, it becomes to receive data that significantly differs from or contradicts our paradigms. This may be seen as a good news/ bad news metaphor for the human condition: Sincerity of belief is

not a guarantor of truth, and we can be, and often are, sincerely wrong! Our culturally conditioned

views of other religions and societies are often based on erroneous information or serious misconceptions, due to our attachment to a single perspective.

A synopsis of the history of religion in America, from pre-colonial times to the present, including the arrival of Muslim slaves prior to the Civil War, and the vital role of religion in the Civil Rights Movement, was shared. They also learned of the importance of the American doctrine of the **Separation of Church and State**. It is an integral part of America's history of seeking the freedom to worship without State control, and the ongoing debate about how to live as a faithful believer in a pluralistic society. America's founders sought a righteous government that is both democratic and consistent with religious principles without being controlled by religious institutions or clerical authorities. A distinction was made between spirituality- an inner condition of unitive awareness, peace, and harmony nurtured by certain inner practices; and religion- a set of institutionalized beliefs, external practices, and customs. Failure to make that distinction has historically fueled both internecine and inter-cultural conflicts throughout history.

Father Bill Au, shared in detail various aspects on the **Interfaith Movement in America**. Fr. Bill presented interfaith dialogue as an indispensable and necessary exploration of what it really means to be a full human being. He underscored the premise that each tribe and people on the Earth are co-participants in Creation, created in the image and likeness of their Creator, and thereby learning how each group, society, or tradition experiences and understands their relationship to the Creator, and the Creation, enlarges and enriches our respective understanding of ourselves as human beings as well.

Imam Bashar wrapped up the Orientation with a short video of the **Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW) Conference**, and a passionate advocacy for spreading the message of mutual understanding and respect as an integral and essential part of all of CECF's work.

The delegates' first taste of Islam in America was a visit to the **DIYANET CENTER OF AMERICA (DCA)**- the recently completed and very impressive **Turkish Mosque and Islamic Center complex in Lanham, MD**. The Imam and his assistant, escorted the delegates on a tour of the complex, lead them in prayer, and showed them an informative video on the work the center does. This was the first of several visits to local Islamic centers of varying sizes, styles, demographic compositions, and levels of social outreach, in order to give our delegates a first-hand glimpse of the range of Muslim life in America, and the engagement of the Muslim community in the social, economic and political life of the wider community- on the municipal, state and even national levels.



Next, we visited **The MUSLIM COMMUNITY CENTER (MCC) OF SILVER SPRING, MD**, where we were received by Imam Abdullahi, a Somali born and educated Imam, who moved to America as an adult with his wife and children.

He shared information about the community and their efforts. The delegates were given a tour of the complex- including their mosque and their remarkable community clinic (**MCC Medical Clinic**), where Dr. Rashid Chotani, a Pakistani-born physician trained at the world-renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital, shared the wide range of medical services they provide on a sliding fee scale, based on patients' ability to pay. The delegates were impressed that their medical services are not only available to Muslims, but also to non-Muslims throughout Montgomery County.

A poster on the lawn outside the mosque caught the attention of all the delegates: it stated in bold letters and multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, Chinese and Korean, ***"There is No Place for Hate Here"***.



At **THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF THE WASHINGTON AREA (ISWA)**, Imam Faizal Khan greeted the delegation before Jumu'ah prayers and lead them on a tour afterwards. The facility also serves as CECF/Al Basheer's D.C. area campus for classes, seminars, workshops, conferences and meetings.

With these three visits, delegates glimpsed the diversity of Muslim life in America.

NEW YORK INTERFAITH & INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

At **THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTER OF NEW YORK (ICCNY)**, the largest mosque in New York City, the delegation was met by the Sheikh Ali Mashour who guided us through the mosque. Then the principal, Sister Khadija Jean Pryce, lead a tour of the school, which was of particular interest to several delegates, whose focus in their native countries is on youth and education, and the challenges of providing both Qur'anic and well-rounded general literacy at home.



Delegates pose with the Imam of The Islamic society of New York

Following the tour of the Islamic Center, we travelled back downtown to board the **CIRCLE LINE LANDMARKS CRUISE AROUND NEW YORK-** which gave the delegates a wonderful overview of Manhattan, and a close-up view of both **the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island**. This was particularly important to help them better understand America's history as a nation of immigrants, and to realize that the Statue of Liberty was a gift in grateful acknowledgment of American receptivity to others from the nation of France.



The Rev. Thomas Faulkner, and his wife, the Rev. Brenda Husson, under the auspices of the **Episcopal Diocese of New York** and its **Roots & Branches Program**, run by CECF colleague, Fr. Masud Ibn Syedullah, provided a wonderful reception and dinner for our delegates.



The Rev. Thomas Faulkner, the Rev. Brenda Husson & the Rev. Masud Ibn Syedullah



Rev. Jeremiah Juma offering prayer before the meal

Included among the guests were Dr. Sara Sayeed, a representative from the Mayor's Office, and the Rev. Chloe Breyer, director of New York's Interfaith Council. Both gave a warm welcome and an informative overview of their work in the community.

Following dinner, there was a screening of a docu-drama, ***The Sultan and the Saint***, based on the historical encounter between St. Francis of Assisi and the Sultan Al-Malik al-Kamil, at the siege of Damietta in Egypt in 1219. This event was of great significance, and established a precedent and model for mutual inter-faith understanding and respect.



Neither Francis nor the Sultan succeeded in converting the other to his faith, but came to understand that conversion was not necessary, because they each recognized the other shared a similar view of the message of peace and spiritual commitment. *The Sultan and the Saint* is also the name Imam Bashar has chosen to mount a major conference in 2019, to be held in Washington, D.C., Assisi, Italy, and Damietta, Egypt in celebration of the 800th Anniversary of the original encounter.

Another highlight was a visit to **THE EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE**, long noted for its active promotion of intercultural dialogue and inter-faith activity. The delegation was warmly received by the Rt. Rev. Clifton Daniel III- retired bishop and Interim Dean of the Cathedral.

The delegates were seated near the altar for the Choral Eucharist- and following an inspiring sermon on the nature and risks of “entitlement”, were publicly introduced and welcomed by the Dean, who also honored the delegation by having them join him as the clergy and choir recessed down the nave end of at the end of the mass. There they were warmly greeted by parishioners, and treated to an informal “coffee hour”. For most of the delegates this was their first experience attending a Christian worship service.



The delegation had a very informative meeting with Dr. Azza Karam, the Director of the **UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND (UNFPA)** and their Task Force on **Realizing the Faith Dividend, Religion, Gender, Peace and Security**. Dr. Karam shared the multi-pronged work of the UN in empowering women, gender inclusivity in education, and preventing faith-based discrimination around the world. She and her colleagues also advocated eloquently for the positive utilization of faith-based organizations committed to peace.



Delegates were given the opportunity to ask many questions, and were clearly concerned about the methods and means of implementation of UN guidelines and policies in countries where corruption and autocracy often hold sway. It was pointed out that “terrorism” is used as a sort of bogey-man term to instill fear and justify the incarceration of opponents- as a poor substitute for actually achieving security.

The UN presentation by Dr. Karam and her colleagues also underscored the positive role faith-based organizations can and must play in the prevention of genocide. Since history shows that genocidal policies have often misappropriated religious and scriptural references to justify their implementation, objective religious and inter-religious education becomes a matter of great importance.



Meeting with Dr. Azza Karam and her colleagues in New York

The delegates took a **Tour of THE UNITED NATIONS COMPLEX**- including the Security Council Chamber, the General Assembly Chamber, various art displays, the bookstore, and cafeteria.





Following lunch, we then moved across the street to **UGANDA HOUSE, THE PERMANENT MISSION OF UGANDA TO THE UNITED NATIONS**, where we were warmly received by the Ugandan Ambassador to the UN, Dr. Adonia Ayebare. Ambassador Ayebare spent a lot of time with the delegates asking and answering questions, and sharing with them his efforts at the UN.



While in New York, between meetings and after program events, the delegation had free time to explore.



WASHINGTON, DC

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

The delegation met with the **BALTIMORE POLICE DEPARTMENT**, with whom CECF and Al Basheer Institute have been working for years as consultants to the Police Department's outreach and interface with the Muslim Community. We were able to have a very informative and interesting meeting with a police lieutenant Featherbead and Tholyn Twyman, the Social Program Administrator for the Community Collaboration Division. It was inspiring for the delegates to see what active collaboration might look like in the prevention of radicalization and the use of violence as a political tool.



Baltimore Police Commissioner and Chief Russell meet the East African Delegation

Chief Russell spoke of a Police-run Summer camp for children from Kindergarten through 8th grade as integral to building faith and trust between the police and the communities they serve, rather than the adversarial relationship too often found in poor and disadvantaged communities.

He has also been a strong advocate for returning to a policing model in which officers and community residents were personally known to each other. This has proven to reduce the incidence of crime and increase the safety of local neighborhoods.

Ms. Twyman pointed out a shift toward recognizing domestic violence as a public health issue, and that by developing better relationships between police and the public, the general health and well-being of the community is enhanced. This was yet another illustration of how public diplomacy, education, and relationship building all interface between the secular and religious communities for the collective good and well-being of all.



After visiting the **SUPREME COURT**, the delegates were surprised to discover that the role of the Court is not as a criminal court in the usual sense, but rather as the final arbiter on the legality of rulings of lower courts on criminal and civil law cases. After visiting the actual courtroom, we were met by Supreme Court Fellow, Parker Douglas, who further explained the duties and practices of the Court, and fielded questions from the delegates. Each of the delegates had already received a copy of the U.S. Constitution, along with the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, so many were able to ask more pointed and helpful questions of the Fellow. They were very interested to see there were more similarities than differences between Constitutional Law and Sharia. This helped refute and demythologize the misperception that the two systems are incompatible, or even mutually contradictory. The Supreme Court Fellow confirmed what both Imam Abdullahi of the MCC and Imam Bashar had stressed, that living by Islamic principles is in fact not inconsistent with American jurisprudence.



Delegates' Q&A with Supreme Court Fellow Parker Douglas and photo with Chief Justice Marshall Statue

Our next stop was **THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER**- the famous non-partisan think tank that provides objective statistics on a wide range of topics, as a primary resource for law makers and policy makers to make informed decisions in their deliberations. It appeared that this kind of objective, statistical research was largely unfamiliar to many of our delegates. Research Fellow Becka Alper offered them a novel, but statistically objective perspective on Muslim life in America, in relation to the wider population.



The delegates then went on a tour of **WASHINGTON NATIONAL CATHEDRAL**- built as "**A national house of prayer for all people**". The cathedral is often seen on television as the place of events of national celebrations or solemn occasions of mourning. Throughout its history, Washington Cathedral has offered worship space to numerous congregations in need of one- including Jewish and Muslim congregations. It is one of Washington's liveliest cultural centers and a popular venue for numerous

concerts, plays, lectures, interfaith conferences and other cultural and educational events. It was also

inspiring to many to learn that every stone in the cathedral was a gift from someone, and that the gardens were planted with many trees, herbs and shrubs specifically mentioned in the Bible.

From the Cathedral, the delegation travelled a short distance down Massachusetts Avenue for evening prayers at **THE ISLAMIC CENTER OF WASHINGTON**, the beautiful mosque whose cornerstone was laid in the 1950's by President Eisenhower.

Washington National Cathedral "A House of Prayer for All People" and Friday Evening Prayers in Washington's most beautiful Mosque



The delegation visited **TEMPLE EMANUEL IN KENSINGTON, MARYLAND**, a nearby Washington suburb, where we were met by Al Basheer faculty member and CECF participant, Rabbi Doug Heifetz.



This was an especially significant occasion and a mind-opening experience for our delegates, none of whom had ever entered a synagogue or even spoken with a rabbi before. Given the negative anti-Israeli narrative often publicized throughout the Muslim world, the Prophet Mohammed's high respect for the Jewish people and scriptures has often been overshadowed by political agendas. Consequently, the beauty of the synagogue, the warmth and candor of Rabbi Doug, and the moving experience of actually seeing the Torah scroll unrolled for their viewing, was deeply moving and revelatory. Rabbi Doug then answered questions from the delegation about Jewish belief and practice.



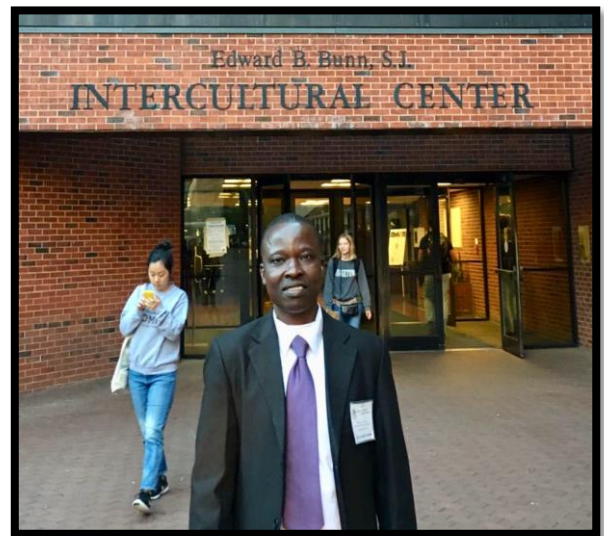
Al Basheer faculty member, Fr. Bill Au, gave a compelling presentation on the issue of the invaluable Fruit of Interfaith- Brotherhood Without Borders, and in evidence of that he, Imam Bashar, and Rabbi Doug served as a discussion panel reflecting on the BUBW's Youth Exchange experiences of the synagogue.

Our visit to **THE GLOBAL POLICY CENTER**, a specifically Muslim Think Tank providing up to date information and accurate data to lawyers, legislators, and policy makers throughout the government was a revelation to the delegates. They were amazed that a specifically Muslim think tank even existed, and was invested in providing objective information on current trends and movements throughout the Muslim world, for the purpose of improving decision making on the part of governmental officials seeking to secure peaceful and successful international relations.



Global Policy Center in Washington, DC

We ended the day with a visit to **GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY'S PRINCE AL WALEED BIN TALAL CENTER FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING (ACMCU)**, and a very informative presentation about the difference between *teaching religion*, and *teaching about religion*- the first being the realm of sectarian catechesis for adherents to a particular faith tradition; and the second being the realm of becoming a well-informed and well-rounded person. It is of great importance that more people be educated *about* religion- with no "*conversion agenda*", because of the widespread ignorance of both the fundamental beliefs and the practices of the world's religious traditions, and the enmity and violence that ignorance too often provokes.



Georgetown University Prince Al-waleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding where Delegates learned about religious education in a pluralistic society

The delegates visited **THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS**- one of the largest repositories of knowledge and information in the world. They were impressed by the statistic that 60% of the library's millions of books and publications are not written in English! The delegates were also amazed that that knowledge is freely accessible to the public.



The Library of Congress- a Marble Temple to Knowledge and Learning

We then moved across the street to **THE CAPITOL BUILDING** for Jumu'ah prayers. Our guide enthusiastically greeted the delegation, pointing out to them that part of the greatness of America is its transparency, and its open invitation to the public to view the chambers of government and many of its proceedings. No other parliament in the world offers its citizens or visitors an opportunity to pray or worship within the actual confines of the seat of government! Several delegates were especially moved to see an entire huge hall in the Visitor's Center has been dedicated to the indispensable role that people of color, slaves, and indigenous Native Americans, have played in the development of our nation. This helped underscore the reality that American history is made up of the efforts of many, many generations, struggling to find out what it means to "create a more perfect Union".



Delegates joining fellow Muslims for Jumu'ah in the U.S. Capitol Building

That struggle is not dissimilar from the religious striving to achieve a righteous society as the foundation of peace and prosperity. It was an extremely uplifting experience for the entire delegation to experience Jumu-ah prayers in the U.S. Capitol, and see how many Muslims working in the area came so freely to pray there. It was a powerful statement about the openness of the American system that stood in sharp contrast to the popular perception of the present Administration's often inflammatory remarks about Muslims and Islam.

After Jumu'ah prayers, the delegates were taken to an important event at the **ISLAMIC EDUCATION CENTER IN POTOMAC, MD**. The IEC is a **Shia mosque, school, and community center**.



Imam Rasoul Naghavi Nia and his Teacher, Ayatollah Iravani, presided over the event, which included a tour of the school and community center, wudu and prayers in the mosque, and a very lively and interesting panel discussion with Imam Rasoul, Imam Bashar, and Ayatollah Iravani on Shia-Sunni relations. This was followed by a Question and Answer session and a delicious dinner hosted by the IEC's youth group.



Imam Rasoul Naghavi Nia, his Teacher, Ayatollah Iravani, and Imam Bashar Arafat hold a Shia-Sunni Panel Discussion on Commonalities between their traditions

It was an eye-opening event for most of the delegates, as they had never seen any interaction between the two sects in their own countries! They were surprised to discover that the similarities between the two far outweighed the differences. This underscored the recurring theme that the education of religious leaders- no matter what their tradition- was a vitally important component of assuring that the general public is also informed in making wiser choices to prevent violence and the radicalization of young people.

The delegates were taken on a professional **SIGHT-SEEING TOUR OF WASHINGTON**- seeing the major monuments and sights, learning of their history, and concluded with a private boat cruise on the Potomac River. After seeing all the major sights, the delegates were taken once again to Potomac, MD and the palatial home of Mr. & Mrs. M. Iqbal Khan. Iqbal is a Pakistani-American entrepreneur and businessman who has created The Foundation of Global Village- a business model empowering creative people on the low end of the economic ladder - artisans, craftsmen and small businesses- and help link them to profitable markets in America and the West. The Ugandan delegates were treated to an additional welcome by being invited to the home of Mr. Hakeem Buuza, for the Ugandan American Muslim Association's Community Weekly Darasah.

The delegation returned to **ISWA** in Silver Spring for a **half-day workshop /conference** on **"The Role of the African Diaspora in America"**.

They were startled to learn fully 10% of the one million people living in Montgomery County are Muslims, and many of them are from African nations!



Hamza Khan spoke passionately about the power of democracy, and the need to empower the African Diaspora to participate more actively in the democratic process in order to maximize democracy's benefits for the common good.

Iqbal Khan, Hamza Khan's father, described their business model for **Neelamga** and on-line marketing. His is a very cost-effective model to link artisans, craftsmen, and local producers of foods and spices in Africa and throughout the Muslim world, to the Diaspora market, and the general American public, through a creative and well-structured use of the Internet. It was particularly inspiring to the various delegates working with youth, in recognition that this might provide an effective model to engage the disaffected young people who are most susceptible to extremist radicalization and violence, because of their lack of employment or consistent means of support.



Tausi Suedi, director of **CSI, Childbirth Survival International**, gave a powerful presentation on women and family health service. Her efforts at providing reproductive health and advocacy services to women and girls is desperately needed in Africa, where the cruel practice of Female Genital Mutilation is still carried out in some places, sexual education is often considered taboo, and child-bride marriages are still not uncommon. Family planning is of crucial importance, especially in poverty-stricken areas. Tausi was urging the importance of also supporting men in advocating for their wives and daughters. The delegates were greatly impressed by her presentation.



Start-up Africa was another organization, whose efforts to inspire African youth through entrepreneurship education were highlighted during the conference.

Their mission to support youth in building business skills and in endeavors that foster financial independence, create jobs and grow African economies is another aspect needed to keep youth from being manipulated.



Finally, there was a brief sharing by a long-time partner of CECF and retired U.S. diplomat, Peter Kovach, who shared his work as an interfaith convener, teacher and mentor with many years' experience of dealing with the interface between religion and society around the world. He too stressed the importance of education, and pointed out that lack of information in the diaspora often prevents people from fully benefiting from what is available to them.

The last major program component was a wonderful presentation by Mehreen Farouq, Director of **WORDE- THE WORLD ORGANIZATION FOR RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION**- on the issues surrounding the prevention of radicalization and terrorist activity around the globe. She spoke of the importance of educating religious leaders as well as the general public. That education must include interaction with other traditions, especially in parts of the world where such interaction rarely, if ever, takes place, and where both passivity and paternalism are still culturally dominant forces. She also spoke of the need to build effective relationships with police and government authorities, whose job it is to serve the public. Her words, echoed what the delegates had already heard from the Baltimore City Police Department's efforts at community building as a key to public safety.

WORDE espouses a multi-pronged approach to prevent the radicalization of youth:

Engage them, Educate them, Connect them to others, Intervene when necessary.

Isolation is a major contributor to despair and desperation- creating riper territory for radicalization. Preventing the isolation of young people is essential. Violent groups who recruit young people to do their bidding look for vulnerabilities and pretend to empathize. They then demonize their opponents. This creates a sort of shadow parallel religion- a dark form they mistakenly call Islam- and through this toxic ideology masked as "faith", they promise the inductee both Earthly and Heavenly rewards for their unquestioning service.

WORDE has come up with a useful acronym for their goal to be **BRAVE**:

**Building
Resistance
Against
Violent
Extremism**

This is achieved by promoting community led efforts through multiple points of access that increase mutual trust, and is evidence-based, not ideologically driven.



Delegates participating in WORDE training session on countering violent extremism

After the seminar at WORDE, the delegates returned to the hotel for a **Final Reflection Session and Pre-Departure Meeting**. This session allows the delegation and staff to discuss ideas and concepts shared during the last few meetings and potential follow up activities. The distribution of program evaluation forms, review of last minute instructions concerning their departure, and the awarding of program completion certificates also takes place during this session.

The delegates expressed universal and enthusiastic gratitude and approval of the program over-all. They offered some helpful suggestions. It was clear that many new friendships had been formed between the delegates of all four countries. It was truly rewarding to see that even the most serious among them had opened up, become more outgoing, and even playful with each other, as well as with the program leaders and staff. Imam Bashar gave a final exhortation for them to take what they have learned and share it with people and institutions at home, so that the seeds CECF had worked to plant in them should bear the best fruit possible- a better, more peaceful and loving world, both at home and abroad.



Delegates before their departure from Dulles International Airport

DELEGATE TESTIMONIALS

All of the delegates had positive responses to the program, its content, and organization. All spoke enthusiastically about taking their experience and applying it to their work in their respective countries. And for many, there were specifically transformative moments or experiences that changed their perceptions and opened them to a new perspective. Here are just a few of their comments:

“This was my first time in America. It really changed the perception I had in my mind about American people. I found out the Americans are friendly, kind and loyal people.”

“My perception changed about Muslims in America. I have always perceived them to be less Islamic in traditions. However, seeing dedicated Muslims and highly knowledgeable of religious life, like Dr. Susan Douglas, changed my thinking and perception. The American people in general are free to practice their religion, whether Muslim or others. This perception was that Muslims are unwanted or curtailed in practice of religion.”

“My perceptions about the Jewish community changed from negative to positive after understanding their beliefs and practices. I realized that they are just like any other religions that want to reach God in their own ways. I initially detested them so much, due to their activities in the West Bank and Gaza. I was also able to separate Islam as a religion, and cultures of certain communities... Most of us practice Islam in the Arab culture, something that has produced many controversies.”

“My fear about being a Muslim and wearing a hijab in the U.S. was driven away as I realized there was a considerable number of Muslims and several mosques. There is freedom of worship and these mosques also provide community services.”

“I never visited or had any feelings for Jews or Shia Muslims- in fact, I was biased and sort of looked down upon them - religiously. I changed my perception about them, and realized the pluralistic nature of religion. I was somewhat intolerant of Shia for no apparent reason but stereotyping.



CECF would like to thank the U.S. Embassies- Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Somalia for their support without which the program in the U.S. would not be possible. The IOP and programs like it seek to develop cultural and religious understanding and improve perspectives thereby preventing conflicts and alleviating unnecessary tension between people of varying backgrounds. CECF appreciates and is proud that exchange programs play an important part in achieving the United States' goals of improving and strengthening relationships among cultures and nations.

