



# Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation



## ***Better Understanding for a Better World Conference 2024 – Baltimore***

**Leadership, Intercultural and Interfaith Program for  
High School Youth**

**April 17 – 21, 2024  
SUMMARY REPORT**

Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (CECF) held the BUBW conference in Baltimore, Maryland from April 17<sup>th</sup>-April 21<sup>st</sup> where students, young leaders from different religious, economic, ethnic, cultural background were engaged in discussion on religion, culture, caring for humanity, international diversity, discrimination, radicalism and extremism, women's empowerment and global citizenship. We also engaged in an "Interfaith Program" by visiting Church, Synagogue, and Mosque on Friday April 19<sup>th</sup>.

#### **BACKGROUND – Baltimore, Maryland**

Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW) was launched in 2006 to give American high school students and international exchange students of diverse cultural backgrounds and various faith traditions the opportunity to meet and learn from one another. The most pressing issue our youth face today is how they view the "other", people who are different from them. Through 1) Diversity & Multi-Cultural Competency Training, 2) Leadership Development, 3) Conflict Resolution & Peacebuilding Workshops and 4) Interfaith Experiences, BUBW aims to breakdown the stereotypes and the barriers that lead to fear and hate of the "other".

Despite a surge in the use of social media, people still lack the face-to-face dialogue needed to foster understanding, respect, compassion and cooperation amongst the various nations and communities of our ever so intricate world.

The 52nd BUBW Conferences in the USA, which were attended by students from 23 countries, have been full of incredibly rich discussions, which removed many misconceptions participants had of one another through education and personal interactions. The positive impact sent a ripple effect that has made CECF feel compelled to bring these conferences to exchange students from all over the world. To hear from some of our participants, please check out the videos which was made by the BUBW participant from Kyrgyzstan Aizhanat Talantbekova, FLEX program:

- 1) <https://go.screenpal.com/watch/cZ1OX2V8ooN>
- 2) <https://go.screenpal.com/watch/cZ1OX2V8oos>

#### **VISION**

A world of multicultural and interreligious understanding and cooperation

#### **MISSION**

To provide multicultural, youth-oriented leadership and interfaith programs for life transforming opportunities

#### **GOALS**

- ✦ Emphasize worldwide citizenship and cultural competency development
- ✦ Focus on leadership development and being ambassadors of good will, reconciliation and justice
- ✦ Become familiar with conflict resolution approaches and peacebuilding strategies
- ✦ Encourage civic engagement among program participants

#### **CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES**

- ✦ To facilitate dialogue that fosters mutual understanding and cooperation between participants from diverse economic, social, religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds
- ✦ To expose participants to the beauty of diverse faith practices in a pluralistic world with emphasis on respect, common values and our shared humanity
- ✦ To discuss the dangers and solutions for discrimination, radicalism, ethnic nationalism and religious extremism, which have historically been recipes for war and conflict for many civilizations
- ✦ To introduce various aspects of leadership including those central to entrepreneurship, innovation and social business
- ✦ To cultivate ties of friendship and encourage future leaders of tomorrow to foster and seek out a better world and a better future for all



**Wednesday, April 17**

### **Arrivals, Pizza social, Ice Breaking Activities and Orientation**

The 52nd Better Understanding for a Better World Conference commenced in Baltimore, Maryland, with a warm welcome extended by **Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat**, founder of the Civilization Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (CECF). Imam Arafat's inspiring presence set the tone for a productive and enriching experience.

The day's proceedings began with a pizza social and ice-breaking activities, allowing students to introduce themselves and share their aspirations for the future. This informal setting fostered a sense of community among the participants.

Imam Bashar's welcome address emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue, cultural understanding, and mutual respect in creating a harmonious global community. His dedication to promoting understanding and cooperation between diverse communities has made a significant impact globally.



The orientation session that followed provided students with a comprehensive overview of the conference schedule, objectives, and expectations. Students were encouraged to engage in meaningful discussions, ask questions, and share their perspectives throughout the conference.

The first day of the conference successfully established a foundation for constructive engagement, networking, and knowledge sharing. We look forward to the upcoming days, filled with enriching discussions, workshops, and presentations.

Thursday, April 18

## BUBW & IYS Sessions, Workshop and Student Country Presentations

On the second day, our agenda began with a significant meeting led by Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat, the president of CECF, to review our program for the first time. We also engaged in a discussion addressing the importance of bridging cultural divides as we explore current global realities. Additionally, attendees were introduced to an International Youth Summit (IYS) and engaged in discussions about various conflicts around the world and their underlying causes, all before lunchtime.

During lunch, attendees enjoyed Maiwand Kabob, a delightful Afghan cuisine that was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone.

Post lunch, activities resumed with an Introduction to Leadership Session led by Imam Arafat, APD, and BUBW Alumni, followed by IYS Session II on Youth Leadership's impact locally and globally. This included breakout IYS sessions and discussions centered on local problem-solving, along with addressing two key questions:

- 1) Whose responsibility is it to educate the youth to be responsible towards global issues? (local, state, international)
- 2) What are the main obstacles in front of our generation to make a change locally and globally?  
Possible solutions?



Following this, attendees engaged in Summary Presentations and Role Playing by IYS Voices for Hope & Change, proceeded by IYS Session III led by Robert Stucky on Perceptions and Misperceptions. The day continued with an IYS Workshop discussing the multiple issues facing future generations, exploring potential problems and solutions, which resulted in workshop summary presentations and a discussion on possible contributions and approaches.

Afterward, attendees gathered for a dinner where meaningful connections were strengthened through lively conversations over a delicious American meal.

After the delicious dinner, everyone returned to the suite for country presentations, featuring contributions from 7 different countries presented to an audience of 14 attendees. This session proved to be one of the conference highlights. During the presentations, we learned more about Thailand, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Poland, Ukraine, Indonesia, and Lebanon, which were enthusiastically received by all. The attendees were genuinely excited about discovering other cultures and fostering mutual support. This presentation session brought everyone closer together, filled with laughter, valuable information, and bonding opportunities, which are crucial aspects of BUBW conference experience.



## RESULTS

The second day of the conference culminated in profound accomplishments, characterized by insightful discussions, cultural exchange, and leadership development. The International Youth Summit sessions delved into global conflicts, youth leadership, and local problem-solving, while country presentations from 7 nations showcased diverse cultures, fostering mutual support and enthusiasm. Attendees fortified connections, acquired valuable knowledge, and deepened their understanding of global issues, rendering the day a remarkable success and a conference highlight. The sessions and activities successfully bridged cultural divides, empowering attendees to address global challenges and become responsible global citizens.



Friday, April 19

## Interfaith Program: Visit a Church, Synagogue, Mosque and Panel Discussion & Dinner

This day's activities are conducted in partnership with the following institutions:

Owen Brown Interfaith Center - <https://obicoffice.wixsite.com/obicolumbia>

Oseh Shalom Congregation - <http://www.oseh-shalom.org/>

Diyanet Center of America - <https://diyanetamerica.org/>

### VISITING THE CHURCH

The fourth day was our Interfaith Day - a highlight for virtually all of the attendees. The first visit was to **Owen Brown Interfaith Center** and was for the majority, their first experience of **Christianity**. The church staff received everyone warmly and discussed the work they are doing in the community, a historical background of their church and its traditions and how 3 major religions connected between each other. The visit was a positive experience for all and there were many engaging questions asked thoughtfully and answered respectfully after the presentation.

Many Muslim participants mentioned how rich the experience was, especially since this was the first time for them to enter a church.



#### VISITING THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE

The second visit was to the **OSEH SHALOM SYNAGOGUE**. The participants were quite interested in asking questions of the rabbi about the practices and the meaning of God within **Judaism**. Many questions were raised and hands continued to be raised as new questions came up. The curiosity and desire to understand each different faith was obvious.



**VISITING THE MOSQUE**  
The last visit was a trip to the **Diyamet Center of America.**

As we arrived, Muslim participants prepared for Friday (Jumu'ah) prayers. Everyone was warmly guided to our respective areas to either observe or pray. For many of the participants, it was their first time in a mosque. The imam explained the importance of daily prayers in **Islam**, the structure of the mosque, and the rituals associated with Islamic worship, including funeral prayers. Students engaged in discussions about the role of faith in daily life and the commonalities between the Abrahamic religions.



### **Interfaith Panel Discussion: “Moving Forward in the World Together”**

The panel discussion on “Moving Forward in the World Together” featured insights from Fr. William Au, Gordon Fuller, and Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat. Each speaker emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and collaboration in addressing global challenges. Fr. Au highlighted the need for empathy and understanding across different communities. Fuller focused on practical strategies for cooperative action in social and environmental issues. Imam Arafat underscored the role of shared values in fostering peace and mutual respect.



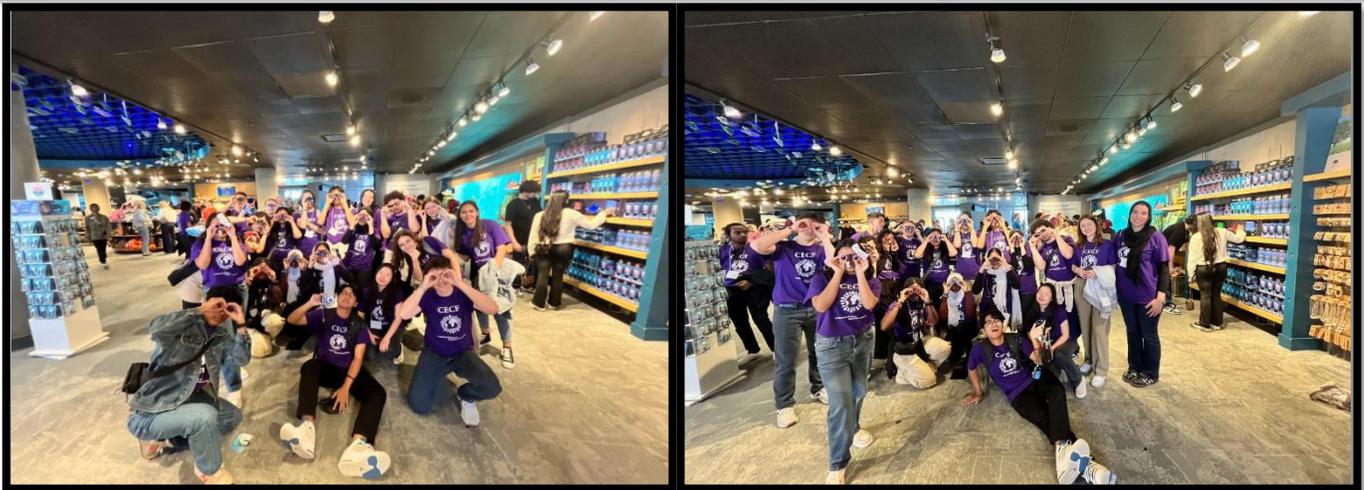
In addition to our religious site visits, we had the opportunity to explore Washington, D.C. We toured significant landmarks, including the National Mall, the Lincoln Memorial, and the United States Capitol. This trip allowed us to appreciate the nation's rich history and the diverse cultural fabric that defines it. One of the highlights of our program was a soccer match organized by Imam Bashar. The game was not only fun but also a fantastic way to build camaraderie and break down barriers through sports.



**Saturday, April 20**

**Global Citizenship & Networking, Baltimore Inner Harbor's National Aquarium, followed by Banquet, Cultural Performances and certificates ceremony**

Just after the BUBW family had an entertaining picnic lunch by the harbor near **The Science Center** and everyone took hundreds of pictures, it was time to visit **The Baltimore Inner Harbor's National Aquarium**. Students got a couple of hours to explore everything the aquarium had offered, some of them even enjoyed the shop in the aquarium. This first half of the day was just devoted to students interacting more with each other, laughing for hours and getting distracted by how vast the aquarium was until it was time to head back for the banquet.



## Banquet & Closing Ceremony



### Keynote speech by **Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu**, Under-Secretary-General/Special Advisor of Sec Gen on Prevention of Genocide, United Nations Headquarters.

Ms. Alice's inspirational speech about genocide touched everyone's heart and emotions. She spread the importance of raising awareness and spreading peace around the world, a goal every BUBW member aspires to achieve. In addition, her speech encouraged everyone to take important steps and set goals to make the world a better place.

The cultural diversity present in the room got to be shared with many people through cultural dances and performances. Everyone got to participate in one or more. People got to know what other countries' dances look like, how wedding traditions can be expressed through various ways and how each country and individual representing it is unique.

The BUBW conference proved to be better than expected for all students that attended. Not only did it bring cultural diversity under one roof, but also taught people about other religions, it opened their eyes and made them appreciate other religions even more. Furthermore, BUBW created a sense of understanding between individuals through communication and fostering mutual respect.



### Certificate Ceremony

And just before anyone could realize it, it was the end of the **Better Understanding for A Better World Conference (BUBW)**. Everyone received a certificate from Imam Mohammad Bashar, it was a brief moment to exchange gratitude and heartfelt feelings regarding the conference. Everyone was grateful for what they have gained from lessons to memories from BUBW, and was sure that it will guide them towards achieving their goals.



## PARTICIPANT QUOTES

*"I am extremely grateful for this BUBW conference as it built a better understanding in me regarding different faiths. I come from a very religiously diverse country India, and it's extremely significant for me to have a liberal interfaith mindset. I learnt a lot about Middle Eastern culture and Muslims in general. One highlight was visiting a mosque which was an amazing experience. The staff at the BUBW made sure we had the best time in every way possible. Special thanks to Mr. Bashir Imam. They built a well-suited personality in me for my future."*

*-Apurva Pathak, BUBW Participant, YES program student from India*

*"The BUBW was such a remarkable experience for me. During the Better Understanding for a Better World Conference, we got the chance to explore each other's nations, cultures, and religions. Thanks to the initiative shown by all the members of the Better Understanding for a Better World Conference, I have attained significant insight into other cultures. The conference started by showing us how effective we can be in solving global issues and ended up with us taking a step further in this process. The progress we have made will keep on growing with us, especially when we are back in our home countries. We will keep spreading what we have learned throughout the BUBW Conference."*

*-Idil Ece Dag, BUBW Participant, KL-YES student from Turkiye*

*"BUBW was an enriching exchange program that brought together students from various countries. This experience was truly eye-opening as it provided a unique opportunity to learn about different cultures firsthand. One of the highlights was our deep dive into current global conflicts. We gained a better understanding of their roots and the impact they have on communities worldwide. This program was a remarkable journey of cultural discovery and learning. It highlighted the importance of intercultural dialogue and provided us with the opportunity to better understand and address the challenges facing our world today. We also met amazing people and gained long lasting friendships during this program."*

*- Karine Patvakanyan, BUBW Participant, FLEX student from Armenia*

*"As it is said "Memories are the key not to the past, but to the future."-Corrie Ten Boom. To illustrate, this is my definition of Better Understanding for a better world. The memories I've made, people I have met, and lessons I've learned will stay with me and guide me towards an outstanding future. The few days I had in BUBW held millions of information stored. I have never been in a room with such diversity and uniqueness. I got to see people from different countries, communicate and talk about peace, exchange cultures and even play sports together. I learned that even if we have different religion and background, as humans we have shared goals, and in this specific event, it was to make the world a better place. I consider myself to be one of the luckiest people to have been in BUBW, all the people and lessons gained will have a place cherished in my heart."*

*- Farah ElHaj Hasan, BUBW Participant, KL-YES student from Lebanon*

*“The soccer game ended our day really well after visiting the mosque, church and synagogue. It was a game of bringing people together, people with different cultures and religions came together to have fun and socialize with one another, even Imam Bashir joined! Everybody had fun that day in the park near the Capitol Hill, Washington D.C. The environment describes it all, very diverse, very beautiful.”*

*- Umar Kromas, BUBW Participant, KL-YES student from Thailand*

*“Playing soccer with Imam Bashir was an incredible experience. It was amazing to see how sports can bring people together, regardless of their backgrounds. We laughed, competed, and shared stories. It was a reminder that despite our different beliefs, we have so much in common.”*

*- Priscilla Opoku-Yeboah, BUBW Participant, KL-YES student from Ghana*

*“That soccer game was the most unique one I have ever played! I scored two goals and overall had a lot of fun; I liked how the game was balanced, it had both girls and boys playing in the same team. The game was played between the memorial building and the Congress building, which the view was awesome and I still can't believe it, and I remember some people were watching and rooting for us. All of us were wearing nice clothes but that didn't stop us from playing.”*

*- Redon Istogu, BUBW Participant, KL-YES student from Kosovo*





## SPECIAL THANKS TO:

*CECF was delighted to conduct this BUBW Conference in partnership and with financial support from*

✦ ...

*CECF is also thankful to the following institutions for their support and partnership*

- ✦ Al Basheer Seminary
- ✦ Interfaith Center and Institute
- ✦ To all the organizations who sent their students to the conference



## ✦ *Volunteers*

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