



Article

People of Faith in Peacebuilding

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Portraits of religious actors resolving conflicts

Is religion a constructive force in the world? For many scholars, belief in God doesn't necessarily safeguard social virtue. Faith alone may not cultivate a keen sense of ethics or the righteous pursuit of human rights and justice.

Nevertheless, some are unequivocal in their stance: religious actors can be, must be—and frequently are—agents for positive change in the world. The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding is an organization that stands by this premise.



Source: Pixabay via Pexels.

Tanenbaum's Peacemakers in Action Network

Each year, Tanenbaum formally recognizes activists who have pushed their communities closer to peace. These Peacemakers in Action (PIAs) are distinguished in the following ways: (1) they are religiously or spiritually motivated, (2) conduct work on the grassroots level in regions stricken by armed conflicts, (3) work with little to no public recognition, and (4) risk their lives, liberty, or livelihoods in the name of peace. In addition to being named a PIA, awardees receive the following support from Tanenbaum:

- A \$15,000 monetary award to support their efforts
- Increased media exposure and opportunities to engage in US-based or international events related to peacebuilding work
- Access to the entire PIA network which includes past and present awardees
- Having an in-depth study of their peacemaking work described in Tanenbaum's *Peacemakers* podcast and written publications
- The opportunity to participate in Peacemaker retreats in which new award recipients receive professional training by previous Peacemakers as well as experts in international conflict resolution



Tanenbaum Peacemaker in Action Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas. Source: Ivan Valencia via The Washington Post.

Meet Some of the Peacemakers

Tanenbaum has recognized religiously motivated activists who fight for peace throughout the world. Below are two examples of women whose efforts the Center has celebrated.

Noziziwe Madlala-Routledge

[Noziziwe Madlala-Routledge](#) is a veteran of the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa. The apartheid government jailed Madlala-Routledge multiple times for her work with the African National Congress (ANC) since the 1970s. Over those years, her Quaker faith motivated her to develop a pacifist approach to political struggle. In 1991, she helped draft the new constitution after the fall of the apartheid system and served in the country's newly constituted parliament. In 1999, she became the country's Deputy Minister

of Defense and used this position to negotiate peace between warring factions in the region. She helped to create the African Union's Peace and Security Council, address HIV/AIDS, and increase the role of women in conflict resolution. Through continued work in government and the nonprofit sector, she continues to fight on gender justice issues including the eradication of sex trafficking and the abolition of gender discrimination.

Betty Bigombe

Today, [Betty Bigombe](#) is perhaps best known for [her extensive efforts](#) to negotiate peace between the government of Uganda and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the Christian extremist militia led by Joseph Kony. The LRA sought to overthrow the government of Yoweri Museveni and replace it with a theocratic state. In 1984, Bigombe became a member of Parliament, and in 1986 she was appointed Minister of State for Pacification in Northern Uganda, beginning her decades-long campaign to foster peace in Uganda. In this role, she successfully brought Ugandan officials, Joseph Kony, and other LRA leaders to the negotiation table in 1993.

Most people outside of East Africa learned about Joseph Kony's crimes through the controversial documentary *Kony 2012*, which painted him as a towering manifestation of evil. By the time that documentary surfaced, the worst of the LRA's atrocities had already been committed. Long before the documentary—which many critics contend did little to resolve the conflict—Bigombe took a different approach. She strongly believed that ending the war necessitated that she treat Kony and his soldiers as people first. Her efforts as the face of the peace process were initially met with threats and insults from Kony himself, who balked at the idea of engaging diplomatically with a woman. Bigombe, however, appealed to their shared religious faith to convince the former altar boy to agree to peace talks.

Bigombe risked her life to engage Kony in a series of face-to-face meetings near the LRA encampment. As a result of her efforts, Kony came to respect her and even referred to her as a mother figure. After their conversations, Kony was open to negotiating peace with President Museveni. His main conditions involved safety and security for himself, his wives and children, and his associates. Bigombe believed that this price was worth paying to put an end to the bloodshed. She urged President Museveni to take this opportunity to end the war. Instead, the president publicly threatened the militant leader and demanded his unconditional surrender, causing the warlord and the LRA to continue the violence. As a result, the negotiations fell apart. Devastated by coming so close to ending the war only to see it flare up again, she left her government position while continuing to work in the field of conflict resolution in a lower-profile capacity. In 1997, she continued her education at Harvard University before working at the African Development Division of the World Bank. Eventually, her commitment to peace brought her back home.

In 2004, when violence erupted once more between Uganda's government and the LRA, Bigombe's conscience led her to return to the peacebuilding process. Due to her effectiveness in nearly winning peace in the first wave of talks, she became the chief negotiator again for the second round of talks. In the name of neutrality, she used a substantial amount of her own resources rather than government funds to facilitate the negotiations. Her work laid the foundation for another summit for peace in Juba, Sudan in the following years. While Uganda still faces significant challenges in establishing lasting peace, most observers agree that Bigombe's efforts brought her nation closer to that goal. Today, Bigombe draws from her experiences in Uganda to work toward peace in South Sudan.

[Learn more about other Peacemakers in Action here](#)