

Interfaith Action to Drive Progress on FP2030 Commitments

Introduction

FP2030 is a global partnership of organizations and individuals working to advance family planning (FP) worldwide. As part of its work, FP2030 mobilizes commitment makers, which pledge to take specific actions to expand access to voluntary, rights-based contraception in their countries. Thirty-five countries and 100 nongovernmental commitment makers have launched FP2030 commitments.

Religious leaders and other faith actors are significant in providing information and services and shaping cultural norms that influence decision-making around family planning. They are among the most trusted leaders who command respect. They are usually the first, last, and most constant presence in their communities. When engaged, their reach and impact can be tremendous. Their engagement is vital to realizing FP2030 country commitments, expanding impact, and reaching more women and communities.

This brief and its recommendations are informed by 76 religious leaders and faith actors of different faiths from 26 African countries, the United States, and Europe who gathered for three days in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, for a “south-to-south” learning workshop on interfaith action to drive progress on FP2030 commitments.

Challenges

There are multiple challenges to faith actors advancing family planning, and many of these challenges are rooted in **misconceptions about sacred texts and misrepresentation of harmful norms deriving from religious tenets**. Some misconceptions about family planning include that it:

- Increases promiscuity and unfaithfulness.
- Is a secular “Western agenda” or plot to reduce the African population.



Figure 1. Attendees and FP2030 staff during the Interfaith Action to Drive Progress on FP2030 Commitments in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

- Contravenes God’s desire for population growth.
- Is not needed by people who are not married.
- Has dangerous side effects, e.g., increases fibroids and reduces the chance of giving birth in the future.

The persistence of harmful myths can be linked to **capacity challenges**. Many religious leaders and faith communities are open to learning how their faith harmonizes with family planning. However, this requires faith- and community-sensitive capacity building for learning and sharing, which requires resources.

Inadequate resources, especially funding, remain an obstacle to implementing effective strategies. Religions that view themselves as responsible for holistically caring for the people in their communities find it difficult to include family planning among their many priorities without resources dedicated to FP. External resources for family planning are predominantly given to secular groups, which often find it difficult to work constructively with religious leaders and faith actors, mainly because linguistic and cultural differences are difficult to bridge¹.

The **gender imbalance among faith institution leaders** might contribute to this lack of faith institution prioritization in addressing FP. Other obstacles and challenges include:

- **Policies and legal frameworks** that do not address family planning comprehensively or do not enable effective contraceptive supply chains can make it difficult for faith actors to increase access to family planning.
- **Lack of private sector** engagement in FP can lead to service system gaps, making it difficult for faith actors to ensure access to FP in their communities.
- **Insufficient involvement of men** in FP, where norms do not support women making decisions independently, can impede faith actors from increasing access to FP.
- **Service system inadequacies**, such as poor-quality management of family planning in health facilities, distance as an access barrier, and exclusion of minority and marginalized groups, can undermine faith actors’ efforts to increase access to FP.

Adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (AYSRHR) is a very challenging topic for many religious leaders and faith actors. FP2030 youth advocates who participated in the south-to-south learning workshop called for a significant shift in how faith leaders view and approach the needs of young people. They urge faith leaders to re-imagine their approach to AYSRHR based on the realities that young people face rather than the moral judgment of sex outside marriage. According to them, religious leaders must “learn, unlearn, and relearn” all aspects of AYSRHR to understand and respond to young people’s challenges. Data and evidence indicate that abstinence messages are not working.

For their part, religious leaders observed that building secular-faith partnerships to advance family planning will fail if secular outsiders insist on starting a collaboration with an issue that they strongly believe they cannot address, namely family planning for adolescents and unmarried people. There

¹ Please see the FP2030 2019 brief “Faith and Family Planning: Working Together to Drive Progress Post-2020.”

may be room for collaboration, but not by placing the most challenging issues at the start or the center of a collaboration.

Faith leaders need to be clear on what they can and cannot support to prevent a backlash against all collaboration with secular groups for family planning and SRHR. Faith leaders can be encouraged to see family planning as a nuanced concept with many dimensions that present easier entry points for faith-secular collaboration. For example, in some contexts where religious leaders such as Catholic service providers are not able to provide hormonal methods of family planning, they may be able to counsel on all methods and refer to other service providers that can provide contraception outside their purview.

Fortunately, religious leaders have considerable experience speaking from texts to address misconceptions, counter extremism, and inspire healthy action for the people in their communities. These misconceptions often derive from a lack of knowledge and information from trusted sources. When faith communities understand the importance of family planning in preventing high maternal mortality and other health injuries, illness, and poor health outcomes, that can counter unhelpful messages.

“No religion is comfortable with mothers and children dying or comfortable with poverty. Family planning helps alleviate poverty and enables parents to give their children a better education and quality of life. These outcomes align with the compassionate and caring aspect of many religious doctrines.”

Samukeliso Dube, Executive Director FP2030

Solutions, Strategies, and Approaches

1. INCREASING RESOURCES AND CAPACITY

There is a clear need to strengthen the capacity of faith-based organizations and faith actors to address family planning needs. Sharing family planning research and evidence with faith leaders can be a good first step/pivotal. When religious authorities support family planning through messages backed by evidence, they help their constituencies and political leaders take the issue seriously and address it effectively. Learning can come from others who already have succeeded in organizing faith communities to advocate for family planning and sexual and reproductive health with local, national, and global decision-makers.

- Strengthening the advocacy capacity of faith communities is necessary to address the following: Understand the different political contexts and embark on targeted advocacy.
- Engage nationally and regionally, identifying opportunities and making the most of them strategically.
- Conduct intentional, purposeful strategy development and messaging for internal, institutional, and external policy-focused advocacy and accountability.
- Build faith champions for family planning.
- Develop action plans that can be used for advocacy and accountability.

- Participate in government technical working groups.

Workshops are most useful when they share diverse tools and strengthen budget and implementation monitoring and other skills.

Religious institutions also need help and support with assessing their own community needs. For example, the gender audit methodology prepared by the Faith to Action Network can help faith institutions assess and improve their gender balance, enable prioritization of women’s and children’s health needs, address gender-based violence, and increase faith institution championship of family planning.

2. IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND MESSAGING

Bringing the voices of faith leaders to secular initiatives can help strengthen family planning as a positive social norm in faith communities and increase the impact of secular activities to advance family planning. Workshops bringing secular and faith actors together can reinforce mutual understanding and bring nuance to both secular and faith messages, to use them effectively and ensure they are received well by their intended audiences. Workshops also can help clarify how to detangle cultural norms from religious tenets and sacred texts.

To increase faith actor support for family planning, secular actors need to meet faith actors where they are, using faith-inspired language and emphasizing the moral aspects of family planning.



Figure 2. Panel of religious leaders providing their insight and expertise on how to advocate for family planning in their communities.

Helpful messages emphasize the role of family planning in saving lives and ending maternal mortality, enabling healthy children and mothers, and promoting healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. Messaging must consider that many people are illiterate or have no direct knowledge of their sacred texts. In some contexts, “family planning” might not be the most appropriate terminology, so understanding community context is key to success.

Good storytelling, especially testimonials from small families in religious communities and from religious leaders who have converted from anti-family planning to pro-family planning, is very beneficial for reducing fears and combating myths about family planning. Integrating marginalized groups into messaging can be particularly powerful if the integration happens sensitively.

Public education and counseling are needed to inform those who need family planning on how to use contraception. This requires community engagement and awareness raising, including with couples and singles, encouraging male involvement, promoting intergenerational dialogues, integrating family planning into other health programming, and making family planning more easily

accessible. Public education should include faith leaders, health system staff, and civil servants to integrate awareness throughout their work.

3. NETWORKING AND COLLABORATION

Secular and faith actors need to work together to have open discussions and dialogues and build trust proactively. This includes:

- Building strong secular-faith partnerships.
- Supporting national and international networking among faith actors interested in or already championing family planning.
- Supporting interfaith approaches.
- Amplifying positive voices organically.

These steps can be done efficiently by building on existing faith-based networks and platforms, such as FP2030 and its regional hubs, the West African coalition, the Ouagadougou Partnership, the Faith to Action Network, and Christian Connections for International Health.

Networking between and among faith actors who support family planning nationally, regionally, and internationally helps identify allies and collaborators. Networking works best when it brings different perspectives — scientific, faith-based, youth, and mass media — to build trusting relationships, share good practices, improve coordination and cooperation, and build partnerships. Interfaith networking can expand programmatic interventions’ reach, scale, and impact to advance family planning. Strengthening religious actors through international peer support enables them to learn from and support each other to advance family planning through messages, programs, and advocacy.

Integration of faith into otherwise secular family planning programs and project implementation can help ensure sustainability. Integrating religious institutions and faith health facilities also helps mainstream family planning in different communities. Because faith communities are among the first, last, and often the only responders in crisis, ensuring they understand the importance of family planning in crisis response can be critical.

In addition, it can be worthwhile to collaborate with some donors, such as the U.S. Agency for International Aid, that are interested in working with local organizations and strengthening capacity on faith-related issues. USAID itself has launched a strategic religious engagement policy. Collaboration between different institutions may require developing a memorandum of understanding that clearly states monitoring, evaluation accountability, and reporting roles and responsibilities.

Engaging religious leaders is a long-term investment; it requires planning and follow-through. The FP community needs to take time to understand context, build trusting relationships, increase knowledge incrementally, and bring newcomers on board.

4. ADDRESSING ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING

Many, if not most, religious leaders and faith traditions are uncomfortable addressing family planning needs for those who are not married, including youths. And yet, preaching abstinence has failed to meet the needs of unmarried people. This seeming impasse requires gentle handling and commitment to long-term dialogue to find ways to collaborate to save lives through family planning. Intergenerational dialogues among young people and faith leaders — though possibly uncomfortable for older faith leaders — represent one way to help debunk myths and misconceptions hindering family planning access.

5. ADDRESSING CRISIS AND HUMANITARIAN NEEDS TOGETHER WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

Religious communities are often the first to respond in a crisis but are typically not at the table for emergency preparedness planning. Humanitarian action by aid agencies and government planners will achieve greater results from engaging religious institutions proactively.

Recommendations for FP2030 and the global FP community

1. Build on existing platforms to support the scale-up of best practices with religious and regional multilateral institutions. There is no need to reinvent the wheel: Connecting and resourcing faith communities with the appropriate learning platforms and toolkits beyond webinars will capture existing strengths.
2. Support coordination of faith leaders at country and regional levels by establishing new regional interfaith coalitions and working closely with existing ones. This requires mapping and connecting regional faith leaders and groups with FP2030 hubs for continued engagement and technical assistance in advocacy, communication, and fundraising. For example, developing a faith leaders champion group would be a productive way to amplify and sustain the good work done at the workshop in Abidjan.
3. Intentionally invest in intergenerational dialogues to find ways that faith actors that faith actors and institutions can help address adolescent youth sexual and reproductive health. As part of this effort, it would be worth finding resources to engage young religious leaders in family planning conversations. Dialogues between youths and religious leaders are a starting point, and FP2030 should facilitate them.

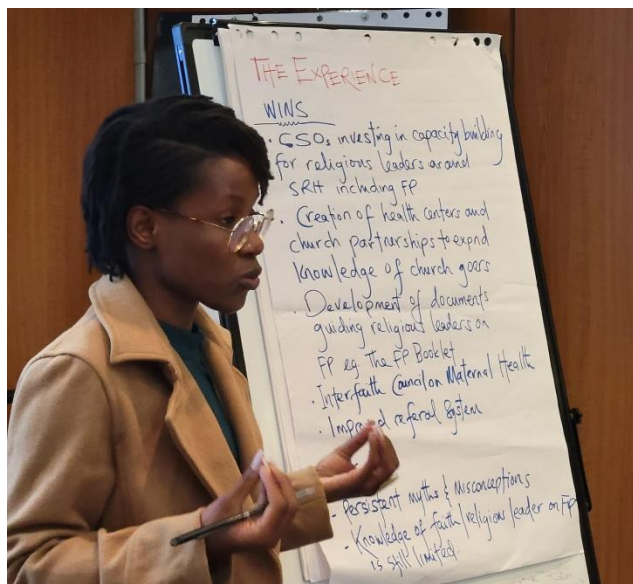


Figure 3. Young people communicate their experience and strategies to advocate for family planning in faith communities and contexts.

4. Allocate resources for networking meetings and mutual capacity building of faith and secular actors across advocacy, communication, fundraising, and project development and management.

Helpful Resources

Faith leaders participating in the FP2030 workshop cited many **sacred texts that inspire** them to take action to improve family planning access. They affirmed that the Bible and Quran do not forbid family planning. Muslims present reported that the Quran supports child spacing, and many verses in the Bible were cited as supporting family planning, such as I Timothy 5:8, Genesis 38:3-5/9, 1 Samuel 1:22-24, I Corinthians 14:40, Proverbs 25:28, and Luke 14:28-30.



Figure 4. Workshop participants during activities and roundtables in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

Many other resources are available to help faith actors in their efforts to advance family planning and can help secular actors work with faith actors. **FP2030, its Faith and Family Planning Working Group, and its regional hubs** can help facilitate learning and make useful connections. **FP2030 commitments** can enable faith institutions to work toward advancing family planning and sexual and reproductive health, as they currently do for governments and non-governmental organizations. The **Ouagadougou Partnership, the Faith to Action Network, and Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH)** are

working to increase support for faith action on family planning.

Faith leaders working in their communities to advance family planning can inspire, teach, and mentor. **Governments and donors** such as USAID have family planning strategies and FP2030 commitments, including various activities to promote FP, such as training healthcare providers and increasing community engagement. These policy documents can be important for faith actors seeking to help improve family planning understanding and access. **Multilaterals, notably the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)**, also offer a wide range of resources.

Increasing numbers of research and learning publications also present learning opportunities. Workshop speakers drew attention to the following resources:

- CCIH has created a [messaging guide](#) to support faith actors to improve family planning literacy and acceptance through sermons and other messaging opportunities. It addresses religious texts and sacred traditions from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Baha'i faith, and Sikhism and can be used in various contexts.

- The [Faith to Action Network](#) has developed a gender assessment methodology that integrates theological foundations from different faiths to offer a holistic approach to organizational change for gender equality.
- Tearfund offers a manual that can be used to train gender champions and faith leaders on [transforming masculinities](#).
- USAID MOMENTUM Country and Global Leadership, Faith Engagement Team, and CCIH have created a High Impact Practice [Strategic Planning Guide](#) to lead program planners and decision-makers through a strategic process to engage and strengthen partnerships with faith actors in family planning.
- USAID has developed a new [policy for strategic religious engagement](#) that provides guidance on how to build bridges with religious communities and faith-based organizations (when and where appropriate), outlines foundational principles, and defines an operational framework for USAID staff.

Guidelines, policies, and tools such as these can help mobilize faith actors for family planning.

Making an FP2030 commitment provides a range of benefits to faith institutions:

- It can deepen institutional and personal relationships with the FP2030 support network, with its wide array of information, resources, and support.
- It can help make connections with a wide network of supportive partner organizations and focal points worldwide.
- It allows faith institutions to participate in the FP2030 movement and implementation of its strategy.
- It can bring visibility to the institution's work through access to the FP2030 newsletter, social media presence, and global platform.



Figure 5. FP2030 Commitment Makers during the Interfaith Workshop in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

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