



**Message of
Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, President of Arigatou International
at the occasion of the
First Meeting of the GNRC 5th Forum Organizing Committee
New York, USA, 25-26 January 2016**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of everyone at Arigatou International and our faithful supporters in Japan and around the world, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to each of you for agreeing to serve on the Organizing Committee for the Fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children. I would especially like to thank Monsignor Sidney Fones for accepting the important responsibility of guiding us as Chair of the Organizing Committee.

It is no exaggeration to say that the success and eventual impact of the Forum is in your hands. My heart is filled with gratitude when I think about all of our valuable partners represented here. I see assembled a team of great wisdom, expertise and richly diverse perspectives. I am confident we can plan and prepare the greatest GNRC forum yet.

Please let me give some background and perspective which, I hope will help set the table for the success of this meeting.

Arigatou International has its roots in the Japanese Buddhist organization, Myochikai, which is deeply committed to building world peace. But what do we mean by peace? Our Great Spiritual Teacher, Rev. Takeyasu Miyamoto, who passed away last year at the age of 97, once said, "Peace is built by human beings, and human beings are built from their hearts." It is this recognition, that the straightest path to peace is building human compassion, that led us to focus on children and establish the Arigatou Foundation in 1990. Ever since, our goal has been to ensure that every child gets to grow up safe and sound, reaching his or her full potential. Children are the most vulnerable among us, yet they are also full of endless possibilities. Though we are an organization with relatively small resources, we have done all we can with the help of many partners to reduce the appalling suffering of children around the world. In the year 2000, we reached out to people of every religion and walk of life, launching a

major new initiative in interfaith cooperation for children, which, thanks to the work of countless passionate volunteers, has now grown into the worldwide movement that you know as the GNRC.

As you know, we have held a global forum for GNRC members every four years. From now on, forums will be held every five years and I'm delighted that the next edition will take place in 2017 in Latin America. The GNRC members in Latin America and the Caribbean have set a great example over the years for the network as a whole, and we look forward to members from around the world being able to come and learn from the work in this region.

We have always made child empowerment and youth participation key elements of everything we do. We truly believe in the power of children to change the world, not only after they grow up, but now! That's why we've put so much focus on Ethics Education for Children. Since the year 2004, we have been working with UNICEF, UNESCO and other partners to promote a multicultural, multi-faith approach to ethical and spiritual development. I hope to see young people playing a dynamic role at the Fifth Forum, just as they have at the previous ones.

As we look forward to the fifth global forum of the GNRC, I would like to start by acknowledging the progress that has been made. The situation that children face has improved in many places, in many ways. We are very thankful for the progress made under the Millennium Development Goals and for the active participation of the world's faith communities in helping to make this progress possible. We were pleased to be able to report to the United Nations Economic and Social Council that, just between 2008 and 2011, there were 193 GNRC events and programs in support of the MDGs in 28 countries, reaching 46,200 participants, most of them young people. These include youth peace clubs in conflict areas, interfaith reconciliation workshops in the Middle East as well as national and community advocacy for quality girls' education and child rights around the world. In the years since 2011, these activities have only expanded.

Yet, today I believe there is one global concern that is at the top of everyone's mind, and that is violence. As so many forms of violence seem to be spiraling out of control, the entire international community, including all of our religious communities, is being confronted with the one deafening and seemingly unanswerable question: "How can we put a stop to all this violence?"

I know I don't have to remind you that, just as children come into the world unscarred and full of every potential, they are more vulnerable than anyone else to having that all changed in a moment. It takes just one act of horrifying violence to change the trajectory of a life forever, to scar the unscarred and to turn wide-eyed potential into tight-fisted trauma.

I sincerely hope that the GNRC Fifth Forum can provide the world with a compelling, credible answer to that question confronting us all: "How can we stop violence against children?" "How can we ensure children get to grow up in peace, safe and sound?"

As I consider the wisdom and resources of the people around the table here today and the organizations they represent, I think we can, and should, aim high, by designing a forum that answers these questions. As a network of people of faith, GNRC members and I believe in the action and intervention of the Divine Presence, especially when we reach out and cooperate across boundaries, of religious and every other kind. When I think of the passionate commitment of GNRC members, partners, and volunteers around the world — including the youth and children — I believe we can... indeed we must... answer these questions. And we need to answer them with action that makes a real difference in children's lives. This Committee must ask: How can we prepare a Forum that inspires the GNRC, our other Arigatou initiatives and our partners to go forth together to demonstrate practical answers to the challenge of violence against children? How can we use the Forum to equip the GNRC network for action around the globe and in particular in Latin America?

I believe that, with the GNRC functioning as a global network of people and organizations devoted to interfaith collaboration, and with Arigatou International's other three initiatives providing programs, tools, and partnerships, we are now ideally positioned, as of the Fifth Forum, to bring these efforts together more tightly than ever in an overarching strategy — maximizing synergies, strengthening partnerships, reinforcing the GNRC network and leveraging resources to end violence against children. The first four forums gave birth to four useful initiatives; let the Fifth Forum bring their potential together in powerful cooperation to build a better world for children.

Thus, I would like to encourage you to find ways to ensure that the whole Fifth Forum program brings together perspectives from all the Arigatou initiatives so that

we can inspire everyone to act in synergy, both during and after the Forum. In your planning, please envision the desired outcomes of the Forum: the inspired members, the new and stronger partnerships, the concrete action plans to change children's lives at the grassroots, the visionary new ideas for changing the landscape for children and answering that pressing question: "How can we stop violence against children?"

Of course, there are many awful forms of violence against children, and they all cry out for solutions. The diversity of the GNRC membership, which is of great value, means that members are free to emphasize and address the most pressing particular issues in their communities. Also, since 2008, our Prayer and Action for Children initiative has been focused on violence against children, inviting hundreds of partners in more than 70 countries around the world to tackle many different forms of violence against children, with events and programs reaching nearly 300,000 people.

Yet, particular forms of violence have roots in globally pervasive forms. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Poverty is the worst form of violence." And there is nothing more heartbreaking than a child living in poverty. We also know that children in poverty are much more likely to fall victim to other forms of violence. Our End Child Poverty initiative has been hard at work since 2012 mobilizing religious resources for the ethical imperative to ensure that no child has to live in poverty.

One of the worst forms of violence against children — and really against our whole world — is the indoctrination of their fragile minds with both religious and secular ideologies based on division between "us" and "them," that encourage distrust and hatred of anyone who is different. Whether the pretence is religious or not, when children are taught that "our side" is all good and "the other side" is all evil, we are only sowing the seeds of future violence. As has been said, "The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being," and thus it is in the human heart — not on the battlefield or in the streets — that the true battle must be fought.

And this is one place where all of our paths cross. At the core of all four of our initiatives is a belief in the inherent spirituality and dignity of children and young people. Nurturing spirituality in young people is thus not only tactically a place of greatest potential synergy, but also ethically and morally our obligation. Indeed, we believe that there is no more direct, long-term and effective way to combat the violence of this world than ensuring that children grow up in peace with full access to their innate spiritual resources. Children grounded in love, compassion, and peace will

grow up able to resist the attraction of violence, the invitation to violence and the temptation to religious extremism, which we see plastered across our media every day. We must not only guide our children, but also learn from and listen to them. They will be the visionaries that see many of the new solutions we cannot imagine yet so desperately need.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his recent book, “Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence,” predicts that the 21st century will be much more “religious” than the 20th, and states that “Tomorrow’s world is born in what we teach our children today.”

I think we would do well to pay heed to these words. What shall we teach our children about violence? And about peace? What shall we teach them about religion and spirituality? And how shall we do it?

His Holiness Pope Francis, in declaring this year a Holy Year of Mercy, spoke of the infinite mercy of the Divine Presence, welcoming everyone and going out personally to encounter each one of us.

What and how shall we teach our children about their infinite value? About the source of their own dignity? And the dignity of others?

The Buddha said, “What’s done to children is what’s done to the world.”

What and how shall we teach our children — and indeed ourselves — about the way forward to a world without violence? How can we “do unto children as we would have done unto us, unto our world?”

Perhaps questions like these can help inform our discussions as we tackle our challenging agenda over the next two days.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.