

Why the 30th Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to Bishop Gunnar Stålsett

The Niwano Peace Prize Committee has decided to award the 30th Niwano Peace Prize to Bishop Gunnar Stålsett. The Niwano Peace Prize recognizes Bishop Stålsett's extraordinary and persistent work for peace. His life and career are truly examples of what is needed and what can be done to bring about lasting and just peace, and what religious ideas, ideals, and interreligious institutions can contribute. The Niwano Peace Prize honors Bishop Stålsett's service to humankind in its search for wisdom and paths to peace.

Bishop Stålsett has worked tirelessly over a long career that has engaged him in every world region and in many different sectors. He has proved himself a determined, highly effective and creative peacebuilder, working with courage and an unwillingness ever to give up or lose hope, to end conflicts and to take the actions needed to move forward on the path towards a lasting and just peace. He has thus achieved important, durable results that have affected millions of people. He combines a deep spirituality and passion for social justice and for human rights with a determination to engage with leaders from politics, religion, civil society, and business. His leadership in many interfaith organizations has strengthened the interreligious movement globally and especially in Europe, and lent it international credibility. He is a rare world leader who brings together a heartfelt compassion for all humankind and especially those who are most vulnerable and suffering, a respect for nature, a belief in the possibility of a truly just future, and a practical determination to bring about change. He is a listener, always ready to hear different sides, but he is also courageous in his willingness to speak truth to powerful actors and to recognize the forces of evil. He believes in consensus and bringing all sides to a debate but never hesitates to see a path towards a larger whole.

Bishop Stålsett truly exemplifies what the Niwano Peace Prize stands for: he is a transformational and caring leader inspired by deeply held spiritual values, committed to understanding and appreciating differences, relentless in his commitment to the core values of justice and compassion, practical in his life's work for peace, and hopeful for the future. He brings a global perspective and intellectual understanding of history and present social realities, as well as a profoundly human and individual understanding of what motivates conflict as well as reconciliation. He is deeply motivated by his spiritual roots in the Christian faith, in a profoundly ethical and reasoned manner. He believes deeply in the power of religion for good, even as he recognizes where it falls short. He is deeply and practically committed to promoting freedom of religion and expression everywhere. He has the stamina, patience, and determination to dig into the details of any situation and then to set it in a broader, world context.

Bishop Stålsett's life began in a small, very remote community in the far north of Norway. He witnessed both poverty and ethnic discrimination in his childhood, and came

through his early experience to respect the opportunities that education opens up and the practical benefits of community solidarity. His early career combined theological studies, pastoral work, political action, and work on health. As Secretary General of the Lutheran World Federation, Rector of a theological school, and Bishop of Oslo he gained experience and respect in a variety of worlds and disciplines. He has served over the years in many capacities in interreligious organizations, shaping organizations like Religions for Peace and showing that interfaith dialogue can truly make a difference. He has exercised special leadership in bringing a wide range of religious leaders to see the global HIV and AIDS pandemic as a spiritual challenge that calls for their common action, exemplifying both love of God and love of neighbor. His leadership has helped many to overcome the religiously based stigmatization and social exclusion that have surrounded HIV and AIDS.

Bishop Stålsett has for many years served on the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, which in many respects sets the standard for international prizes, bringing to the selection process his spiritual values and vision of what kind of leadership can make a difference for world peace.

The Niwano Peace Prize Committee was much affected by the remarkable range of peace activities that Bishop Stålsett has led and inspired over many decades, in many parts of the world. He has played leadership roles in Guatemala, Sri Lanka, the Balkans, Timor Leste, Myanmar/Burma, Namibia, Kyrgyzstan, and many other conflict situations. He brings an exemplary capacity to listen and to understand the perspectives of different parties, thus emerging as a creative mediator who is able to help and inspire the actors involved to find new solutions and compromises. He appreciates well the importance of building lasting institutions and addressing problems like imbalance of power, exclusion of minorities, and endemic corruption, even as he works to encourage forgiveness. He is a wise advocate who never forgets the forgotten, and who brings minority views, the voices of victims, and women into the process in authentic, practical, and meaningful ways. He is always honest and forthright, even as he never fails in sympathy and compassion.

Bishop Stålsett has played central roles also in building and shaping the global interreligious movement through his leadership roles in The World Conference of Religions for Peace and the European Council of Religious leaders. His conviction that any religion has something to contribute, as religious traditions and as individuals who are part of a political and social system has colored approaches to interfaith dialogue, as has his commitment to practical action and results. He argues that all need to hear the self-critical voice from within and all need to be a self-critical voice before criticism of other religions and traditions.

Bishop Stålsett's leadership has always been marked by a blend of courage, compassion, and appreciation for humanity's strengths and weaknesses. He garners respect wherever he is engaged. His life's work is an example to us all.