

UNESCO Symposium 20 May 2026

We Shall Overcome

Building Inner Peace and Hope

Date: Wednesday May 20, 2026

Time: 13:15 - 18:00

Venue: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Organized by: UNESCO Chair on Cross-Cultural Sustainability (CCS, VU Amsterdam)

In collaboration with: The Netherlands Commission for UNESCO, WCCES, VU Workplace of Hope, Martin Luther King Lezing, SBE Paradox and Reconciliation Hub VU, SERVUS-VU, Inner Development Goals, VU Faculty of Humanities, Lived Religion and Society, and the VU Peace & Conflict Studies Centre

Expected Participants: 150 (UNESCO Chairs, academics, policymakers, students, artists, and community partners)

Preliminary programme, 12 May 2026: <https://vu.nl/en/events/2026/unesco-symposium-we-shall-overcome>,

Registration Form: http://www.formdesk.nl/vu-onlinepayment/SBE_UNESCO_Symposium_2026

Background: Following the success of *Be the Change* (UNESCO Symposium 2025, full report: [2025 symposium Be the Change](#) at VU Amsterdam, participants, speakers, and UNESCO Chairs emphasized the importance of translating inspiration into sustained, smaller-scale collaboration.

Peace and Hope side by side. Peace and Hope rarely appear together in contemporary discourse. Peace is often framed as a diplomatic artifact, an agreement negotiated far above the lives of ordinary people. Hope, by contrast, is treated as fragile. Yet if we listen closely to the tremors of our present moment—wars raging across continents, polarizing rhetoric within democracies, the quiet dehumanization of refugees, the loneliness that stretches across generations—we see a stark truth: Peace without Hope becomes procedural, while Hope without Peace dissolves into

sentiment. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) occupies a rare intellectual and moral position: it dares to place these two concepts side by side, insisting that today they must be rebuilt together.

Our era is often described as a “polycrisis,” a word that risks abstraction. Beneath economic instability, digital distrust, and fractured cultural narratives lies a more intimate truth: a crisis of meaning. Futures feel narrower, particularly for the most vulnerable. In such a climate, hope is harder to imagine, and peace is harder to practice.

We Shall Overcome. History, however, reminds us that humanity has often discovered new moral languages precisely in moments of despair. One of the clearest examples comes from Martin Luther King Jr. who received a VU honorary Doctoral degree in Social Sciences in 1965. In the late 1960s, when early civil rights victories gave way to backlash, war, and political fatigue, King did not offer optimism. He offered something deeper: “infinite hope.” A hope that does not hinge on probabilities or outcomes, that resists despair, that insists justice can be carved “out of a mountain of despair.” Infinite hope is both intellectual and spiritual—a disciplined imagination capable of breathing life into peace when it seems impossible. This is why the 2026 symposium draws inspiration from dr. King’s words: *We Shall Overcome*. Not as nostalgia, but as methodology: societies overcome injustice not only through policy, but by cultivating shared narratives capable of carrying us across disappointment. It is a rehearsal for a new kind of societal architecture—one where peace stems from intergenerational dialogue, not avoidance, and hope arises from shared responsibility, not naïveté. It asks difficult but essential questions: How do we cultivate inner peace when outer peace is fragile? How do we sustain hope and forgiveness in a public space dominated by cynicism and polarization? How can universities model the sustainable futures they teach?

These questions matter. In 1965, King warned that humanity stood at a crossroads between chaos and community. Today, that crossroads is global. Our responsibility—as educators, scholars, community members, and UNESCO Chairs—is to practise a beloved community and to build the infrastructures—intellectual, emotional, and institutional—that make it possible.

Symposium objectives

1. Promote interdisciplinary exchange between UNESCO Chairs.
2. Showcase VU Peace and Hope as a living example of a peacebuilding community.
3. Encourage intergenerational workshops that translate reflection into daily practice.
4. Prepare a collective call-to-action for the 2027 UNESCO Chairs’ network meeting to rotate among partner universities.

Preliminary Symposium 2026 Outline

Venue: NU Building

Time	Session	Details
12:00	VU heritage and UNESCO Memory of the World, guided tour - Pre-symposium guided tour is in VU Main building	VU Gallery in Main building, https://vu.nl/en/news/2025/opening-exhibition-vu-heritage-history Peace and Hope via historical awareness: UNESCO Memory of the World 'From Kuyper to King': guided tour by Eline Bos (conservator VU Academic Heritage) and Ab Flipse (VU University Historian)
13:15	Registration & Welcome	Registration Desk, ground floor NU Building
13:45	Opening Ceremony	Opening by Kathleen Ferrier, Chair Dutch UNESCO Commission, Prof. dr. Jeroen Geurts (Rector Magnificus, VU), and Dr. Sylvia van de Bunt (UNESCO Chair Cross-Cultural Sustainability)
14:25	Dialogue on building intergenerational hope and mutual understanding	UNESCO keynote speaker and young pre-university student
14:30	Panel: 'Peace as Practice – Universities, a Beacon of Hope in Divided Times'	Moderator: dr. Jon Verriet, Senior Science Advisor UNESCO NL Panelists: Josje van der Linden (UNESCO Chair Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work, interactive workshop leader(s)), dr. Saeed Khanagha, Associate Professor of Strategy, VU Amsterdam, Tobya Monte and Nikita de Kruijff of UNESCO NL Youth Commission https://unesco.nl/unesco/unesco-jongerencommissie
15:10	Coffee and tea break	Poster presentations by (international) high school students, local community projects and UNESCO chairs

16:00	Interactive workshops	Details below
17:15	Plenary reflection, Reception & Networking	With a speech for student refugees LS-WSO graduates
18:00	Farewell	

Workshops

1. Language Stories, by Laura Rupp, VU Centre for Global English

In this workshop we will watch clips of Language Stories, a series of documentaries in which people share the languages they speak, the stories behind these languages, and the role of language in their lives. Language gives voice to communities and their unique attributes such as cultural identity and heritage. Language can connect, provide access and empower, but also constitute a barrier and be deployed to exert power.

Workshop participants will be invited to share their own language stories. We will have a conversation about language matters at stake and think of ways to address them. UNESCO patronage project, <https://vu.nl/en/news/2025/unesco-patronage-for-vu-centre-for-global-english>

Moderator: Klaas de Zwaan, VU Lecturer Media History/Media Studies.

2. Mentoring in times of uncertainty, by mentors and mentees of the UNESCO Lecture Series We Shall Overcome (LS-WSO) is a mentorship-based program designed in 2022 to reconnect refugee learners with academic communities and professional networks. Inspired by the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., who received an honorary doctorate from the VU university in 1965, this initiative reflects a commitment to linking historical memory with contemporary educational practice. By combining lectures, mentorship, and intercultural exchange, the program illustrates how universities can create spaces where dialogue, solidarity, and learning contribute to broader processes of peacebuilding. Mentors and mentees share their international mentoring stories, like Wim Leereveld (Founder of the Access to Medicine Foundation) and his mentee, Portia Georgouras and an alumnus mentee of the Blue Road Academy, Diana Kushnir (mentor, and PhD researcher on managing AI in organizations) and Marcel van Hal (mentor, schuldhulpmaatje)

Moderators: mentors team

3. Peacebuilding through Dilemma Reconciliation and navigating Paradoxes by VU Professors dr Brian Tjemkes and Fons Trompenaars, while research in this area has advanced tremendously, actionable know-what and know-how lag behind. The speakers aim to close this research gap with the goal to generate and disseminate actionable knowledge while enriching academia, business and society, last but not least for the sake of peacebuilding. bit.ly/3MQbtDL

Moderator: Rik A. Grooten, PhD candidate SBE VU

4. (African) Universities in times of crisis, playing a role as platforms of co-creation, fed by youth associations and local communities, partnering with colleagues in the academic world, Moderators: Cristina Giudici, UNESCO Chair *Population, Migrations and Development*, Sapienza University

of Rome, Josje van der Linden, UNESCO *Chair Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work*, Gulu University, Uganda and University Groningen, Dr Robert Jjuuko co-chair *Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work*, Gulu University, Uganda and Dr Alawia ElFarag and Manal Eltayeb, Ahfad University, Sudan.

5. Be the Change; Reimagining Peace through Indian Perspectives on Inner Transformation and Collective Harmony, Explore peace as an embodied and relational practice through Indian concepts such as Śāntiḥ, Ahimsā, and dharma, moving beyond peace as merely the absence of conflict. This interactive workshop combines short conceptual inputs, dialogical reflection, and a co-creation exercise to rethink peacebuilding, from Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., to contemporary global challenges. by dr. Puneet Bindlish and dr. Gunjan Joshi, VU School of Religion and Theology.

Moderator: Nancy Helmy, UNESCO symposium volunteer

6. Hope as research program. We live in radical uncertain times. Standard economic policy only is insufficient to cope with radical uncertainty. This interactive workshop highlights transdisciplinary hope to deal with radical uncertainty. An illustration is given by the case study of Hope-Driven Transition in the economic sector of infrastructure in the Netherlands. See also: www.workplaceofhope.com. Workshop by Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, associate professor public theology and the flourishing life. Moderator Egbert Wits, anthropologist and researcher 'Hope-Driven Transition.

Contributors

- UNESCO Chairs (NL & International): Utrecht, Amsterdam, Leiden, Groningen, Rome, Innsbruck, Japan, Berlin, Uganda, Sudan
- VU Peace and Dialogue initiative
- Durf!
- International university partners and peace education hubs
- VU Pre-university College students, SBE students, We Shall Overcome refugee-students, Life Skills students
- Netherlands Commission for UNESCO: Strategic partnership and support
- VU School of Religion & Theology, <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/faculties/school-of-religion-and-theology/more-about/rediscover-and-build-hope-for-all>

Organizing Committee

Sylvia van de Bunt, UNESCO Chair on Cross-Cultural Sustainability (CCS) VU, UNESCO symposium co-leadership

Gagan Kaur, VU international relations/USRN coordinator/Japan coordinator, UNESCO symposium co-leadership

Jon Verriet, Netherlands Commission for UNESCO, senior science advisor

Eleonora Tonazzoli, CCS UNESCO chair assistant

Sanaz Kateb, PhD and Post-doc researcher, CCS UNESCO Chair assistant

Jaap Gordijn, UNESCO Chair Decentralized Information Society Engineering VU

Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, Associate Professor Public Theology and director Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development VU

Willemijn Dekkers, secretariat, email: secretariaat.mo.sbe@vu.nl