

## **Consul General of Azerbaijan Nasimi Aghayev about religious tolerance in his country**



*Consul General Nasimi Aghayev during presentation at UVU*

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2018, Utah Valley University had the opportunity and honor to host His Excellency Mr. Nasimi Aghayev, Consul General of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Los Angeles. Mr. Aghayev is the representative of his nation to California and twelve additional states, including Utah. We were happy to have him come to our University and speak on his nation's history and the importance of interfaith cooperation and acceptance, and how his nation has implemented such measures.

He first spoke on the history of his nation, and that its first democratic government was established in 1918 as the Russian Empire found itself in a civil war. This was short-lived however, as Bolshevik forces marched into the nation and annexed it. It remained a part of the Soviet Union until that nation's collapse in 1991. One of Azerbaijan's top goals was to restore a secular democracy and reestablish freedom of religion, which had been suppressed by the Soviet regime.

He spoke also that most of the nation's population are adherents of Islam, with about seventy percent of them belonging to the Shi'a sect, and thirty percent belonging to the Sunni sect. Only about seven percent of the nation are members of other religions, with an aggregate of five percent belonging to Christian and Jewish denominations. Other religions are present, including a temple of Zoroastrianism that has been present in Baku for many years.

The nation has shown a history of religious tolerance and acceptance. Some of the oldest churches of Christianity can be found here. He also spoke of Bartholomew, one of the early Christian missionaries, that came to this region and spread Christianity. During the Second World War, Azerbaijan was a refuge for Eastern European Jews that fled from the advancing German armies and the persecution that followed them.

Consul General Aghayev also presented his nation's support of interfaith council and how the nation supports different faiths ~~them~~. The nation gives funds ~~a sum of money~~ to each faith to help support the health of that religion in the community. They have even gone as far as to build a new Synagogue for the Jewish community in Baku. They also support and help arrange an interfaith council each year, where religious leaders from the community come together and discuss faith related issues, and coordination. It is also common that the entire community celebrates the religious festivals and holy days of each other's denominations.

Mr. Aghayev also commented that the literacy rate of ninety-nine percent gives the nation the ability to tackle and discuss tough, faith-based issues. He believes firmly that education is key in understanding, discussing, and solving issues and promoting, not tolerance, but acceptance of other faiths. Both Shiite and Sunni often pray together, side by side in the same mosques, and worship together. The government as well is integrated, with members of every major faith represented in the highest levels of government. One of their Supreme Court Justices is a woman of Jewish faith, and both Christians and Jewish adherents serve in their parliament.

He also spoke to the bridge-building abilities of his nation. As a majority Muslim nation, but also as a progressive secular democracy, they use their position to open discourse between nations with large differences. They are able to reach out to their Middle-Eastern neighbors, such as Iran and Israel, creating a conduit for diplomacy, peace and cooperation. He was particularly proud of the nation's strong relationship with Israel, and the effort they lead in promoting peace in the region. They are also a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Azerbaijan provides important lessons ~~is a model nation~~ in a region that is often plagued by political, social and religious issues. They use their position as an advanced ~~democracy~~ and state to foster peace, democracy, and prosperity in the region. Their efforts are helping to build stable relations in the Middle-East and improve discourse between Israel and the Muslim nation of the region. Azerbaijan is a leader and example of interfaith cooperation and a good model of successful transition to mature sovereign and independent nation. ~~democracy~~.

***By Brandon Pedler, President German Club, Member UIMF***