

**KEYNOTE OPENING LECTURE  
FOR  
UAE50 CONFERENCE**

by

**The Revd Jonathan Aitken**

*The founding, formation, nation building and historic achievements of the United Arab Emirates 1971-2021: (Perceptions of an eyewitness present since the creation of the UAE)*

on

Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm

at

The Red Theatre, Arts Centre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Thank you so much for inviting me to give the opening lecture at this important conference.

I regard it as a great honour to be here today and to be congratulating the UAE on its remarkable milestone Anniversary of 50 years of successful Federation.

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2,500 years ago the ancient Greek Philosopher Sophocles memorably said:  
*"Sometimes one has to wait until the evening to see how glorious the day has been".*

Now I am not for one moment suggesting that this nation has reached the evening of its existence.

Far from it. In historical terms it is still morning in the UAE.

Yet the first 50 years of the UAE's life have been glorious:

- In their stability
- In their unity
- In their constitutional resilience
- In their economic prosperity
- And in their tolerant social progress.

How did all this come about?

It is a story worth telling from many angles. Mine is only one of them, but I hope you will find it interesting.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

When I made my first visit to Abu Dhabi 55 years ago, in 1966, I was told that there was an old saying in use among the Bedu tribesmen of Sir Bani Yas Island:

*"When two fish are fighting in the Gulf the British are behind it."*

Of course, this is no longer applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, the British and the Bedu still have one link in common.

They both have a tradition of oral history.

They both enjoy telling stories and describing the events of the past that they have witnessed.

So, in continuance of this oral tradition, I thought I would offer in this lecture some eye-witness perceptions of the UAE's foundation, constitution and progress.

How did I become such an eye-witness?

By accident – an accident, which had an amusing beginning.

In 1966 I was a 23 year old war correspondent based in Vietnam.

I was sitting in the Press Centre of Da Nang when I received a telegram from my News Editor in London, which said in jargon of 1960's Fleet Street cable communications:

*"Since you nearest Abu Dhabi move coup-wards soonest!"*

Now geography was obviously not my News Editor's strong point.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

He apparently thought that Abu Dhabi was somewhere in Vietnam or South East Asia.

But like most people in the world of the 1960s I did not know where Abu Dhabi was either, so I spent the next hour or so thumbing through maps in the wrong continent.

But then I was helped by a fellow journalist in the Da Nang Press Centre, an American reporter from *Time Magazine*. He said:

"Oh Gee, we ran a story on 'Aboo Dobbye' some time ago!"

He found it.

*Time Magazine* in May 1963 had indeed published what was probably the world's first ever international report on what is now this great capital city, under the tongue in cheek headline "*Sheik Jackpot*".

The gist of the story was that the then Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Shakhbut (an old fashioned, frugal but much honoured leader whom I later met several times) had suddenly "Hit the Jackpot" when huge oil reserves were discovered under his Sheikdom.

Having now found out roughly where Abu Dhabi was, I spent three days travelling via Saigon, Hong Kong, Delhi and Bahrain.

The final leg of my journey was on a single engine oil company Tiger Moth aircraft, known as the "Dune Hopper", arriving here the day after Sheikh Zayed had become the new Ruler of Abu Dhabi.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Forty-eight hours later, I was invited to the Old Fort where Sheikh Zayed gave me his first ever interview to a western journalist.

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Meeting Sheikh Zayed for the first time 55 years ago was an experience I have never forgotten.

As many of you well know, Sheikh Zayed was a man of great presence, charisma, and natural authority.

By contrast, I was rather nervous made more so by the surrounding cast of heavily armed *Mutarzin*.

But Sheikh Zayed soon put me at my ease - and with the assistance of a brilliant simultaneous translator, Ahmed Al Obaidli, sitting at his feet, we had a marvellous conversation, lasting well over three hours.

I asked Sheikh Zayed the predictable reporter's questions about his plans and his vision for the future of Abu Dhabi.

To answer this, Sheikh Zayed rose from his seat, took me into the courtyard of the old Fort and started scratching marks in the sand with his cane, or *aasa*.

"Here, I am going to build the Corniche" he said.

"Here, I am going to build some new schools because I strongly believe in education. I built the first ever school in this Emirate in Al Ain twenty years ago."

He went on: "Here, I am going to build a hospital."

And here I am going to build a 170km road all the way to Al Ain with irrigation so that plants and Palm trees will grow all the way along the road."

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Now, a cynical journalist might have thought that such declarations of intent by the new Ruler were fantasy talk.

For in 1966 the Old Fort was just about the only concrete structure in the whole of Abu Dhabi, apart from some oil company offices.

There were:

- No tarmac roads;
- No schools;
- No hospitals;
- Most of the houses of the 5000 or so residents were *barasti* – Third World huts made from palm leaves. And there was not a single tree in sight.

That was the reality of my eyes, yet my ears were hearing a completely different prospect from the lips of the new Ruler.

So great were Sheikh Zayed's powers of communication that I believed his visionary ideas.

So I reported them respectfully and positively in a full-page article, which was duly published in *The London Evening Standard*.

I did, however, make one foolish mistake in my article, which seems laughable now.

I wondered how all the Ruler's building schemes were going to be paid but added these words:

*"Yet some optimists believe that Abu Dhabi's oil revenues will one day reach \$100 million a year".*

So, I was wrong there by a factor of about 1000 per cent.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

But I was right to see that under Sheikh Zayed's leadership there just could be the potential for a modern nation state to be created from these humble 1966 beginnings.

I returned to Abu Dhabi several more times in those early years.

I came back again as a journalist and wrote another favourable article about the economic prospects here.

And then a year or so later I came back as an investment banker and later as a Member of Parliament and as a Government Minister.

On several of these return visits, Sheikh Zayed used to tease me and amuse his Majlis by saying something like:

*"Mr Jonathan is the Englishman who first came to see me when I was so poor that I could not even afford pen and paper.*

*So, I had to draw roads in the sand for him with my qasab."*

In my early visits as a banker, I started to do business with what was called the Abu Dhabi Investment Board.

This was another visionary Sheikh Zayed idea – the first stirrings towards a Sovereign Wealth fund, which was the forerunner of ADIA, now with about \$700 billion dollars under management.

But in those days Abu Dhabi Investment Board was tiny.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

It was making some good decisions, thanks to some talented young Abu Dhabians such as Mohammed Habrourh and Ahmed Khalifa Al Suwaidi (of whom more later).

But the admin was done by a British civil servant, formerly from the Sudan Civil Service, called John Butter.

John Butter was not only in charge of the new Investment Board. He was also in charge of much of the financial administration of Abu Dhabi in the early days.

There was a famous episode in which John Butter over-stepped the mark in his duties

What happened was that John Butter drew up some plans, in accordance with the Ruler's wishes, for a new hospital to be built here.

The project was carefully costed, and a contractor was recommended. John Butter sent all these plans to the Ruler's office, but for a month received no reply.

John Butter then wrote a somewhat impatient letter to the Ruler, which, roughly speaking said:

*"Your Highness, I sent you these proposals for a new hospital four weeks ago. If I have not heard from you within a week from now, I will sign the contract and pay the first instalment due to the contractors."*

When this letter was read out to Sheikh Zayed in his Majlis, he asked to be given the letter.

In front of everyone he tore it into little pieces.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

It was a powerful and well-deserved rebuke.

Above all it made it clear that the British were no long in charge of such matters.

The Ruler of Abu Dhabi was in charge.

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This tearing up of the letter story made waves across the Gulf.

It made everyone realise that the British were no longer in charge. And soon the British were leaving.

In 1968 the Labour Government as part of its Defence Review announced that it would be closing its garrison and RAF Base in Sharjah.

And also ending British control of the Trucial Oman Scouts Regiment. The withdrawal date was 1971. So there was suddenly going to be a military and political vacuum in the area. Who would fill it and how?

The political conception and constitutional birth of the United Arab Emirates is one of the greatest success stories in contemporary geo-politics.

For this is a period in world history when federations and unions fell apart.

Think of the collapse:

- Of the Soviet Union;
- Of Yugoslavia;
- Of the Central African Federation;
- Of the Federation of Malaya;
- Of tiny Caribbean creations like St Kitts, Nevis, and Anguilla.

Where have all these flowers gone?

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Gone to political graveyards every one.

By contrast the United Arab Emirates shine on as a beacon of unity, stability and prosperity.

Who made it work and shine?

There is an old saying that "in Politics success has a hundred fathers. But defeat is always an orphan".

Here today in this national capital, I think we can safely agree that Sheikh Zayed was the hero and Founding Father of the UAE.

He rightly deserves his place in history for this great nation-building achievement.

But it was not as easy as perhaps it looks today.

Going back for a second to my first journalistic interview with Sheikh Zayed in 1966.

When it ended he asked me how I was going to get home. So I replied:

*"This interview has been so fascinating that I have missed my plane – referring to the Tiger Moth Dune Hopper – so I am going to have to get to Dubai."*

*"Oh, I'll give you my car and driver",* said Sheikh Zayed.

*"You'll have to stop at several border crossings but my man will make sure you get through."*

Then Sheikh Zayed added as he waved me goodbye: *"We won't always have these difficulties".*

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

I wondered later about his prescient words of farewell.

Were they a gleam in the eye towards unity from the future President of the United Arab Emirates?

Who knows?

I don't even think Sheikh Zayed knew but perhaps the idea was there.

My journey to Dubai took about five hours across the desert sands.

Not a strip of a tarmac road in sight.

And there were indeed many border crossings with bureaucracy, formalities, passport inspections and flag waving.

In Dubai where I spent three days I was able to pay my respects to The Ruler Sheikh Rashid. He struck me as more of a mercantile businessman than a political visionary but he was clearly a most capable ruler.

However, I did not get the faintest clue that anyone in Dubai was dreaming of a United Arab Emirates.

Sheikh Zayed may have been starting to dream that dream and see that vision and by about 1969 he was even having serious conversations about it. But with whom?

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One of the greatest essays on the constitutional theory of politics was written by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian Statesman Niccolò Machiavelli. His most quoted essay "*The Prince*" begins with these words: "*The best way of judging a Ruler is to study the quality of the brains of the men around him*".

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Now here I move in the story of the creation of the UAE to a level below that of the Rulers - principally Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid - to the level of their advisers and confidantes.

I believe there were three important Counsellors to the Rulers without whose advice the UAE might not have come into existence.

They perhaps deserve more credit than the chronicles of the UAE history have so far given them.

The first of these great advisers was Ahmed Khalifa Al Suwaidi. Sheikh Zayed's most trusted right-hand man.

He was an Abu Dhabi from a good tribal family: well educated; a man of immense wisdom and of considerable diplomatic skills.

From my own conversations with Ahmed Al Suwaidi in about 1970-71 I know that he fully shared Sheikh Zayed's vision of unity and nation creating. And I think it is true to say that without Ahmed Al Suwaidi's tireless negotiating skills the Ruler's vision of the UAE would not have been implemented.

The second major player at adviser level in the creation of the UAE was Mahdi Al Tajir. His historical importance in the story started because he was Sheikh Rashid's most trusted confidante. He was not always a popular figure in Abu Dhabi.

Yet remarkably Mahdi Al Tajir, because of the fearless candour of his advice, became well trusted by Sheikh Zayed.

Ahmed Al Suwaidi and Mahdi Tajir also trusted one another. They may have looked an odd couple to outsiders because their backgrounds were so different.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Mahdi Tajir was the bold, buccaneering, brilliant dealmaker from Bahrain.

Ahmed Al Suwaidi was the gracious, graceful scion of renowned tribal lineage.

They were both clever, hardworking, can-do operators who shared Sheikh Zayed's vision of uniting the Sheikhdoms into a new nation.

And they delivered.

But for all their 'on the ground' know-how these two pivotal advisers to the Founding Father of the UAE might not have succeeded without the help of a third and also under-recognised key figure behind the scenes of the creation of the new country.

The third wise man was a British Crown Servant with unrivalled knowledge of the Gulf – Sir William Luce who:

- Spoke perfect Arabic with a 40 year career which included being:
  - Governor of Aden,
  - Political Resident in charge of the Gulf based in Bahrain;
  - And before that was in charge of winding up the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in the Sudan.
- Luce was called "*The Last of the Great Proconsuls.*"

Behind that rather over grand title lay a quiet, unassuming man with a deep love of the Trucial States, its tribes people and their rulers who knew and trusted him well.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

The British Foreign Office, headed in the early 1970s by the Foreign Secretary and former Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home, felt that they had to come up with a man and a plan – to find a way of filling the vacuum that the British withdrawal was creating.

So Sir William Luce was persuaded to come out of retirement and help the Rulers of the Gulf to move towards a combined Federation, which in effect was based on the vision of Sheikh Zayed.

In his role as the Foreign Secretary's Personal Envoy to the Persian Gulf, for nearly two years Luce travelled continually around this area exercising his international diplomatic skills to the full.

Luce already knew Sheikh Zayed well so swiftly won his full confidence and also that of Sheikh Rashid's.

Luce's greatest contributions to the successful creation of the UAE lay outside its borders. For it was he who worked hard to persuade the Shah of Iran, and to a lesser extent King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, not to interfere with the vision of Sheikh Zayed.

This was no easy task.

Sir William Luce did the early spadework but it was Sheikh Zayed whose personal diplomacy finally pulled it off.

Only two days ago I was told by my old friend Sheikh Suroor bin Mohammed Al Nahyan, whom I also met here 55 years ago this fascinating untold story.

In 1970 Sheikh Zayed had a secret meeting with the Shah of Iran.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

The Shah previously hostile to the proposed Federation saw the leadership qualities in the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and after a long dialogue reversed Iranian opposition to the proposed Federation.

For different reasons Saudi Arabia also revised its predatory stance towards the unborn UAE.

Qatar dropped out – which was probably a blessing for both sides – so the way became clear for what eventually became “The Federation of the ‘Seven Sheikhdoms’ in December 1971”.

The tribal bargaining, the financial deals, and the various provisions of the final treaties that created the UAE are magisterially chronicled in Frauke Heard-Bey’s definitive work *“From Trucial States to the United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition”*.

But at my own more modest eyewitness level of conversations in this period with the key players I would suggest that the final moves towards federation were more fragile and indeed more chaotic than the written record conveys.

There were times when Sheikh Rashid had cold feet.

The provisional constitution of the UAE signed in July 1971 looked to many a shaky and short-term temporary fix of limited duration.

Indeed at its signing, Britain’s Political Resident in the Gulf, Sir Geoffrey Arthur told a close friend: “I wouldn’t give it more than four to six months”.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

On December 1 1971, when Britain signed the termination of its Protection Treaty for Abu Dhabi the ceremony was so disorganised that the British delegation had to climb out of the window of the room before the formalities were completed in order to board the RAF flight to Dubai for Part II of the signing ceremony there.

While on that flight the news came through on the aircraft radio that there had just been an assassination attempt which wounded the Deputy Ruler of Sharjah.

The Senior British Foreign Official on the aircraft Sir Julian Bullard greeted the news with the gloomy announcement:

“This spells the end of our efforts to achieve a peaceful handover”.

But the gloomsters and the pessimists were wrong.

Here we are 50 years on celebrating the longevity of the UAE’s existence and constitution.

So what went right and why?

At the risk of offending some learned academics and legal experts in this audience today I would like to sound a warning note about the importance of constitutions.

Neither constitutions nor countries are made by lawyers they are made by individual leaders.

The UAE’s constitution began life as a bad bet.

Its survival reminds me of the old French proverb:

*“Rien ne dure que le provisoire”* (nothing lasts as long as the provisional).

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

A few days ago I was talking in London to Lord Green of Deddington who, as the youthful Andrew Green in the Foreign Office, served here in Abu Dhabi 1970-1972.

He had the task, assisted by an Egyptian expert Waheed Rafit, of translating the original English draft of the 1971 provisional constitution into Arabic. He was told by his superiors to make the translation as flexible as possible.

He seems to have succeeded because the 1971 constitution soon became everyone's flexible friend, which is just what Sheikh Zayed, Sheikh Rashid and the other rulers wanted.

And those parts, which were not flexible enough, were soon made even more flexible by the customs and practices of the people of the UAE.

Coming as I do from a career as a legislator in the Parliament of the United Kingdom – a country which has never had a formal written constitution - I am not surprised by this flexibility.

For example, the British constitution makers spent or rather wasted a great deal of time preparing immigration rules and legal procedures which would enable local residents to move from Sheikhdome to Sheikhdome using passports, which had to be rubber stamped.

The British Official in charge of these new laws was John Coles.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

In 1968 he became Assistant Political Agent to the Trucial States based in Dubai. He was later to become Permanent Secretary or Head of the entire British Foreign Office - but in the late 1960s this, in Cole's own words, was the humble role he played in preparing to make the 1971 provisional constitution work:

*"When it came to handing over the immigration system, I mean not only did we have to devise the law, but I actually remember making the rubber stamps myself so that there were some means of putting visas into people's passports. You did everything from top to bottom".*

In fact, the rubber stamps making efforts of the young John Coles was an exercise in futility.

For whatever the immigration law and the official constitution may have said within a few weeks the Emiratis themselves reverted to the old system of "chittys", scraps of paper, signed by this or that sheikh which were permissions to move around.

So from the beginning flexibility reigned.

It was a flexibility, poetically enshrined in these famous lines by the great 18<sup>th</sup> century English sage Dr Samuel Johnson:

*How small of all that human hearts endure,  
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.*

And here in the UAE what cured the dysfunctional disunity of the Sheikhdoms and what caused the Federation to succeed was not the letter of the law or the constitution but the *spirit* in which the new nation was built.

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Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

So what then has been the *spirit* of the UAE its in its nation building efforts for the last five decades?

This is a complex question, which cannot be swiftly or easily answered. If I were to mention this country's many achievements or even lessons it may have learned from its failures we would be here all night.

But in the closing minutes of this lecture here is my shorthand attempt at identifying four key ingredients behind the successful spirit of the UAE.

First a spirit of generosity;  
Second a spirit of tolerance;  
Thirdly a spirit of innovation;  
Fourthly a spirit of realistic optimism.

### **A Spirit of Generosity**

As is well known Sheikh Zayed was enormously generous in the way he spent his oil revenues.

Domestically he was financially generous to the other six Sheikhdoms in the Federation.

And they in turn were emotionally and politically generous in their willingness to relinquish some of their traditional sovereign powers over their own Sheikhdoms.

Sheikh Rashid of Dubai, in particular, deserves credit for having the generosity to step down to the number two role of Vice President of the Federation.

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Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

Sheikh Zayed's spirit of generosity was perhaps displayed most clearly in the foreign policy of the UAE.

Within the Arab world it has been well said that no other leader in modern Arab history loved the rest of the Arab peoples and countries as much as Sheikh Zayed did. And no other leader showed that love more generously.

It was not the constitution which guided the UAE to do this.

It was Sheikh Zayed's personal instincts.

I caught a glimpse of those instincts in 1973 when as a young politician I was invited to fly from London to Abu Dhabi on Sheikh Zayed's personal VC10 Aircraft.

During the flight I was invited to have lunch almost alone with Sheikh Zayed apart from Mahdi Tajir acting as translator and a BP Executive Jeffrey Keating.

Suddenly Sheikh Zayed started to ask me why the British public and British politicians seem to care so little about the plight of the Palestinians.

I replied by saying that: *"There was considerable sympathy for those Palestinians suffering in the refugee camps of Gaza and the West Bank.*

*However, your average British voter in the 1970s in constituencies like mine had higher personal priorities such as unemployment and rising food prices."*

I remember how Sheikh Zayed became animated at his disappointment over my answer.

He began to bang the table of the VC10 saying:

*"The British people should care much more about the Palestinians!"*

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

And of course he himself did care giving away huge sums of money to the Palestinian cause and to many other Arab causes so establishing UAE's reputation for its spirit of global generosity in foreign policy.

And this generous spirit has continued to this day.

It surely lies behind the UAE's remarkable initiative of The Abraham Accords, which I, and many others, believe will be a game changer in the search for peaceful co-existence in the Middle East.

### **Spiritual Tolerance**

Moving on to the Spirit of Tolerance, let's start with religious and spiritual tolerance.

Unusually for a Middle Eastern country, religious tolerance has been allowed to flourish here for many decades.

There has been a synagogue in a Villa in Dubai's Jumeirah quietly and continually conducting its ancient Jewish services using the Torah for longer than the life of the UAE itself.

The UAE's Shia minority of around 10,000 has never been pressured or persecuted.

Christians and other faiths are free to practise their religion here. In Sheikh Shakhbut's time, over 60 years ago, there was a Christian church in Al Ain.

In 1968 I attended the inauguration by Sheikh Zayed of the first Christian church in Abu Dhabi in 1968.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

It was, and is, an Anglican church still going strong. There are now many Christian churches from Catholics to Copts freely practising their religion here.

We hear a lot in the Western World about Islamic religious extremism yet apart from occasional rumbles from the Muslim Brotherhood they seem to be conspicuously absent in the UAE. Why?

Perhaps the explanation is personified in an anecdote about Sheikh Zayed in the 1980s when he was told about an incendiary sermon preached at Friday prayers in an Abu Dhabi mosque by an Islamist Mullah.

This Mullah delivered a fiery denunciation of all foreigners in the UAE for their non-Muslim beliefs and said they should be expelled from the country.

Sheikh Zayed sent for him and told him he was wrong to preach such sermons.

The preacher refused to back down.

Sheikh Zayed was reported to have sent for a pair of scissors saying:

*"If you won't cut your extremism then I will have to cut off your beard".*

Snip, snip, went the President's scissors as the Mullah's beard cascaded to the floor.

There has been little or no political troublemaking at Friday prayers in the UAE ever since.

Sermons in mosques are now monitored for any extremist tendencies so moderation prevails.

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Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

This spirit of tolerance, which includes, not only spiritual freedoms but considerable personal freedoms as well, is one of the cornerstones of life in today's UAE.

Nurturing that tolerance is now the responsibility of the Minister of Tolerance and Co-Existence H.H. Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak.

I have known Sheikh Nahyan as a personal friend, since his days as a young Oxford University student in the mid 1970s.

There could be no more capable or hardworking or more dedicated hand to hold aloft the flame of tolerance in the UAE today and the future.

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### **Spirit of Innovation**

Closely linked to the spirit of tolerance lies the UAE's spirit of innovation.

As it passes its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this is a country brimming with ideas and innovations for the future.

This is technologically true in exciting new areas such as space research, artificial intelligence and medical immunotherapy.

It is financially true in the pioneering investment management innovations being executed by ADIA Mubadala and other leading institutions.

It is culturally true in the world of museums and Art Galleries such as the Louvre.

And it is politically true as the UAE builds new international relations in Asia and elsewhere while pioneering the groundbreaking Abraham Accord in this region.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

## **The Spirit of Realism and Future Optimism**

Finally turning the spirit of realism and future optimism these are finally balanced ingredients in the make up of today's and tomorrow's UAE.

I have no doubt that there are some people who will hear or read this lecture who will think that its view of the UAE is too positive and optimistic.

I think my approach is right but of course no country is perfect.  
No country avoids mistakes.

It is not the idyllic Utopia of Arab Emirates. It is the actual real world of today's United Arab Emirates.

It is the actual real world of today's and tomorrow's United Arab Emirates.

Tomorrow we are spending a session of this conference on the future of the UAE. We will have a distinguished Israeli speaker and also an important British speaker Lord Udny-Lister, the Personal Envoy of the UAE of our British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

As I am chairing this session I will have a chance to add a thought or two on what might lie ahead here for the UAE's rising generations.

This is a young country still only opening its account on the world stage in terms of potential economic and political influence.

The UAE has built well with its ideals, ideas, its innovations and with the inspiration of its leaders particularly the inspiration of its Founding Father, Sheikh Zayed.

Keynote Opening Lecture for UAE50 Conference by The Revd Jonathan Aitken  
Monday 22 November 2021 12.30pm Red Theatre, New York University Abu Dhabi

His dreams are now being well honoured and amplified by his sons and ruling family members.

So even though it is still only morning in the UAE I think we might go back to Sophocles and say that so far the day has been full of glorious achievements.

Long may those achievements continue under IAE President, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed; Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and always under the inspiration of the Founding Father of the UAE Sheikh Zayed whose memory I now honour today in this lecture.