What difference does faith make in disaster relief, community development and peacebuilding? In this issue of *Intersections* authors answer this question from multiple perspectives and contexts. This framing question could also be stated thus: do faith-based organizations and local faith communities bring distinctive strengths to food security initiatives, conflict prevention efforts, maternal and child health and nutrition projects and more?

The term *faith-based organization*, or FBO, refers here to organizations with a predominant or exclusive focus on disaster relief, development and/or peacebuilding and with varying degrees of religious self-identification and rootedness in faith communities: some, like MCC, are international, while others, like the Comisión de Acción Social Menonita (CASM) in Honduras, are country-specific. In his article, Ray Vander Zaag sketches a typology of FBOs in the development sphere, introducing readers to the different types of actors grouped under the label. The term *local faith communities*, or LFCs, in contrast, points to groupings like congregations, synagogues and communities around mosques.

From its inception, MCC has been committed to partnerships with Anabaptist and other churches. Some actors in the international development sphere, however, raise a variety of skeptical concerns about FBOs and LFCs. A study commissioned in 2014 by Lutheran World Relief of senior development professionals working for USAID and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) regarding their perceptions of FBOs found ambivalent attitudes. On the one hand, respondents generally affirmed FBOs as a positive force in international development efforts, thanks to their connectedness to local networks and their responsiveness to beneficiaries. At the same time, respondents voiced multiple concerns. Some of these worries revolved around the effectiveness of FBO efforts: respondents rated FBOs lower than non-faith-based NGOs and for-profit development contractors regarding responsiveness to governmental donors, ability to implement and scale-up quickly and relative levels of professionalism and technical expertise. A significant number of respondents also expressed concerns about FBOs tying their services to religious identification and to proselytizing efforts: in this issue, Bruce Guenther discusses humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality and examines how FBOs like MCC work with such principles.
Recognizing the negative perceptions some development actors hold of FBOs, several organizations (including Christian Aid, Islamic World Relief and Tearfund) have formed the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFLC) to promote and share evidence-based assessments of the positive difference FBOs and LFCs make in disaster relief, development and peacebuilding. In its evidence briefs, the JLIFLC echoes points made by other development actors and scholars (e.g., GiZ, 2015; Barnett and Stein, 2012) about the particular strengths and contributions FBOs and LFCs bring to humanitarian efforts. The points include the following:

- FBOs have networks of connection and partnership with LFCs that give initiatives carried out by FBOs and their LFC partners greater geographical reach (offering access to remote areas) and longer-term sustainability.
- LFCs are often a source of volunteers who are highly motivated to care for their neighbors and who can ensure the durable impact of particular initiatives. The care groups described by Beth Good in her article are composed of such church-based volunteers, volunteers who promote vaccination, breastfeeding and other health behaviors among pregnant and new mothers in order to improve maternal and child health and nutrition outcomes.
- In contexts in which government institutions are weak and lack popular legitimacy, religious leaders and institutions often retain authority and trust within targeted communities. Working with LFCs is thus often essential to the success of project interventions.
- Churches, mosques and other LFCs are often best positioned to be first responders in times of disaster or other crises, investing their own resources in such responses, and can be mobilized as part of larger, longer-term disaster preparedness and risk reduction efforts.
- LFCs foster hope and resilience in communities devastated by disaster and violent conflict (Ager, 2015).
- Trusted religious leaders are often better placed than governmental or other actors to help shape and change community norms. So, for example, pastors, imams and other religious leaders can play essential roles in campaigns against gender-based violence by articulating religious arguments for why violence against women is wrong and why respecting the dignity of women is theologically mandated (Le Roux, 2011). Similarly, religiously-grounded arguments can often prove more persuasive in local communities than arguments made in supposedly universalist language. In this issue Vurayayi Pugenzi and Dan Wiens offer an example of this dynamic in their article analyzing how presenting conservation agriculture practices as “farming God’s way” helps overcome farmer resistance to adopting non-traditional, labor intensive methods.
- While religion is often deployed as a frame to justify various types of conflict, religious leaders can, as Wade Snowdon and Mark Tymm explore in their articles, prove essential to conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. At the same time, as Lindsey Frye shows in her article, practical efforts like kitchen garden promotion that bring members of different religious groups together around concrete projects can foster and strengthen bonds across religious divides, in turn contributing to longer-term conflict prevention.

Does faith make a difference? As an organization that has served for nearly a century “in the name of Christ,” MCC is convinced that the answer to the question is yes. The articles below reflect ongoing attempts by MCC and other FBOs to reflect on and articulate the what and the how of that difference.

Alain Epp Weaver directs strategic planning and learning for MCC.


Analyzing the diversity of faith-based development NGOs

Despite predictions of the inevitable advance of secularism, the world remains strongly religious, as evidenced by the resurgence of politically and socially active religious identities in many parts of the world. Many observers have also argued that Western secular-rational models of development (whether neo-liberal or socialist) are failing. As a result, development actors and scholars are examining the relationship of religion and development as well as the role of faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in development efforts. Yet such analysis is no simple matter, given the diverse approaches adopted and roles played by faith-based organizations. Faith-based international NGOs like MCC have long wrestled with how faith and religion, on the one hand, and development and social action, on the other hand, should be related, both theologically and programmatically.

In this article I contribute to this discussion by, first, summarizing and critiquing common typologies of classifying faith-based development organizations. Alternatively, I then propose a three-fold typology of faith-based NGOs, describing the differing theological positions undergirding these three types of faith-based organizations. As with all typologies, this framework for understanding the diversity of faith-based NGOs can be accused of over-simplifying, yet I hope that the typology might nevertheless generate productive reflection.

Development scholars and actors have proposed various classifications of faith-based development NGOs. Almost all of these approaches adopt a ‘more-to-less’ continuum, categorizing organizations by the (declining) degree of integration of religious belief and development approaches (see, for example, Berger, 2003; Sider and Unruh, 2004; and Clarke, 2008). Such models implicitly follow a type of secularization theory, which assumes that since religion is separate from the rest of culture, it can simply be removed to leave the rest intact.

Countering such models, other writers argue that a continuum approach follows an overly narrow definition of religion, an argument I find generally persuasive. Rather than defining religion exclusively in terms of belief in a deity or spiritual reality, these scholars contend that traditional religions are only one type of foundational belief system or worldview (e.g. Deneulin with Bano 2009 for a discussion specifically related to religion and development; Naugle, 2002; and most broadly, Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen, 2011). All cultures and people-groups hold to certain ‘fundamental agreements’ on what the purpose of human life is and what it means to ‘live well’ (and so become ‘developed’). Thus, all definitions of development (and therefore the goals and purpose of all development organizations) are rooted in faith-like commitments and traditions. Some of these convictions undergirding differing understandings of development are held through traditionally religious faith, and others are now held through modern secular warranted belief, but all are a type of belief system. The diversity of faith-based and secular development organizations should therefore, these scholars contend, be analyzed as embodying different (religious) beliefs and commitments rather than along a spectrum of more-or-less religious belief.

"Faith cannot be set aside to make way for purportedly neutral humanitarian efforts, be they in disaster response, education, food security, health or peacebuilding. Rather, development efforts are shaped by and flow from a comprehensive Christian vision of human flourishing."
As my contribution to the ongoing work of analyzing religious actors in development, I propose a conceptual grouping of (Christian) faith-based development NGOs into three categories (faith-based humanitarian, missional, and transformational), with NGOs in each grouping reflecting underlying theological understandings of the world that shape the divergent ways these NGOs approach development. I developed this typology in part based on my research over many years into different faith-based NGOs operating in Haiti.

**Faith-based humanitarian** NGOs understand their development work as a witness to or expression of God's love and justice. They draw inspiration for action from religious teachings, but their programming is largely similar to other development organizations. Following the humanitarian aid principle of independence (i.e., that aid should be independent of any political objectives), these organizations do not attempt to directly create any type of ‘religious belief’ change in those they assist. Serving those in need or suffering injustice, for these NGOs, is their Christian witness, their response to the experience of God's love and Jesus’ incarnation. Service (deed) and evangelism (proclamation) are separated into two separate spheres and roles. This separation of service from evangelism can arise from missiologies that view service as a sufficient witness to God's love, with evangelistic proclamation of Christ viewed as inappropriate or exclusivist in a pluralist world. Others view such separation as necessary in order to guard against un-Christ-like conditional assistance that takes advantage of vulnerable and marginalized peoples.

**Missional** NGOs also separate service and evangelism, but to different ends. [I recognize that some people use the term missional differently than I do here, employing it to describe what I call transformational, viewing the mission of faith-based organizations being the integral and radical transformation of all life.] For such organizations, service ministry is important, but primarily for its role in preparing the way for the ultimately more important evangelistic ministry of accompanying people on the path to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. This flows out of a more dualistic body/soul theology. Even when such agencies do not engage in explicit proselytizing, agency staff are expected to be able to testify to their gospel hope when beneficiaries (project participants) raise ‘spiritual’ questions and concerns.

Between these two positions, **transformational** faith-based NGOs reject dualistic approaches to human life, grounded in the conviction that all areas of life are and should be shaped by foundational Christian commitments. Faith cannot be set aside to make way for purportedly neutral humanitarian efforts, be they in disaster response, education, food security, health or peacebuilding. Rather, for these organizations, development efforts are shaped by and flow from a comprehensive Christian vision of human flourishing. Authentic partnerships, with both organizational and community-based partners, requires that all parties should openly dialogue on their foundational, normative sources of meaning and hope that foster human flourishing.

Typologies typically conclude with the type preferred by the scholar who produced the typology, and this typology is no different: I find the transformational type to be most faithful to the Christian calling. I readily acknowledge that the compartmentalizing approach to faith adopted by the organizations in my faith-based humanitarian category can be

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The difference faith makes

Ray Vander Zaag is Associate Professor of International Development Studies at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB.

Local church partnerships in humanitarian assistance

One question I am asked by MCC supporters is: “When there is a disaster, how does MCC decide who receives relief and who doesn’t?” This article attempts to answer that question by exploring the opportunities and challenges of working with local church partners when responding to humanitarian crises and disasters. In particular, this short piece explores the challenges in targeting, meeting minimum humanitarian standards and the potential for peacebuilding through humanitarian assistance.

At this year’s World Humanitarian Summit international humanitarian actors committed to channel more resources into partnerships with local humanitarian actors. That commitment reflects MCC’s primary approach for the last few decades: executing humanitarian activities almost entirely through local partners in recognition of their unique access and capacity to respond appropriately to people affected in their communities. MCC partners with a variety of local civil society organizations such as churches, denominational entities, faith-based organizations and community-based organizations.

In particular, MCC is committed to supporting local Anabaptist churches in responding to disaster. For example, this year MCC is working with the Brethren in Christ Church in responding to drought and acute hunger in Zimbabwe and Honduras and to flooding in Nepal. In Colombia and Ecuador, MCC works with local Mennonite organizations and churches to meet the needs of people displaced by conflict. And in eastern Congo and India, MCC works with Christian ecumenical organizations where local Anabaptist churches are members.

One of the challenges in working with local churches is how best to target limited resources. Church leaders in communities affected by disaster and conflict often feel they should respond first to those in the family of faith. MCC was born in response to the call to Mennonites in Canada and the U.S. from fellow Mennonites in the Soviet Union to provide urgent food assistance, agricultural equipment and ultimately refugee resettlement assistance in Canada. Likewise, MCC’s current church partners are moved to assist those affected in their faith communities because they have direct relationships to church members and know their specific needs.

At times, this desire stands in tension with humanitarian principles requiring humanitarian actors to be impartial—that is, the principle that assistance should be provided based on need and vulnerability, without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, race, ability or religious identity or affiliation. So while church partners may have the easiest access to people in their own congregations, they should also seek to support

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The difference faith makes

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Mobilizing local faith communities to improve health outcomes

Churches have long functioned as leading actors in healthcare provision. Today, faith-based organizations (FBOs) have a high profile within the changing healthcare landscape, both in the United States and beyond. This article assesses FBO roles in healthcare and the opportunities for FBOs to improve health outcomes for the most vulnerable. Not only do FBOs draw upon healthcare practitioners motivated by religious conviction to care for the sick, their connections with congregations and other local faith communities provide them greater access to economically and socially marginalized communities than government or for-profit health providers often have, positioning them to positively influence healthcare outcomes in those communities.

Different factors impel individuals and groups to care for the sick and vulnerable. Historians contend that many early healthcare institutions, in contrast to profit-driven systems, were motivated by faith commitments that mandated followers to care for the poor and heal the sick (Risse, 1999). The care provided in these early hospitals prompted the Roman
emperor Julian to remark: “Now we can see what it is that makes these Christians such a powerful enemy of our gods. It is brotherly love which they manifest toward the sick and poor.”

In many countries, healthcare over the past 40 years has shifted from a social service for the most vulnerable to a trillion dollar, profit-driven industry. Amidst this shift, however, faith-based health services have continued to provide an important gateway of care for economically and socially marginalized communities around the world. In many developing countries, faith-based health services provide up to 70% of healthcare to the most vulnerable (WHO, 2007).

Core values that drive Christian FBOs are compassion and love for one’s fellow human beings created in God’s image, human beings in whom Christ is encountered (Matthew 25). These values shape an understanding of discipleship as including “consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it” (Neufeldt, 2011). These motivations for Christian health services have not necessarily changed over the years. However, the complexities for FBOs in providing access to care have increased dramatically as they not only navigate relationships with the public healthcare sector (government-run hospitals, clinics and more), but also face the rapid growth of the for-profit healthcare industry.

One response of healthcare FBOs has been to undertake more collaborations with the public healthcare sector, collaborations that build on the distinctive strengths of both partners. The public healthcare sector has financial, material and political resources that are critical to the development and implementation of health services, especially to marginalized communities. Likewise, the faith-based sector has a reputation for successfully mobilizing communities to action by leveraging their engagement and trust. As churches and FBOs collaborate with the public sector, there is an increased possibility for success. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the Congolese government partners with faith-based hospitals (many of them initially founded by foreign mission agencies and then later turned over to the control of Congolese churches) to implement national health priorities and extend the state’s ability to provide healthcare to isolated communities: Congolese Mennonite hospitals, with support from MCC, have been part of such efforts. Public healthcare institutions and the faith-based healthcare sector need one another and increasingly recognize the wisdom in collaboration.

One method of improving health outcomes at the community level is through the implementation of care groups. The care group approach is a community-based strategy for promoting behavior change by engaging local health educators. Groups are made up of ten to 15 volunteers who regularly meet together with FBO staff for training and supervision. Care groups create a multiplying effect to equitably reach targeted households with activities aimed at promoting specific health behaviors (such as getting one’s children vaccinated and adoption of breastfeeding). The community-based volunteers who are central to the care group model are enmeshed in the lives of target communities and are thus well positioned to catalyze and reinforce the creation of new community health norms.

Not only do faith-based organizations draw upon healthcare practitioners motivated by religious conviction to care for the sick, their connections with congregations and other local faith communities provide them greater access to economically and socially marginalized communities than government or for-profit health providers often have, positioning them to positively influence healthcare outcomes in those communities.”
Churches and other local faith communities are typically key sources of volunteers for the care group model. Relationships fostered among care group volunteers and their neighbors in targeted communities are activated through the care group model to create more durable change in health behaviors. A review assessing the effectiveness of community-based interventions using care groups to promote maternal and child health and nutrition has shown the benefits of such approaches when it comes to reducing maternal illness, stillbirths and newborn deaths (Lassi, 2010). These positive impacts can be traced to changes in household behaviors and practices, such as improved tetanus immunization rates, use of clean birth kits, facility births, early initiation of breastfeeding and seeking care for newborn illnesses.

Through the new Luann Martin Legacy Fund initiative in eastern Africa, MCC is partnering with local Anabaptist groups and other faith-based organizations who are adopting the care group model to promote maternal and child health and nutrition. Projects in this initiative will mobilize volunteers in local faith communities to participate in care groups resourced by FBOs that promote new health behaviors among pregnant women and mothers of newborns and young children. FBOs participating in this initiative will give particular attention to how the volunteer-based care group health promotion activities intersect and collaborate with governmental health departments so that care group efforts help meet national maternal and child health and nutrition goals.

The effort to build healthy communities around the world, especially for vulnerable groups and those in crisis, will require the collaborative efforts of the faith-based and public healthcare sectors. Leveraging the trust and reach of churches and faith communities is an essential element in the ongoing efforts to increase positive health outcomes for economically and socially marginalized communities.

Beth Good is MCC health coordinator and lives in eastern Congo.

**Conservation agriculture and religious motivation**

Farmers in every region of the world are adapting to a changing climate. In Africa in particular rainfall is becoming increasingly unreliable, forcing farmers to seek out new ways to conserve precious soil moisture for food production. A growing number of MCC partner organizations in sub-Saharan Africa are promoting a style of farming called conservation agriculture (CA). MCC works with a number of church-based organizations, including the Mennonite church in Tanzania and the Brethren in Christ Church in Honduras, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to promote CA. This article examines the promotion of CA through “Farming God’s Way” and assesses how that framing impacts the adoption of new agricultural techniques.

CA has three main principles: minimal soil disturbance (no plowing), ground cover (mulch) and crop rotation. For many farmers, these principles have contributed to greatly improved yields, even during very dry growing seasons. The no plowing and mulch principles can have significant positive impacts on soil moisture levels, but they are also countercultural for most farmers. Farmers in most communities where MCC’s partners work have for generations tilled and cleared land (with clearing often done by burning plant material) in preparation for seeding.
These culturally entrenched practices go back generations and die hard. Asking a farmer not to till before seeding is something like telling city homeowners not to cut their lawn. “That’s not the way we do things around here. What would the neighbors think?”

So even as farmers actively look for new techniques to respond to drier conditions, convincing them to try CA with its counter-cultural elements has proven challenging. To overcome this cultural barrier, some organizations bring biblical and spiritual principles into their conversations about CA with farmers, integrating biblical ethics with scientifically sound agriculture practices in order to connect with and influence farmers more effectively. These organizations seek to persuade farmers that CA is akin to farming God’s way. In fact, a growing movement that started in Zimbabwe actually calls itself Farming God’s Way. For its proponents, Farming God’s Way is not a farming model *per se*, but rather a perspective from which to present, promote and understand CA.

Mulch, for example, in standard CA parlance is simply referred to as mulch. Mulch is plant material that covers the soil to conserve moisture, suppress weeds and foster plant growth. Farming God’s way, however, describes mulch as “God’s blanket”. Farming God’s Way promoters explain “God’s blanket” to farmers thus: If one observes the natural, God-created world, one rarely sees soil not covered with some sort of plant material. God’s intention is thus for soil to be covered with plant material, even in human cropping systems: applying “God’s blanket” participates in God’s creative and sustaining action while protecting the soil for future generations. Suddenly, with this explanation, once skeptical farmers are now more convinced that mulching and CA as a whole are worth a try. MCC partners who present CA as farming God’s way report that it smooths the road for change in many communities. This approach apparently works equally well for Muslim and Christian farmers alike. In fact, even non-religious farmers do not seem to be turned off by the argument. Furthermore, framing CA using “farming God’s way” language provides better community entry, using existing community structures such as churches and church youth groups.

Organizations that promote CA as farming God’s way are not trying to pull the wool over farmers’ eyes with talk about God and the Bible: they are sincere in their belief that CA mimics the natural world more closely than conventional farming and is therefore closer to God’s intended way of farming. However, farming God’s way proponents also realize that talk about God only goes so far. To be sure, CA often leads to dramatic increases in yield. In fact, recent reports suggest average yield increases of over 100% for first-time CA farmers. Increased yield obviously offers extra motivation for farmers, regardless of their desire to be good stewards of God’s creation. But along with entrenched notions of how to farm properly, the extra work required by mulching presents a real barrier for many farmers. In some communities, farmer adoption levels have not been as strong as expected, mostly due to the perceived increase in labor requirements, particularly in the first year of using CA approaches. But farmers tend to be innovators. Some farmers have come up with alternatives to mulching that serve the same purpose, like growing beans along with corn (intercropping). The beans cover most of the bare ground around the corn, acting as a sort of living mulch. The extra bean harvest makes the additional work worthwhile.

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While farmers prove time and again to be innovators, organizations promoting farming God’s way have not always encouraged this innovation, holding to an overly dogmatic or narrow understanding of what it means to farm God’s way. Yet lived reality challenges such dogmatism, and proponents of farming God’s way have begun to learn that diversity is also a part of God’s created order. Most MCC partner organizations now encourage farmers to embrace the three CA principles in general and then adapt them to their own particular farming circumstances.

MCC’s partners hope to convince more than 20,000 African farmers to try CA farming within the next few years. One of the challenges will be to present CA not only as God’s way, but also as a way toward a more sustainable and food-secure future for farmers. One might argue that these two things are mutually inclusive, but farmers rightfully require evidence of CA’s effectiveness, given that their families’ livelihoods are at stake. A current initiative funded by the Canadian government in eastern Africa and implemented by MCC and its partners seeks to gather better information about crop yield and other food security metrics in order to provide a more complete picture of how CA methods improve the lives of farmers and their families.

Some MCC partner organizations that promote CA avoid framing arguments for CA in religious terms, choosing to rely solely on agronomic arguments. Most organizations, however, choose a balance between God and yield, making the case that CA practices mimic the created order while also demonstrating CA’s practical benefits. MCC does not mandate a specific approach to promoting CA, opting instead to listen and learn from its partner organizations about what works best. For now, however, the initial evidence seems to support the hypothesis that framing CA in religious terms fosters adoption of CA practices.

Vurayayi Pugeni and Dan Wiens are disaster response and food security coordinators, respectively, for MCC.

**Religion and reconciliation in post-conflict northern Uganda**

It is a day I will never forget. Six members of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) had surrendered and returned home after years of fighting a bloody war against the government of Uganda. The crowd gathered to witness the homecoming consisted of those who themselves had endured horrific massacres, mutilations, mass displacement and the abduction of their loved ones, including upwards of 30,000 children forced into the rebel ranks. I didn’t know what to expect as survivors and perpetrators came face to face for the first time. Would the crowd demand their arrest? Would some seek revenge?

What happened next is not what I had expected. As the former rebels moved into the clearing of the compound where the crowd of survivors had gathered, they one by one stepped on a raw egg that had been meticulously laid on the path along with two types of branches by the traditional leaders. Known as *nynyo tong gweno*, this act signified a desire to begin the process of reconciliation, symbolizing the perpetrators’ acknowledgement of wrongdoing and their desire to be a part of the community again. Noise erupted from the crowd, but instead of the sound of insults and jeering, it was the sound of cheers and jubilation. Shortly
afterwards, the Catholic Archbishop of northern Uganda, John Baptist Odama, knelt down in front of the returnees, stating, “If in any way my contribution [to ending the war] was not sufficient or enough to make you better, please forgive me.” The moment was powerful and communicated collective responsibility, acceptance, hope and a desire to move forward together to achieve sustainable reconciliation and peace.

Religious leaders in Northern Uganda have been active in promoting peace and reconciliation throughout the region. Beginning with an idea to come together and pray, the religious leaders recognized they would have a greater impact working together rather than separately. Out of these prayer meetings the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), consisting of top clerics from the Anglican, Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox and Pentecostal faiths, was born. Guided by values and teachings that its participants share in common, ARLPI seeks to foster sustainable peace and reconciliation by transforming conflict using the path of nonviolence. As the Catholic Archbishop Odama states, “The world has torn us apart; it is our job to bring it together.”

With many based at the grassroots level, Ugandan religious leaders have been well placed to provide constant spiritual support and encouragement to those enduring through hardship. Religious leaders have organized activities such as building monuments to remember those killed in the conflict and annual peace prayers at massacre sites throughout the region. Many survivors of the conflict have told me that religiously-based messages have provided a significant source of comfort to communities that have lived through ongoing conflict. One individual shared how the biblical story of Job narrated by a religious leader during a peace prayer event resonated with her personal experience and helped to provide a sense of hope that her plight was temporary. She insisted that “It’s only the word from the Bible that can console people. . . . You will find that this type of suffering did not only start with me. Like for Ayubu [Job], all his family died so Ayubu was left with nothing and again God brought to him a lot of pain . . . but still Ayubu survived.” Reflecting on the unprecedented brutality and large scale of the violence that had torn through northern Uganda, one person with whom I spoke observed that “such kind of death would not be managed emotionally by anyone if there were no prayers.”

Promoting theology that insists that “we are all children of God,” religious leaders have also used peace prayers to provide a non-adversarial and supportive forum where both survivors and former rebels have an opportunity to give their testimonies and feel safeguarded by the presence of religious and other leaders well-known for promoting forgiveness and reconciliation. Former rebels heard stories of how the war had affected the survivors and survivors were able to hear directly from individuals once deemed as enemies to learn about how many of them were abducted and forced to fight and about the hardships they endured just to try and stay alive with the hope they would one day return home to their families. This sharing of stories has not only helped to provide a better understanding of the complex nature of the conflict, but also helped to highlight the blurred lines between victim and perpetrator, fostering the re-humanization of those who were once solely viewed as the enemy.

However, not all have been supportive of the role and influence that religious leaders have had in promoting peace and reconciliation. Critics argue that survivors are pressured by religious leaders to forgive,

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which promotes impunity and does not adequately address the unique needs of survivors. Some critics express the concern that the Christian understanding of reconciliation carries strong moral obligations, implying that in order to have a relationship with God, one must forgive one’s enemies. This concern is compounded by the fact that the Acholi word for amnesty, a process vigorously promoted by the religious leaders in order to encourage the surrender of the rebels, is *kica*, which also means forgiveness.

Others argue that the widespread use of religious rhetoric in promoting reconciliation may only help to achieve non-violent coexistence, but not reconciliation. For example, in post-conflict Sierra Leone, Lisa Skoval perceived the rhetoric surrounding Christian reconciliation to be “formulaic.” She found that while people verbally stated they had forgiven and reconciled with their perpetrators, community members remained “fearful, careful, and diffident in their dealings with former combatants” (quoted in Govier, 2006).

Such critiques certainly name valid concerns. For their part, ARLPI recognizes that ceremonies of reconciliation like the one described at the beginning of this article are only the starting point. Sustainable reconciliation is a long-term process, providing opportunities for both victims and perpetrators in northern Ugandan communities to work side-by-side, rebuilding trust, restoring interdependence and moving towards a shared future together.

Wade Snowdon coordinates MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program.

Interfaith bridge-building and violence aversion in Chad

In the late 1970s, Chad entered a civil war for political power between geographically- and culturally-based groups. Even though the civil war pitted Christians against Muslims, religion was not a major motivating factor for militants. Over the past decade MCC has partnered with the department of Ethics, Peace and Justice (EPJ), an operative branch of the Protestant churches in Chad, to promote conflict transformation in interfaith settings. This article examines the religious context and history of Chad and discusses how EPJ draws upon religion as a resource for proactive peacebuilding and violence aversion.

In terms of religious affiliation, Chad’s population is divided among Muslims (55%), Catholics (20%) and Protestants (15%), with the remainder practicing forms of African traditional religion. Religious identity is tightly intertwined with tribal and ethnic affiliation for geographic reasons. Islam entered northern Chad with Arab traders in the twelfth century, while western missionaries arrived from the south during the twentieth century. Both religions are blended with rituals and beliefs that predate the arrival of Abrahamic faiths in Chad.

Like other colonial administrations, France’s colonial regime exploited and exacerbated ethnic and religious divides. Chadians in the overwhelmingly Muslim north routinely resisted the imposition by the colonial authorities of a French education system. The colonial regime, in turn, disproportionately appointed people from the predominantly Christian south to lead various...
government departments. Following independence in 1960, it was therefore southerners who occupied the majority of civil service positions. The country’s first president, N’Garta Tombalbaye (a Christian southerner), appointed a majority of Muslims (65%) to his first cabinet. Originally named François, Tombalbaye established a tyrannical one-party system that brutally promoted a top-down cultural revolution that pushed for movement away from Christian and Muslim influences towards a recovery of Chadian traditions. Following a decade of armed rebellions, Tombalbaye was assassinated in 1975, plunging the country into an armed power struggle between the predominantly Muslim north and predominantly Christian south that continued into the 1990s. The religious differences between these two regional populations led adherents to vilify the religion of the other. Religion remains a dividing factor in population, with the government perceived as being dominated by Muslim ethnic groups.

Within this post-civil war context, EPJ has worked to strengthen relationships across religious divides as part of peacebuilding and violence prevention efforts across the country. Over the past decade EPJ has earned a reputation as a leading organization of interfaith dialogue. Initially EPJ addressed conflicts within the church, but in 2008 expanded its violence aversion efforts by hosting an interfaith conflict transformation workshop for 30 Muslim and Christian leaders. This workshop became an annual event in N’Djamena, running through 2011. In 2012 EPJ stretched these interfaith peacebuilding efforts beyond the capital to host a workshop in Mongo. Momentum grew, with EPJ initiating workshops specifically targeting women and youth. Since 2013, EPJ has organized 29 week-long workshops for over 1100 participants in 15 different locations.

While current violent conflicts in Chad today flow from multiple sources (such as competition over resources and political power), participants in these conflicts routinely frame the conflicts in religious terms, making interfaith peacebuilding efforts that draw on religion as a source of conflict transformation a vital necessity. EPJ’s workshops highlight common ground between faiths and offer alternatives to violence. Each workshop is attended by local representatives who are selected by the national religious bodies of each faith. EPJ strives to have 40% of workshop participants be Muslim, along with 30% each for Protestants and Catholics, although these percentages vary.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants are usually quiet, tense and polite, sitting with their co-religionists. Over the course of the workshop participants hear and discuss stories from sacred texts that describe how both Jesus and Muhammad taught their followers to do good to their enemies.

EPJ workshops center on a relatively set course of seminars led by EPJ staff that promote strong interfaith relations, present nonviolent conflict management strategies and teach mediation techniques. EPJ consistently invites MCC staff to contribute to the overview of the biblical basis for peace. EPJ also invites leaders from Muslim and Catholic institutions to give seminars on how their respective faiths understand peace. Catholic participants draw on Catholicism’s rich tradition of social justice teaching, while Muslim scholars highlight passages from the Qur’an and stories from the hadith (traditions about the prophet Muhammad) that exemplify peacebuilding in action. The workshop leaves considerable time for group discussion, encouraging thoughtful engagement with presenters and among participants.
participants. By the end of the workshop, participants typically report transformed perspectives. For example, after a workshop in the eastern city of Am Timan, one of the Muslim participants, Imam Ibrahim Abdoulaye, stated: “We have never heard teaching like this before; it needs to continue. We want to help.”

EPJ routinely faces two significant hurdles as it works to break down barriers between participants. First, Muslim and Christian participants need to hear that their own faith holds deep and rich peace teachings. Both Christian and Muslim sacred texts contain plenty of examples of violence seemingly portrayed in positive terms, from the conquest narratives of the Old Testament and literalist interpretations of Revelation, to violence carried out by the nascent Muslim umma (community) in Medina, the conquest of Mecca and certain hadith about Muhammad. Participants often arrive at the workshop convinced that their sacred texts justify violence. EPJ staff and the invited speakers complicate this understanding by lifting up examples from Muslim and Christian scriptures that reflect a commitment to peacebuilding, with a specific emphasis on Jesus’ life and teachings (especially the Sermon on the Mount) and Muhammad’s respect for both Jewish and Christian communities as well as his teachings on conflict resolution.

The second obstacle is to dispel notions of persecution that Christians and Muslims hold concerning one another. Both Muslim and Christian participants will point to the other with accusatory claims, citing current or historical outrages, such as Boko Haram’s massacres or the history of Africa’s colonization by western powers such as France. Citing such histories and present realities, Christian and Muslim participants can retreat into defensive postures that justify violence. EPJ works with participants to overcome such defensiveness and to focus on past histories of cooperation and coexistence and on possibilities for the future.

EPJ’s interfaith peacebuilding efforts have gathered momentum since 2013, with its conflict transformation workshops increasingly in demand and gaining support from Chadian leaders. Challenges certainly remain, including establishing better mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the longer-term impact of the workshops on communities where the workshops are held. Yet EPJ’s experience has already clearly demonstrated that participants emerge from the interfaith peacebuilding workshops with an increased desire and willingness to collaborate across religious lines, which is no small feat in a context in which appeals to religion too often stoke rather than transform conflict.

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Creating ecumenical ties through food sovereignty

In the rural village of Llano Alto in the Chiapas region of southern Mexico, a group of gardeners meets regularly to share experiences in cultivating organic kitchen gardens that produce various kinds of herbs and vegetables for domestic consumption. Supported by the Institute for Intercultural Studies and Research (INESIN, an MCC partner organization for which I work), these gardeners come from families that have been working the land for centuries, with most dedicating themselves exclusively to growing beans and corn, the major staples of the local diet. The idea of growing an organic vegetable and herb garden in one’s backyard is a fairly novel idea. When families have extra cash on hand, they might buy these “extras” to supplement their staple diet—otherwise, they do without. The INESIN initiative aims to foster greater food sovereignty in Llano Alto, supporting farmers in this rural community to provide balanced diets for their families. The initiative has proven successful: the kitchen gardens have attracted the attention of other farmers, leading to an expansion of the group from nine to 19 gardeners. At INESIN we view this expansion positively, yet we also know that expansion could introduce delicate dynamics into the life of the group, as now the gardeners no longer share the same religious affiliation.

INESIN began facilitating the gardeners’ group through a contact at the Church of the Nazarene in Llano Alto. Although INESIN explained upfront to the gardeners that neither INESIN nor the gardeners’ group itself is a program of the church, for the last eight months the majority of the group’s meetings have been held at or around the church. INESIN has found that churches are often good starting places for gardeners’ groups because the church space creates a sense of trust; once a gardeners’ group is formed and operational, however, INESIN encourages it to move outward into the broader community. At a recent meeting with the Llano Alto group, my coworker Marielena delicately brings up the possibility of expanding beyond the church. “Now that the gardens are growing and we have new members, it’s a good time to begin meeting at each other’s houses,” she suggests. A few faces of the newcomers look relieved. One man explains, “Since we are not part of this church, we feel uncomfortable meeting here, like we’re disrespecting the space by invading it.” Two women from the original group disagree. “This is where we’ve always met. We don’t have the space to host people in our houses anyway.”

The discussion goes on, with the group reaching an agreement that future meetings will be hosted at the homes of group members who volunteer. But as in the case of many conflicts, what makes this particular conflict interesting lies not so much in what is being said, but rather beneath the surface of this conversation about the spaces of gardens, houses and churches.

There have long been tensions over both politics and religion in Chiapas, but the effects of the 1994 Zapatista uprising have deeply intertwined the two. Although the uprising was not clearly a movement about religion, the Zapatista movement benefitted from the energy of a socially active Catholic parish influenced by liberation theology. At the same time, a paramilitary organization in the region drew upon the resentment of the evangelical church feeling like a persecuted underdog. Political and
religious tensions at times erupted into violence, most glaringly in the massacre of 45 indigenous pacifist Zapatistas in the community of Acteal in 1997.

These political and religious tensions have persisted among people of different faiths in Chiapas. Several peace organizations have developed over the past 20 years, many through the support of the late Catholic bishop Samuel Ruiz, a significant actor in the peace process during and after the uprising. When Ruiz and others dreamed about what INESIN would look like, he commissioned a group of people to “get Catholics and Protestants together to do something. Anything. But don’t talk about religion or differences. Not at first. Just get them together and talking.”

The social landscape in Chiapas has witnessed many changes over the past two decades. In the case of the community in Llano Alto, social conflicts simmer among evangelical churches, rather than between Catholics and evangelicals (Catholics have their own internal struggles in other communities). Yet Ruiz’s original commission to INESIN applies here as well, with INESIN looking to foster ecumenical relationships at the community level through collaborative initiatives around common interests.

In the case of Llano Alto, INESIN’s collaborative initiative focuses on the common interest of food sovereignty. INESIN staff give workshops on organic fertilizers and seed saving (and sharing); gardeners in the project tend each other’s plots and make small talk. When political and religious tensions arise at the community or state level, the members of the group have lived experience with “the other” that is broader and more gracious than mass media portray.

A colleague in the region once told me about a mediation session she facilitated between Protestants and Catholics. At the end of the session the two groups began talking in their native language of Tsotsil, an indigenous language commonly spoken in the highlands of Chiapas. My colleague asked someone to translate for her, as she felt so good about the progress that had been made and wanted to know where the conversation was leading. As it turns out, the two groups were talking about beans, the one thing they felt they might be able to talk about together, perhaps one of the only things they felt they had in common. This story reflects INESIN’s broader experience, in Llano Alto and elsewhere, that engaging in something so simple and complex as growing our own food is intimately connected with the simple and complex task of living peacefully together.

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