Accommodating Religious Identity in Youth Peacebuilding Programs

Search for Common Ground
About Search for Common Ground

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has been working since 1982 to transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving. We use a multi-faceted approach, working with local partners in government and civil society and employing media initiatives, to find culturally-appropriate means to strengthen societies’ capacities to handle conflicts constructively: to understand differences and act on commonalities.

Using innovative tools and working at different levels of society in 30 countries, we engage in pragmatic long-term processes of conflict transformation. Our methods consist of mediation and facilitation, training, community organizing, sports, theater, and media production including radio, TV, film, and print.

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Purpose of the Document

This toolkit is intended to address the accommodation of religious beliefs in youth programming in three distinct ways: by identifying positive outcomes and challenges from programs and case studies in the field of religious peacebuilding among youth; by communicating gender complexities within programming and distilling best practices to create a space for full engagement of girls and boys within their communities; and by sharing program experiences from around the globe that will be helpful for program development. SFCG staff from various regions and backgrounds provided their insights about respecting, accommodating, and engaging young people’s religious beliefs into inter-, intra-, and non-religious programming.
Introduction
In situations of violent conflict, young people are generally viewed as either victims or perpetrators. As victims, the young are viewed as lacking agency and in need of protection; as perpetrators, they may be held accountable for committing violence and undermining stability. This said, most young people around the world are active peacebuilders. Search for Common Ground (SFCG) works to empower children and youth to be true agents of conflict transformation in their communities. Investment in young men and women has proven to yield positive returns, both with regard to conflict prevention and to building sustainable peace.

Search for Common Ground works with young people across a wide spectrum of religious beliefs. In some contexts, religion is a key element of conflict and/or peacebuilding. Even when religion is not a key element of a conflict, it plays an important role in the lives of many young people who participate in SFCG programs.

This toolkit presents a thematic overview of how SFCG youth programs across the globe accommodate religious belief. We hope that the sharing of insights across programs will contribute to SFCG efforts to continuously improve practice in this area.

The Relevance of Religion in Peacebuilding
According to the Pew Research Center, religious faith is growing. Over the next 35 years, religious adherents will make up a growing percentage of the global population, while the share of religiously unaffiliated people will decrease.1

Continued changes in birth rates and life expectancies, migration patterns, and people switching faiths will dramatically change traditional religious demographics in many regions of the world.2

With religion’s deep claims on individual and community identity, beliefs, and actions, religion can play either a real or perceived role in violent conflict—but experience shows religion can play an equally important role in creating peace.3

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Key Terms

Youth
Who are “youth”? Generally, youth are defined as individuals who are no longer considered children, but have not yet reached the status of adulthood. According to the United Nations, “youth” is a category of people between the ages of 15 and 24.\(^4\) However, concepts of youth vary across cultures. In some cases, youth begins when an individual leaves compulsory education and ends when that individual finds employment. In other cases, youth ends at marriage or childbirth. A culturally-specific understanding of youth is helpful when designing and implementing programs targeting this demographic.

Appreciative Inquiry
Appreciative Inquiry (AI) “involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential.” “It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.”\(^5\)

Inter-religious
Inter-religious means “between two or more different religions.”

Intra-religious
Intra-religious means “within one religion.”

Non-religious
Non-religious, for the purposes of this document, means “not explicitly religious.” Although programs may be non-religious, they often benefit from the consideration of religious issues.

Pesantren
Pesantren are private Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia.

\(^4\) United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
The Importance of Religious Sensitivity in Programs for Youth in Conflict

Human differences are found everywhere we look. These range from more easily identifiable physical features such as hair and eye color to more abstract and deeply held convictions on politics and religion. We cannot fully know or comprehend why and how people are the way they are, but we can attempt to be as understanding as possible when presented with actions, ideas, and beliefs different from our own. When it comes to faith, information on the beliefs and practices of many world religions is widely available. Using this knowledge, we can tailor programs and activities to create safe space for all those who wish to participate.

Privilege and Oppression
Throughout the world, identity is a made up of a combination of factors that include race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and gender. Oftentimes the majority group in a society assumes people share a similar identity. Existing rules and customs are seen as having little impact on minorities and are accepted without question. This can cause unintended harm to minority groups. When a majority group has control over a society, it is said to have privilege. Such privilege can cause minorities to suffer oppression.

Privilege and oppression exist in various contexts around the world, including in the domain of religion. Countries vary in the amount of power a majority has over minority groups. This ranges from a 99% majority (as with Islam in Saudi Arabia) to a 50/40 split (such as between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, with the remaining 10% local religions). While the most infamous example of religious oppression in history may be the Holocaust, lesser known examples of religious oppression occur today. Such examples include the repression of Muslim Rohingyas by the Burmese government, or requiring the removal of a Sikh’s turban during work.

Becoming familiar with the role of privilege and oppression in our own countries allows us to be sensitive toward participants and ensure everyone is included and comfortable. In this way, we are able work toward a more positive peacebuilding environment. When designing program activities for young people, consider the structures, cultures, and relationships of privilege and oppression in your context. Does the program need adaptations to make it equitable and accessible to youth with different religious

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8 British Broadcasting Corporation (2014).
identities? How might privilege and oppression unintentionally manifest and cause conflict in programming?

At times, programs may only involve one religious group, or sometimes they may include many. These differences are more apparent in inter-religious contexts, but even when working with one group, beliefs and experiences will differ from person to person. With the knowledge of privilege and oppression in hand and keeping in mind that everyone’s contexts and experiences are different, let us move toward more specific discussions about inter-religious (between groups), intra-religious (within one group), and non-religious programming.

**Inter-Religious Peacebuilding**

People often perceive religious conflict to occur between two or more different religions. Longstanding tensions in Israel, Nigeria, and the former Yugoslavia are widely-known examples of such conflict. Inter-religious peacebuilding seeks to address the divisions that occur between these religions. Divisions can develop over time for a multitude of reasons, including fundamental disagreements over theology, disputes over holy sites and religious figures, and more. Sometimes the roots of inter-religious conflict are indeed over legitimate religious divides, but sometimes religion becomes a lens through which conflicts are viewed or perpetuated; for example, when a political figure uses their community to garner support over an issue. This can sometimes result in oppression of other religious communities. Because differences are often used to enhance divides between various faith traditions, in peacebuilding it can be useful to instead focus on shared values and celebrate the uniqueness of different religions.

**Approaches to Inter-Religious Youth Peacebuilding Programming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Golden Rule: Treat others the way you would like to be treated.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faiths and ideologies that incorporate some form of the Golden Rule:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahá’í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Humanism, Islam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Many programs focus on identifying similarities between religions, such as the Golden Rule, which is found in at least 14 major religions around the globe. The Golden Rule indicates that you should treat other people the way you would like to be treated. By teaching the Golden Rule to youth, they may develop an understanding of empathy, compassion, love, and support for their neighbors. This approach can be used for initial interfaith understanding. When different groups identify shared wants and needs, they are able to appreciate that maybe they are not so different after all. The recognition of similarities humanizes the “other” by dismantling the barrier between “us” and “them.” Participants can then begin to see each other as brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, and friends working toward the same basic goals. These goals may be as simple as helping provide for their families or as complex as graduating from university. No matter what the similarities are, participants should be able to find common ground and come together in the promotion of peace in their communities.

**United Religions Initiative’s Young Leaders**
Leadership programs and service learning are other ways organizations help facilitate interfaith cooperation and dialogue among youth. One example is the Appreciative Inquiry dialogue process in United Religions Initiative’s (URI) Young Leaders Program, which connects participants and allows them to develop insights into individual experiences and belief systems. In this activity, youth of various identities come together to discuss personal experiences with inner peace and the effect it has had on their lives; next, groups identify peace leaders from their faiths, how they served as inspirations, and for what reasons.\(^{10}\)

URI also uses a hybrid method to bring intra-religious peers together to discuss their faith and its teachings, with an emphasis on hospitality and inclusion (universal values in most major religions). After presentations on individual faiths to the broader event participants, facilitators lead an inter-faith dialogue focused on shared challenges and how to increase cooperation and understanding.\(^{11}\)

**Strengths of Inter-Religious Peacebuilding with Youth**
- By creating a space for open dialogue and reflection, inter-religious peacebuilding can build tolerance and understanding among youth participants.
- Religious identity—including holy texts, sites, and figures—can be a powerful resource when working with youth in peacebuilding. Religious identity can be

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\(^{10}\) United Religions Initiative, *URI young leaders program: Southeast Asia and the Pacific: Appreciative Inquiry.*
\(^{11}\) Ibid.
engaged to enrich dialogue among participants and to further examine beliefs about the self, others, and spirituality as a whole.

**Challenges of Inter-Religious Peacebuilding with Youth**

- Participant groups have the potential to be homogenous, often coming from the same school or religious affiliation. This makes building relationships across religious difficult.

- Some participants come with preconceived views about other religions and their followers, and in some instances there may not be enough time for the program to delve deeply into working through these prejudices.

- Some participants may have a fear of conversion. Youth, families, and communities in divided societies may view religious peacebuilding as religious proselytization instead of emphasizing similarities or understanding and celebrating differences.

**Inter-Religious Case Study in CAR: Working Together for Education**

At SFCG Central African Republic (CAR), the office in the capital Bangui has worked with youth to create a comedy played by five people, including two Christians, two Muslims, and one neutral staff member (of these five, two participants are girls). The purpose of the skit is to advocate for the return of Muslim students to schools and university. In December 2013, during the height of inter-communal conflict, schools were closed out of concern for staff and student safety. Almost a year later, in October 2014, classes resumed, but there were no Muslim students or teachers in school because they were afraid to return. They were not forbidden to come back to school, but most were staying in one area of Bangui. In some CAR cities, no Muslims remain because they have completely fled to neighboring countries. In Bangui, many Muslims remain afraid to leave their neighborhood. Concerned that their friends were not attending school, Christian students reached out to SFCG, resulting in the launch of an initiative.

Search staff first met with Muslim students, then Christians to discuss coming together to advocate for safe returns. After both groups individually determined they were ready to talk, SFCG organized a group meeting. For five days in March 2015, 30 youth (15 Christians and 15 Muslims) participated in training on social cohesion and nonviolence, including rumor control and conflict management. The youth created action plans in which Muslims first talked with peers about returning. Then Christians spoke with peers about stopping the violence to allow their Muslim friends to return. Working together,
Muslim and Christian youth organized community-building events to advocate for Muslims' safe returns to school, to create confidence, and to eliminate fear.

Lessons Learned:
- Separating youth from different religions first and then bringing everyone together for a broader discussion helped to focus the dialogue.
- Allowing young people to take leadership roles and set their own priorities empowered participants to further this work.

“We have developed an educational program using the Universal Code as an impetus to look at the whole question of shared holy sites and seeing how we can advance mutual respect for the attachments that people hold for their holy sites.”
- SFCG Jerusalem

Inter-Religious Case Study in Jerusalem: Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites
Staff members in SFCG’s Jerusalem office have developed an experiential pilot program based on the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. The project is comprised of a series of workshops for youth from local schools (ages 16-18), pre-Army groups (18-year-olds about to serve in the Israeli military), and active soldiers. The curriculum is divided into three phases.

In the introductory phase, participants begin by taking a quiz to assess their knowledge of the three Abrahamic religions. Participants then look at photographs of different holy sites and pictures that are symbolic representations of various religious practices and beliefs (example: the Catholic rosary). The participants reflect on these pictures and identify one that pushes them away, draws them in, or makes them feel unsure and place one of three differently colored stickers next to the image. The students have an open discussion about the stickers and how they feel about certain religious sites and symbols. Then they repeat this activity with about 20-30 artifacts from different religions. Participants may choose an artifact that interests them. In one program, someone picked up a Qur’an and said that it makes them uncomfortable to know nothing about its contents when they live in a country surrounded by Muslims. These facilitated discussions help participants express their feelings and identify prejudices that may exist.

The second phase features a field trip to a shared holy site. Groups have visited Mount Zion just outside Jerusalem’s Old City, which is historically recognized as the Tomb of
King David and the room of the last supper that Jesus had before his arrest. The Tomb of King David was turned into a synagogue in the ninth century and adopted by very observant Jews for worship. The Tomb is on the ground floor of the building and the room of the last supper is above it. Many Jews believe that if Christians pray in the room of the last supper, then the room of the synagogue is an unsuitable place for Jewish prayer, resulting in tension and discomfort. Since there was a mosque at the location for five hundred years, it also remains an important place for Muslims. Participants discuss the attachments that religious groups have toward the site and can participate in a treasure hunt activity in which they must find information and interview other visitors to find out where they are from and how the site makes them feel. This helps youth understand the importance of the holy site and their own religious beliefs in nonthreatening ways.

In the final phase, participants develop their own code of conduct for holy sites and analyze how these sites can be places that are accommodating and respectful toward people of different religious beliefs. A follow-up session one week later assesses how much the participants absorbed, what they think, what they have learned, and what further reactions they have toward the experience.

**Lessons Learned:**

- Use the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites as a framework for examining the question of shared holy sites.
- To extend the benefits of the program beyond its immediate beneficiaries, recruit facilitators like tour guides who also interact with people outside the program.
- Create safe spaces for young people to discuss their biases and feelings about other religions without judgment
- Competition with groups that champion particular viewpoints by incentivizing free programs can make it difficult to recruit participants.
Intra-Religious Peacebuilding

In considering religious peacebuilding, intra-religious work is often overlooked. For many, the most prominent religious conflicts occur across religious divisions. What does intra-religious actually mean? In contrast to inter-religious programs that target relationships between different religions, intra-religious programs seek to address dynamics within a faith tradition, including sects, factions, denominations, splinter groups, or schools of thought within a religion.

Intra-religious dialogue brings together members from different branches of the same religion. An intra-religious Hindu dialogue may bring together Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Shakta participants to represent prominent traditions within the same faith. Intra-religious dialogue among Muslims may include Sunni, Shia, or Sufi participants—or include participants who identify with a specific school of Islamic interpretation or Sufi order. Dialogues among Christians have included Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant members. Bridgefolk—a movement that works to connect Roman Catholic and Mennonite Christians—has held regular dialogues for more than a decade, seeking to transform an estrangement that began 500 years ago.\footnote{The Bridgefolk Story (2015).}

The distinction between inter-religious and intra-religious is not always clear. Deep divisions can emerge between branches of the same faith just as they are found between different religions. Disputes can emerge over theological issues, religious practices and rituals, as well as institutional hierarchy and governance. Furthermore, cultural, economic, governance, and other social issues may become embedded within conflicts that also feature a religious component. The longstanding struggle in Northern Ireland—between the largely Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists—including elements of intra-religious conflict between Christian denominations along with a series of secular grievances held by both sides. In many cases, intra-religious peacebuilding programs can be designed to address tensions using frameworks similar to inter-religious peacebuilding.

**Approaches to Intra-Religious Youth Peacebuilding Programming**

Within more religiously homogenous contexts, adaptations of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) processes can help participants cut through negative messages to identify positive resources available within the broader religious community. In contrast with models focused on identifying and solving a problem, AI encourages participants to identify community assets and strengths that can be built upon, instead of emphasizing grievances. The goal is to help participants “operate from a clearer and stronger sense
of wealth and wisdom they have as a community.” These resources can include theological concepts linked to peace, cooperation, and coexistence or existing social infrastructure that can be leveraged to build healthier and more productive communities.

Other organizations approach intra-religious peacebuilding by identifying a potentially divisive issue and seeking to build understanding both inside and outside the religious community. For example, during a time of debate about wearing the Islamic headscarf, the Turkish Cultural Centre in Singapore began hosting a series of public talks and other events discussing the issue. Opinions within the Muslim community in Singapore were divided. The talks helped to clarify the issues at stake. Further dialogue among youth and university students attending the events helped to defuse tensions by increasing understanding among Muslims who took part in the discussions and with the community at large.

**Strengths of Intra-Religious Peacebuilding with Youth**

- Each faith includes teachings and practices that value peaceful coexistence. Identifying those religious texts, beliefs, and rituals can empower voices of peace.

- Intra-religious peacebuilding can reach large numbers of people by engaging local leaders who possess credibility and legitimacy within their communities.

- In divided societies with a shared religious tradition, intra-religious peacebuilding can help bridge other racial, ethnic, or other social divisions.

**Challenges of Intra-Religious Peacebuilding with Youth**

- Acknowledging and wrestling with differences within a faith can prompt distress among some participants. Establishing a safe space and shared expectations for managing strong emotions can help ease the process.

- Destructive conflict can establish deep roots of historical grievance and systemic injustice within faith traditions. At times, other approaches may be more appropriate starting points.

**Intra-Religious Case Study Indonesia**

In 2011, SFCG in Indonesia partnered with the Wahid Institute and Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat (P3M) to launch a two-year intra-religious program called “Countering and Preventing Radicalization in Indonesian Pesantren.”

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14 Esposito & Yilmaz (2010).
the face of increasing rates of violence committed in the name of religion, the program sought to counter voices of intolerance and extremism by empowering moderate religious voices within their communities.

The program featured two primary activities. First, SFCG partnered with ten pesantren—private Islamic boarding schools run by local religious leaders—to set up and run local radio station programs. Second, pesantren students received training in radio and video production in order to take part in a documentary competition featuring the themes of tolerance, coexistence, and cooperation.

After completion of the program, evaluations identified positive impacts on teachers and students within participating pesantren as well as members of their local communities. The program helped inspire participants to think critically about what their own religious traditions have to say about peaceful coexistence and provided the tools to share those insights through media broadcasts, documentary films, debates, community outreach, and other activities. The intra-religious approach to peacebuilding and de-radicalization helped to empower a moderate majority voice within Indonesian communities and create a culture of tolerance within participating pesantren.15

Lessons Learned:

- In regions susceptible to violent conflict, identify moderate religious voices and empower them to provide an authentic and credible alternative to violence.
- Incorporate a skills-building or training component to help motivate participation and contribute toward a program’s long-term sustainability.
- Before beginning activities in individual schools, assess whether teachers and students will have sufficient time to devote to the project.
- To maximize impact, begin outreach to teachers and administrators at targeted schools early in the design and planning process, engaging local partners and community leaders whenever possible.

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15 For more information on this project, see the evaluation report by Octavia & Wahyuni (2014).
Religious Considerations in Non-Religious Programs

Because religious identity is deeply ingrained in the value systems of youth and their communities, faith commitments are often blended with cultural practices and not clearly articulated. However, when a person or group perceives an outside threat, religion can suddenly become a particularly important aspect of identity. Due to the importance of religious identity in many societies, it is vital to keep these sensitive issues in mind, even within non-religious programs. For example, in non-religious programs, the religious worldview of the majority of participants might inform program norms. In such instances, participants from other religions may feel excluded or unwelcome. Many youth consider religion to be an important element of their identity. Although a program itself might be secular, individual youth might draw on their religious values, experiences, and worldviews to make themselves better peacebuilders. Therefore, understanding religious identity is vital to the creation of effective programming.

Approaches for Considering Religious Identity in Non-Religious Youth Peacebuilding Programming

The following questions can help us reflect on religious sensitivity within programming:

- What knowledge, attitudes, and behavior do our staff members have toward their own and other religions?

- Do the participants have appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and behavior toward the religious identities of their peers and other participants? If not, how can they develop them in the program?

- Do our staff and participants know what attitudes and practices may challenge others’ religious identities?

- Is the activity appropriate in the religious context? (e.g. field work, sleepovers, dress code, mixed genders, touching across genders)

- Is the timing appropriate? (e.g. prayer times, religious holidays)

- Have appropriate spaces and materials been arranged for all participants? (e.g. prayer room, cleansing instrument)

- Is the food acceptable for all participants? (e.g. kosher and/or halal)
Non-Religious Case Study: Nigeria Unity Prayer
Prayer is a crucial part of the day-to-day routine in many religious communities. SFCG in Nigeria experienced challenges with incorporating prayers in non-religious programs that included participants from multiple faiths. The team faced a dilemma when participants wanted to start the program with their own prayers. However, the team overcame the challenge by creating a “unity prayer” that allowed participants from each religion to contribute. In addition, staff scheduled regular prayer breaks to allow room for Muslim participants to pray at their designated times, others to pray and meditate as desired, and others to spend time getting acquainted with each other.

Strengths of Religious Sensitivity in Non-Religious Peacebuilding with Youth
- Religious sensitivity creates a safe and inclusive space for the participants to express their religious identities.
- In communities where religious identity heavily impacts day-to-day routines, religious sensitivity helps programs be more accommodating to participants.
- Religious sensitivity facilitates better communication among both staff and participants.

Challenges of Religious Sensitivity in Non-Religious Peacebuilding with Youth
- Programs might need to include additional trainings on religious sensitivity for both staff and the participants
- Sometimes it might be best to avoid explicitly addressing the religious differences among the participants, especially when the difference could create tension and division

Non-Religious Case Study: Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone Action Research Programs
In Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, SFCG staff created a program that empowered youth between the ages of 18 and 20 to conduct research on violence against children within their countries. The program incorporated equal numbers of young men and young women, and included both Muslim and Christian participants. The first phase began with training sessions that provided youth with research tools, data analysis skills, and cultural sensitivity training. As a part of this cultural sensitivity training, the participants engaged in an extensive discussion on religious differences. Afterward, youth entered communities to conduct interviews and gather data about violence against children and youth. Despite the heavy demands of time and energy and
logistical challenges surrounding research in areas affected by the Ebola crisis of 2014-2015, each country team succeeded in compiling reports that highlight their work.

While this program was not specifically focused on religion, youth researchers learned how to accommodate religious differences within their research teams. In each country team, Christian and Muslim youth worked together to conduct research and write reports. In Guinea and Sierra Leone, part of training and data collection took place during Ramadan. Without guidance from program staff, researchers organized themselves in ways that allowed Muslim participants to fast, pray, and eat when needed while remaining active in the program.

Lessons Learned:

● Successful training should empower participants to express their religious identity throughout the program.
● Since participants are the experts on their own contexts, they can actively contribute to the shaping of the program to ensure that the program is compatible with their religious identities.
Incorporating Gender Sensitivities in Religious Peacebuilding

Two Main Issues Surround Women in Religious Peacebuilding:
1. Men tend to dominate leadership positions, including those within formal religious institutions. As a result, women’s engagement in religious peacebuilding often goes unnoticed.

2. A woman’s right to control her own body is an issue across all religions and cultures, including the right “to consent to marriage; to accept, reject or request sex in marriage; to have freedom from both physical and sexual abuse inside and outside of marriage; to control her own childbirth; and to control her own reproduction.”

Women’s Participation in Religion-Focused Peacebuilding Is Crucial Because:
● Women’s faith groups tend to be deeply interconnected and frequently focus on promoting relationships among women.

● Scholars have found that women tend to be more religious than men in many societies. Research suggests that “women report a stronger personal faith, stronger commitment to orthodox beliefs, and more active participation in religious events and rituals.”

● Women from all religions report dealing with similar issues regarding families, the community, problems of men dominating women, sexual abuse, and domestic violence.

● Women tend to view “their peace work as a service to God, which keeps them motivated to continue, despite the challenges they face.”

● Women inspired by their faith may be more likely to reach out to religious communities as a resource or partners for peacebuilding work.

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17 Ibid. p. 23.
19 Ibid. p. 11.
20 Ibid. p. 13.
Due to their influence within the family’s religious life, women are able to shape religious interpretations and religious traditions in ways that are often overlooked.\textsuperscript{21}

**Engaging Men and Boys Is Important Because:**

- Empowerment of men with faith typically does not receive as much attention as other groups in religious peacebuilding programs.\textsuperscript{22}

- Since religious leaders tend to be male, it is crucial to gain their support and collaborate with them in order to encourage community-wide participation and acceptance of programs.

- Similarly to women, men are often bound by specific expectations and roles within society, which are commonly rooted in religious values. Getting men to join the conversation and talk about roles in society may help alleviate prejudices and create opportunities for every gender.

- In many traditionally religious cultures, men often have the final say in the day-to-day activities of mothers, wives, or daughters. Educating young men on issues relating to gender and religion can help them become advocates for women’s participation in the community and in leadership positions.

- Religiously conservative men (even those who were originally supportive) may become resentful of women in their lives having new opportunities and being away from their obligations at home. It is important to acknowledge men’s concerns and provide equal opportunities for every gender.

**Issues to Consider for Gender and Religion Peacebuilding Programs:**

> “A woman can be anything so long as the community provides opportunities.”
> - Yemen

- Any changes or adjustments “in gender roles and cultural practices must ultimately be grounded at the community level.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. p. 14.
\textsuperscript{22} Berkley Center (2008) p. 47.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. p. 31.
• An international organization may have difficulty gaining trust from religiously conservative girls and their families. Work with a trusted local partner to engage a greater number of religiously conservative girls.

• Young women and men may not have or be aware of female religious leaders within their own faith who can serve as role models. Identify and highlight these role models by directing young participants to female faith leaders from religious texts, historical examples, or popular culture.

Use Religious Texts to Highlight Extraordinary Women in Faith
In the Torah, women such as Rebecca, Deborah, and Judith are credited for their sound judgment. The Bible acknowledges many women as prophets, apostles, deacons, and heads of churches. In the Qur’an, Mohammad’s youngest wife A’isha is acknowledged for contributing to the stories of Mohammad. Hinduism recognizes that three women helped write parts of the Rig-Veda.24

• Research indicates that women are motivated by their faith to be involved in peace work; however, they often prefer not to be the center of attention.25

• It is important to note that religious values differ based on culture and context. For example, a Muslim woman in Norway may have strikingly different values than a Muslim woman in Morocco. Be sure to frame religious programming and messaging with respect for local values and definitions.

• Religion and gender can determine ways of engaging with young people for a project. Media outreach, such as radio and TV programming or social media, is important for interfaith programming since it allows you to engage across religious affiliations. Design outreach to reach across religions, but be conscious of gender when selecting a medium for engagement. In many West African countries, young women primarily listen to radio while young men watch more television than their female counterparts.

• Beliefs about a woman’s role in society often have intertwined religious and cultural roots. It may be necessary to frame programs according to these conservative and traditional norms in the community. For example, engage and gain permission for women’s participation from relevant authority figures, limit

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24 Ibid. p. 22.
topics to those that do not contradict religious belief systems, or ensure programs are same sex only.

- Acknowledge that age may have an effect on women’s participation. In Tunisia, for example, SFCG found that between the ages of 20-30, young women are more engaged than boys. After age 30, many women become more focused on the home and raising a family.

- Use religious teachings to have a positive influence on enduring cultural attitudes about violence against women.²⁶

From the Field: Nigeria
In Nigeria, local SFCG staff worked closely with the Children and Youth Division in the Washington, D.C. headquarters to reach out to young girls who have been negatively affected by violence. Girls in Nigeria have one of the lowest rates of education, and they are often affected by early marriages, forced marriages, and sexual violations in conflict. Unfortunately, young girls have been completely left out of the peacebuilding process. In an innovative pilot program called “Naija Girls, Unite!”, SFCG staff found success when they worked specifically with young girls to help them build their knowledge, skills, and relationships with girls from other faiths. The project proved girls can act as some of the most successful inter-religious peacebuilders when given the chance.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 22.
Considerations for Programming

Religion-Specific Issues
Search for Common Ground program staff have highlighted specific religious considerations that they keep in mind when developing and implementing programs:

- **Types of activities:** Program staff members in Nigeria have found they cannot ask young men and young women to swim together. They have also found it is helpful to avoid activities that include any type of touching if both men and women are involved, since Muslim women are prohibited from touching men outside their immediate families. Likewise, Muslim religious leaders are prohibited from touching women outside their immediate families.

- **Separating participants:** In areas with religious tensions, program staff in CAR found it helpful to meet with followers of different religions separately before bringing everyone together for a meeting. However, program staff in Jerusalem have found dividing participants by faith to sometimes present an obstacle.

- **Chaperones:** In Nigerian Muslim communities, it is important to consider who might serve as chaperones for young women during activities. Program staff in Yemen have found it helpful to engage girls by encouraging parents to send male siblings with them to program activities.

**Notes from the Field:** In Yemen, one mosque preacher did not support SFCG programs and was therefore not invited to planning meetings. Being excluded reinforced his negative opinions about the projects and prompted him to preach against SFCG. Once staff adjusted their strategy and began inviting the preacher to meetings, he stopped speaking out against SFCG. Gaining support from religious leaders can sometimes be a huge challenge, but can yield great benefits.

- **Dress code:** Program staff in Nigeria and other countries have noted that dress can be a sensitive issue. It is important to recognize restrictions of dress (like wearing a hijab or yarmulke) for program participants, and to make sure the environment is comfortable and accommodating.

- **Food:** Program staff in Nigeria have also found it helpful to be sensitive to food issues. For example, Muslim participants may follow halal guidelines and Jewish participants may adhere to kosher food restrictions.
• **Holidays:** Program staff in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone have found it helpful to be aware of religious holidays when developing and implementing programs. One program in these countries took place during Ramadan, which meant that Muslim participants needed time and accommodations to be able to fast, pray, and eat at specific times.

• **Locations:** In more traditional areas in Tunisia, young men and young women cannot be together in certain places. Program staff in Jerusalem have found that certain Jewish beliefs prohibit entering a church or place of worship of another religion. It is also important to host activities in an easily accessible location for participants.

• **Prayer:** Staff in Nigeria have found it helpful to respect prayer times and include prayer breaks. Programs in Nigeria that involve Christian and Muslim participants start their activities with “unity prayers” that allow participants from both religions to contribute. In Jerusalem, however, certain Jewish beliefs prohibit praying while followers of other religions are present.

**Involving Families and Religious Leaders**

When addressing religious issues in youth peacebuilding programs, SFCG staff from several countries (including Nigeria, Tunisia, and Yemen) emphasized the importance of involving families and religious leaders early in the program design process.

When deciding whom to approach, it may be worth considering:

- Who could help ensure access to youth within the community?

- Do youth need permission from family and religious leaders to participate in programs?

- Could religious leaders feel threatened by the ideas addressed in the program and create new obstacles?

- Could the program be perceived as challenging the authority of religious leaders or parents?

**Image and Reputation of SFCG in the Community**

It is important to start by understanding how youth, their families, and their communities see SFCG. Community perceptions have a strong influence on SFCG’s ability to work in a given context. The following questions may be helpful while considering how others perceive SFCG:
● How does the community perceive SFCG? (e.g. International? Local? American? Western? Christian? Spiritual? Secular?)

● What knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors do we have surrounding our own and other religions?

● How can we build trust with members of the community?

From the Field: Yemen
Search For Common Ground is a U.S.-based international nongovernmental organization (NGO). SFCG in Yemen operates as a Yemeni-led organization. However, its identity as part of an international NGO still presents challenges for the team in some areas of Yemen. The team has met a few misunderstandings, such as perceptions that SFCG is trying to undermine the beliefs and morality of local communities. Furthermore, although SFCG in Yemen has the advantage of being a Yemeni-driven team, staff are sometimes mistaken as part of a Christian organization.

From the Field: Indonesia
Some program concepts can be interpreted as outside, foreign, or Western ideas. SFCG in Indonesia has conducted programs in Islamic boarding schools (Pesantren) to promote tolerance among youth. The Indonesia team learned to be careful when using the term “tolerance” because it was interpreted as a Western value. Interestingly, Indonesian participants did not view the idea negatively. They perceived it as a foreign idea, but valued it.

Presence of Other Organizations in the Area
In order to develop an effective program, several country teams have developed partnerships with other organizations in their regions. Below are some lessons of productive partnerships from the SFCG country teams:

Partnership with Local Organizations
Since religion is deeply ingrained in the identities of youth and their communities, partnering with local organizations helps SFCG make its programs more accessible to youth. The following questions may help us consider potential and current partnerships:

● Which organizations are aware of the needs of young people, as well as the knowledge, attitude, and behavior of youth based on religion?

● Do the general community and community leaders trust them?
Are they familiar with the current conflict?

Do they have access to resources that would be useful for program implementation?

**From the Field:** SFCG in Lebanon benefited from working with local partners in designing youth camp follow-up activities. In their youth summer camp program (Better Together: A Youth-Led Approach to Peaceful Coexistence in Lebanon), the program was designed with a local partner who knows the youth by their names. This partnership sought to maintain momentum after youth returned home from summer camp. After participating in camp, there is a risk that youth will return to their previous ways of thinking and attitudes towards the other when surrounded by their home environment. To address this issue, the local partner remained engaged with participants to encourage sustained connections.

**From the Field:** SFCG in Indonesia has enjoyed fruitful relationships with local partners in the Pesantren program. Local NGOs with strong grassroot networks have been especially valuable partners. Their networks have helped in establishing communication with schools and reaching out to teachers and their students for programs.

**From the Field:** SFCG in Lebanon has seen a positive impact from local partnerships, particularly in engaging with girls. Because their local partners are trusted and from the community, the partnerships helped reduce parental concerns about their daughters’ participation.

Coordination with Existing Organizations in the Region

In many countries, SFCG operates alongside other local and international NGOs. Some critical questions to consider when designing programs where other organizations operate include:

- What have other organizations done? What knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors have youth developed?

- When do other organizations conduct their programs? (e.g. school breaks, weekends, etc.)
- Are there opportunities to collaborate with one another?
- Who is their target audience and is there overlap?

**From the Field:** Youth in some areas might participate in multiple programs hosted by local and international NGOs. For example, in Israel and Palestine there are numerous active NGOs, which make it difficult to create new and exciting programs for youth. Because of the prolonged conflict and limited economic opportunities, there is a high rate of burnout among youth.
Bibliography


Appendix A - Religious Sensitivity in the Program Cycle

[We envision this section as being incorporated into a four-part chart that depicts flow between the stages.]

All stages of the program cycle can be sensitive to religious issues. While we focus on the religious needs of youth participants, programs should also consider the religious needs of their parents, families, and communities as a whole.

Stage 1: Pre-Design/Needs Analysis

We can consider religious sensitivity to be a participant need rather than a barrier to programming. For example, respecting a certain prayer time should be considered as a need of participants who want to achieve the program outcomes and reach their goals.

In order to conduct the program so that everyone’s religious needs are accommodated, families, communities, staff and participants should develop knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that focus on religious needs throughout the program. The needs may differ depending on the communities, families, and individuals involved.

For example, a participant may not want SFCG staff or other participants to touch her (behavior), to know she wants to pray at certain times (knowledge), and to create a comfortable group atmosphere without alienating her (attitude). These needs should be respected even if the program solely focuses on, for example, media production.

Stage 2: Project Designing/Planning
Religiously sensitive program designs consider the religious needs of youth, their families, and communities throughout the life of the program. For example, we want to design the program content, methods, logistics, youth recruitment, and staffing in religiously sensitive ways.

**Stage 3: Implementation / Monitoring**
During implementation and monitoring, we may encounter interesting findings and challenges related to the religious identities of participants and their communities.

**Stage 4: Evaluation**
Throughout the evaluation process, we uncover impacts of the program on the participants and their communities. Even in programs that do not address religious identity directly, the religious sensitivity of the program may be considered.

For example, the following questions might be helpful in evaluation:

- Did you gain new knowledge about your own religion or other religions?
- Based on what you learned in the program, did your attitudes toward your religion or others change?
- Did you take actions to respect someone else’s religious needs?
Appendix B - Recommended Resources

Appreciative Inquiry
http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/

Berkley Center - Faith, Gender, and Development
http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/challenges

UNESCO - Learning to Live Together
http://en.unesco.org/themes/learning-live-together

UNICEF - Partnering with Religious Communities for Children
http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_(UNICEF).pdf

United Religions Initiative
http://www.uri.org/
http://www.uri.org/browse_resources

United States Institute of Peace - Women in Religious Peacebuilding


Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites
https://www.sfcg.org/universal-code-of-conduct-on-holy-sites/