

# Principles and proselytising: good practice in Ethiopia

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**Faith-based organisations need to ensure that in providing essential humanitarian assistance they do not exploit the vulnerability of people by proselytising, whether overtly or covertly.**

Humanitarian agencies who have signed up to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief have committed themselves not to use humanitarian response to further political or religious creeds.<sup>1</sup>

However, the reality is that some faith-based organisations (FBOs) do proselytise in the context of giving aid, whether through activities such as prayer, scriptural study and distribution or display of religious materials and symbols. Such practices gravely erode the contributions of FBOs in the protection and support of refugees. A World Council of Churches report in 1961 defined proselytism as a corruption of Christian witness: “Witness is corrupted when cajolery, bribery, undue pressure or intimidation is used – subtly or openly – to bring about seeming conversion.” That same year several Orthodox Churches – which had long been opposed to proselytism – joined the World Council of Churches.

The Ethiopian Tewahido Orthodox Church runs a refugee support programme through its Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission in the Refugee and Returnee

Affairs Department (DICAC-RRAD).<sup>2</sup> The refugees supported by DICAC-RRAD are mainly from Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Yemen. In February 2014, about 2,000 camp refugees were receiving secondary education provided by DICAC-RRAD, and around 2,500 urban refugees were dependent on the department for health care, education and subsistence money. In accordance with the Orthodox Church’s long history of opposition to proselytism, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s refugee support programme takes a firm stance against proselytising.

Although DICAC-RRAD’s website carries references to biblical sources for its commitment to assist refugees, “there is no religious statement or symbol or icons that I have ever observed written or displayed except the stamp of the organisation that bears a cross”, says a Somali refugee interviewed by the author. This is an important practice in keeping spirituality and humanitarianism separate. However, it is essential to be aware that even a symbol such as a cross on an organisation’s ‘stamp’

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could be picked up on – as either a sensitive matter or deemed to be promoting a faith – by people from a different religious background. Significantly, there are no religious symbols, icons or references on or in the DICAC-RRAD head office or in the schools in the refugee camps. When asked if DICAC-RRAD staff ever approached refugees to discuss religion, Deng Gach, a South Sudanese refugee, says “Yes, they tell us to be strong in our own religion in order to be resilient in the face of all the bad things we have gone through.” In this way, DICAD-RRAD reinforces faith as a way to cope with trauma and suffering without saying ‘my faith is the best way’.

While education is a likely setting for proselytising to creep in, the schools run by DICAC-RRAD follow the government’s secular curriculum and there are no additional biblical subjects provided, unlike those provided in the church-run primary and secondary schools for the local population (i.e. schools not established for humanitarian purposes). Providing health-care services for ill and/or distressed refugees could also be open to volunteers using the opportunity for evangelism. DICAC-RRAD allows volunteers (who include refugees) of any and no religious affiliation, and provides orientation for them on what is and is not appropriate.

Applicants for jobs with DICAC are not screened for their commitment to Christianity or any other faith. Although there is an interview question on the applicant’s general knowledge of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church/DICAC, there is no expectation of a commitment to the church. Hence, there are Muslims and persons from other Christian denominations who work for DICAC-RRAD, both in the head office and in the refugee camps. So far, however, there are no people from other religions in senior positions, something that DICAC might wish to reflect on.

### Monitoring and accountability

DICAC-RRAD’s partnership with UNHCR requires adherence to humanitarian

principles (including non-discrimination and no proselytising) and monitoring thereof. Participatory Assessment Teams are tasked with periodically assessing the performance of the humanitarian support that the organisation is providing. Ahmed Abdella, a refugee from Eritrea who is a member of one of these teams, explains: “We were democratically elected, representing each refugee nationality, and we review every aspect of humanitarian support delivery. With regard to the imposition of religion, we have had no problem with that so far. If we noticed such a practice, we would bring it to the organisation’s attention to be rectified.” In addition, a Refugee Centre Committee meets every month (involving both urban and camp-based refugees) to discuss issues of concern and to lodge complaints as appropriate. Furthermore, individual complaints by refugees can be made openly at meetings or confidentially in writing or email.

Proselytising under cover of humanitarian aid can come about because the funding comes from the proponent of a particular religion. While the fact that DICAC-RRAD secures its funding from UN agencies is one reason why it does not blur the lines between humanitarianism and proselytisation, it should be commended for differentiating its humanitarian work from its religious values in the context of people fleeing persecution and seeking protection. Faith-based organisations can play vital roles in protecting and supporting displaced people but need to adhere to the humanitarian partnership principle of non-discrimination and non-proselytism. Flouting this principle could be tantamount to exploitation and abuse.

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1. [www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf) (see Article 3)

2. <http://eotcdicac.org/index.php/programs/refugee-and-returnee-support>