

November 2014

## Interfaith humanitarian cooperation: a Lutheran perspective

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**The Lutheran World Federation's experience is that closer cooperation between faith-based organisations of different faiths is both possible and beneficial.**

In parallel with enthusiastically participating in UNHCR's Dialogue on Faith and Protection in 2012, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) began linking with other faith-based organisations (FBOs) to more deliberately address the divisions and suspicions between religious communities through fostering interfaith humanitarian collaboration. Working together with FBOs of other faiths can promote a compassionate and respectful religious voice, and can send a powerful message that people of different faiths can unite around the common goal of serving people in need and working together for peace.

To this effect, in October 2013 the LWF and The Humanitarian Forum<sup>1</sup> convened a workshop entitled 'Working Together: Christian-Muslim Humanitarian Partnerships' in Amman, Jordan. Participants from the LWF, ACT Alliance and several Islamic humanitarian organisations, including Islamic Relief Worldwide and Muslim Aid, gathered to discuss operational issues around interfaith humanitarian partnerships. Pilot projects for working together were outlined for Jordan, Kenya and Myanmar, and a joint statement was released, acknowledging some differences and potential challenges in interfaith cooperation but also reaffirming a common belief that FBOs can be a force for peace and good in the world.

Several real challenges exist in building new partnerships, particularly as relations between religions are often a sensitive issue, and participants at the Working Together workshop identified a series of challenges to address through practical collaboration. Misunderstandings or general ignorance of differences and similarities

in culture and religion can lead to fear of the other; this can foster mistrust of FBOs, and apprehension, both among local communities of different faiths and among constituents of FBOs engaged in interfaith work. In contrast, demonstrating common values through working side by side in humanitarian assistance can help reduce negative perceptions and foster trust.

As a direct result of the workshop, the LWF and Islamic Relief Worldwide are developing a partnership at both global and local levels, and indeed signed a Memorandum of Understanding in August 2014. Planned areas of cooperation include a joint pilot project in the Dadaab camps in Kenya for Somali refugee children with intellectual disabilities; and joint programming in Jordan on a pilot peace-building project among Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities which will include joint budgeting and shared roles and responsibilities. Collaboration at the country level has raised issues and challenges, such as delays caused by technical difficulties in getting organisational systems to work compatibly. Nonetheless, it is precisely in working through these challenges together that partnership can be developed and strengthened.

### Good practice

Transparency about the LWF's motivations and identity has contributed to defusing suspicions that it might be proselytising, and has enabled the LWF to work more effectively in multi-faith environments. Likewise, collaboration between the LWF Jordan and Islamic Relief Jordan has enabled the LWF Jordan staff to learn about Islamic Relief's values, standards and mandate, and vice versa, which has

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confirmed that both organisations are like-minded in values and committed to working towards the same humanitarian goals.

The LWF has been serving vulnerable and marginalised communities worldwide for nearly 70 years, prioritising refugees, internally displaced persons and local communities, and is currently UNHCR's largest faith-based implementing partner, motivated by Christian values and guided by professional humanitarian and development principles and standards. Knowing that organisations of other faiths share a similar profile, LWF's experience suggests that it is possible to join forces to overcome the prejudice that religion is a source only of conflict and, through working together, to demonstrate that religion can be a force for well-being and peace.

"Partnership becomes a compelling duty on all of us; no one organisation can work alone," noted Dr Hany El Banna, President of The Humanitarian Forum, in the Working Together workshop Joint Statement. "We shouldn't be afraid of building partnerships." And the Reverend Eberhard Hitzler, then director of the LWF Department for World Service, added that "We strongly believe that closer cooperation at local and global levels can be of mutual benefit and, most importantly, can contribute to improving our humanitarian services for people affected by disasters."

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1. UK-based forum for dialogue and understanding between Muslim organisations and their Western and multilateral counterparts. [www.humanitarianforum.org](http://www.humanitarianforum.org)