



To Build Trust by Learning about other Religions

Sharon Rosen* | 02.01.2018

It is my great pleasure to once again attend a Sant'Egidio meeting after many years of deep friendship with this magnificent community. And I am especially proud to be representing my organization, *Search for Common Ground* at this meeting as its first global director for religious engagement.

Some of you may know Search. It is the world's leading conflict transformation organization, working in 45 countries and reaching over 4 million people annually with its programming. Search both celebrates diversity and promotes the common interests and needs of groups and societies in conflict to reduce violence. We work to build healthy, just societies and by doing so end violent conflict. We're not a faith based organization but we find ourselves involved in more and more initiatives that have a religious dimension to them. My role is to strategically see how we can combine 'common ground' skills and religious engagement to build paths of peace.

I have lived in Jerusalem for 35 years – arguably one of the world's most spiritual spots - and one of its most contentious. Nobody in this spectacular city, whatever their religion or ethnicity, has ever told me they don't want peace. 'No more wars, no more bloodshed -PEACE ' was a common jingle we heard on Israel radio for many years. Everybody has the same basic needs - love, food, protection, security, dignity and the means to live a meaningful life. The problem is that while we 'yearn' for peace, and we find messages of peace in ALL our religious texts - we don't know HOW to do it. I will never forget a wise school principal in Israel tell me that the meditation, communication and conflict resolution skills she included in her elementary school curriculum would be more valuable to her students in the future than anything else they'd learn at school. Unfortunately there are few educators like this principal.

I'm focusing this presentation on how we at Search have been engaging religious leaders across religions in peace making. I will speak about the methodologies we've used and offer some examples of how they've worked. These are the success stories - but there have been ups and downs and some failures too. I'm hoping that by sharing the positive experiences these can be helpful to you too.

As an aside we need to remember that it's almost impossible to make generalizations about religious leaders and even more so when we are talking about multi-religious engagement. Situations are different in different countries. Religions are different, despite their commonalities. In countries where there isn't a clear division of religion and state, religious leaders with political power are likely to be more clerical in their approach, rather than play a prophetic role. In other countries, in contrast, we hear religious leaders speak truth to power in the most prophetic of religious traditions.

Bearing this in mind, Search has found that the following steps have been most effective in engaging religious actors across religions in peace-building.

We've found that it's important to focus on areas of common interest and concern. It's much easier to get people to cooperate side by side to solve a common problem than to get them together face to face on a regular basis simply to dialogue. I've been involved over the past ten years in an initiative with three other international NGOs to safeguard holy sites. It is concrete, encourages dialogue towards action and it's a subject that most religious leaders are prepared to get together on. They see that protecting other religions' holy places is likely to better safeguard their own.

The Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites which is the outcome of this initiative, has been implemented in diverse ways in countries as disparate as Bosnia- Herzegovina, Indonesia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, India and the Holy Land. We have been running a wonderful initiative using the Code as inspiration on Mt Zion in Jerusalem. And we have engaged a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the process, in addition to the Christian and Jewish leaders on the Mount, that include the police, local government, government ministries, youth and tour guide volunteers.

To give you one take away image: Imagine Jewish and Christian volunteers cleaning away several years of dirt and rubbish from the Muslim Dajani cemetery on Mt Zion while being offered refreshments by the Ultra-Orthodox and politically right wing Jewish seminary overlooking the cemetery. The Jerusalem municipality desperately wanted the cemetery cleaned as it is adjacent to the shared holy site of the Room of the Last Supper and King David's tomb which is visited by over 2 million pilgrims annually. But the Dajani-Daoudi family wanted no contact with the Jewish municipality. Yet after some trust building on all sides, the cemetery gates were opened voluntarily by the Dajani-Daoudi family and with the nod of the municipality, the volunteers got to work.

Secondly it's important to not limit engagement with religious actors to those who are the most 'official' or high level leaders. Sometimes the real authority or influence is at the community level or the person a community believes most represents them.

I saw that in Nigeria a couple of months ago when I met with religious actors, men and women, Muslims and Christians, heads of communities who have been meeting regularly during the past year and have created a 10 point policy program for protecting sacred sites in Northern Nigeria. The points were practical and doable but I was struck by one in particular - Corporate Responsibility for attacks on holy sites. 'Few are guilty but all are responsible'. Few may be damaging or destroying holy sites and exacerbating religious tensions but all are responsible for protecting them and reducing tension. They added that 'Responsible leaders need to 'look into the mirror more than out of the window' (in other words, they need to self-reflect rather than blame others) when things go wrong'. Engaging with religious actors also means throwing the net out as wide as possible - being as inclusive as you can. In peace-building, we also need to meet with the people we would not choose to have dinner with!

Thirdly, the word religious 'actor' also includes women. All too often traditional religious authorities don't view women as leaders and the women themselves can't imagine themselves as religious leaders. What results is a perpetuation of the religious male leadership cycle which absents half the world's population. Women are totally underrepresented in multi-religious meetings dealing with conflict, and this is to the detriment of everyone, men included - even if they don't yet realize it!

For the past year I have been leading a religious leaders' initiative in Israel within three communities, the Haredi/Ultra Orthodox, the National Religious and the Muslim. When we asked the 3 advisors working with us to recruit both male and female participants for each of the groups, we were told categorically by two of them that there weren't any women to recruit. The third advisor said it would be very difficult. I'll leave you to decide who said what! Suffice to say that we insisted and we now not only have equal numbers of women and men but highly enthusiastic female groups who are motivated to create change. I believe they will.

Fourthly in the process of reconciliation it is important to engage other stakeholders in addition to religious leaders - stakeholders such as politicians at the national and local levels, the police and sometimes even the media. I gave some illustration of this earlier with the Mt Zion example. All too often the reconciliation activities of religious leaders are seen as something 'separate' and not 'useful' in wider government efforts to reduce violence. There is also even some fear in engaging religion in these processes. While this is beginning to change we still have a long way to go before the efforts of religious leaders are maximalized.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Interreligious Council created a collaboration with the municipalities, the police, the law courts and media that brought their joint denunciations of attacks on religious sites to public knowledge and resulted in more effective police action, faster sentencing of culprits, repairing of damage and a reduction in the number of attacks.

Fifthly, it is important to institutionalize engagement with religious leaders. In other words, don't do one-off events. They can't be sustained and any initial positive effect dissipates quickly. It takes time to build relationships of trust and they need to be constantly sustained.

And lastly following on from my fifth point it helps to build trust by learning about other religions and demonstrating respect for them and their adherents. Religion is so much at the heart of people's identities. Put simply, showing respect for people's religion bestows dignity on them. And that's a wonderful basis on which to build multi-religious engagement.

Editorial remarks

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