

BUILDING PEACE, ECUMENICALLY

A research brief

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At the core of Tearfund's mission is the belief that the cause of poverty is rooted in broken relationships and the mission of the church should therefore be one of reconciliation. Tearfund's strategy for peacebuilding has been developed within this mission of restoring relationships. The strategy recognises that the nature of peacebuilding requires working in contexts where there is a plurality of beliefs; this brings the challenge of learning to build relationships across these boundaries and differences, to ensure that the pursuit of peace is universally applicable and sensitive to local understandings of Christianity. This highlights the importance and potential value of ecumenism, while acknowledging Tearfund's identity as an evangelical Christian organisation and its vision for peacebuilding. In particular, it raises the questions of whether Tearfund, as a Christian organisation, can pursue peacebuilding if it is not seeking unity within the church itself and what value ecumenism could bring to Tearfund's wider vision for peacebuilding.

Research overview

This research was undertaken in collaboration with the University of Winchester to address the question as to how Tearfund, with its emphasis on working through the church wherever possible, can pursue peacebuilding if it is not also seeking unity within a divided church itself. The research offers recommendations as to how Tearfund as an organisation could engage in ecumenism to widen its vision for peacebuilding.

Key messages:

- Tearfund could have a role as a reconciling 'third way', building ecumenical relationships and creating a safe space for encounter and potential collaboration between groups in conflict.
- Hierarchical structures pose key challenges in the context of ecumenism so ecumenical peacebuilding should mix top-down and bottom-up approaches, engaging communities as well as faith leaders.
- Social cohesion and practical development projects are good opportunities for ecumenical engagement.
- Focusing on people's shared belief in Jesus as a core marker of their Christian identity is helpful for building unity across different traditions, and enables inter-denominational relationships which transcend differing traditions.

The research was undertaken through a series of interviews. These included participants from Lebanon as a case study for conflict and ecumenism, and others who:

- work in peacebuilding
- are involved in ecumenical work
- are religious leaders
- are part of intentional ecumenical communities
- are Tearfund staff

This summary offers an overview of the research findings and recommendations. A full version is available on request.

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Key findings

- Research from Lebanon showed that some key challenges to ecumenism revolve around hierarchical issues. There is a clear need to involve religious leaders, while recognising that ecumenism must not remain at a hierarchical level. Instead, in order to ensure successful ecumenical practice, members of communities and congregations must also be engaged.
- Practical opportunities for enabling successful ecumenical engagement should be centred on social cohesion and development projects. Such projects should involve different Christian traditions working together towards a shared goal that directly benefits their own or other communities. Practical attempts to build unity through collaboration should have a long-term focus to make a positive difference in society.
- The complexities of personal identity greatly influence ecumenism and developing a sense of 'inner peace' is paramount to developing a healthy Christian identity. This 'inner peace' should be reflected in the outward behaviour of the individual and supported by contemplative practice that enables movement from theoretical and doctrinal knowledge towards behavioural change, and true transformation from the inside out. A focus on this can be helpful in supporting Christians to participate in ecumenical peacebuilding.
- The Lebanese context highlighted the historical impact of proselytism which has been shown to have a negative impact on ecumenical relations and still greatly influences perceptions between Eastern Christian traditions and Western Protestant/evangelical traditions. Equally, engaging religious leaders should be done in a way that is mindful of the sensitivities with regard to Eastern Christian perspectives of Western Christian traditions.
- The centrality of Jesus in Christian belief provides cause for building unity across different traditions. If Jesus is the defining factor of people's identity rather than allegiance to church or denomination, then different traditions can build relationships, without expecting the 'other' to convert or conform to one's own denomination.
- In its work, Tearfund has the potential to recognise and engage with the value and uniqueness of different Christian traditions. As it seeks to build sustainable ecumenical relationships, Tearfund could help to make a reconciling 'third way' by creating a safe space for encounter between different groups, thereby enabling potential collaboration between them.

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Key recommendations for working ecumenically within peacebuilding

The research identifies both challenges to, and opportunities for, ecumenism within the context of peacebuilding. It goes on to suggest ways Tearfund could develop its ecumenical practice in order to strengthen its peacebuilding work. In doing so it has observed perspectives in relation to social cohesion and reflected on how these coincide with Tearfund's theology of mission.

The report offers recommendations for consideration that might help Tearfund to integrate better ecumenical practice into its peacebuilding mission both in the wider context and, more specifically, in the Middle East:

- The case study shows that, when working ecumenically, Tearfund should use an equally top-down/bottom-up approach, engaging both formal religious leaders and members of communities and congregations. It is important for Tearfund to remain sensitive to hierarchical challenges, while ensuring that ecumenical activity does not remain only at leadership level.
- Due to these hierarchical challenges, it might prove easier in some circumstances for Tearfund to work with Christian communities rather than churches, at least initially.
- Tearfund should seek to work with religious leaders, trying to promote better understanding of different Christian denominations, as well as encouraging more teaching on peacebuilding and reconciliation for their congregations.
- Tearfund should seek to create opportunities for different Christian denominations to work in collaboration, deciding what problems to address in their communities and how to address them. The ultimate goal would be to work towards building ecumenical relationships on a practical level, as this has been shown to build relationships that are sustainable in the long term.
- Tearfund should encourage 'third way' partnerships, including ecumenical collaboration on social development projects. These are partnerships that work in a different context from those of the communities of the two collaborating groups.
- Tearfund should count on the younger generation's open-mindedness to other traditions and focus efforts on creating ecumenical opportunities through them.
- Tearfund should focus its ecumenical work at a national rather than regional level, as each nation has its own unique identity and character.

- Tearfund should explore the use of cultural heritage as common ground from which to build respect and understanding between different Christian traditions.
- Similarly, Tearfund should develop a better understanding of the differences between Eastern and Western Christian traditions with regard to individualism and collectivism and how these differences influence ecumenism.

The case study findings also offered specific suggestions for Tearfund's peacebuilding work in the context of the Middle East:

- As an evangelical organisation working in the Middle East, it is important that Tearfund builds relationships with indigenous Christian communities at grassroots level in order to gain the trust and confidence of their religious leaders. Tearfund could then seek to mobilise church leaders by working through local individuals or groups.
- Tearfund should seek to better understand the relationship between Western and Eastern Christian traditions in the context of its peacebuilding work in the Middle East, in order to better understand perceptions and issues of trust between them.
- Tearfund's programmatic work should be informed by its ability to play a listening and engaging role, learning how to best support local churches with regard to peacebuilding and reconciliation, and empowering them as they are.

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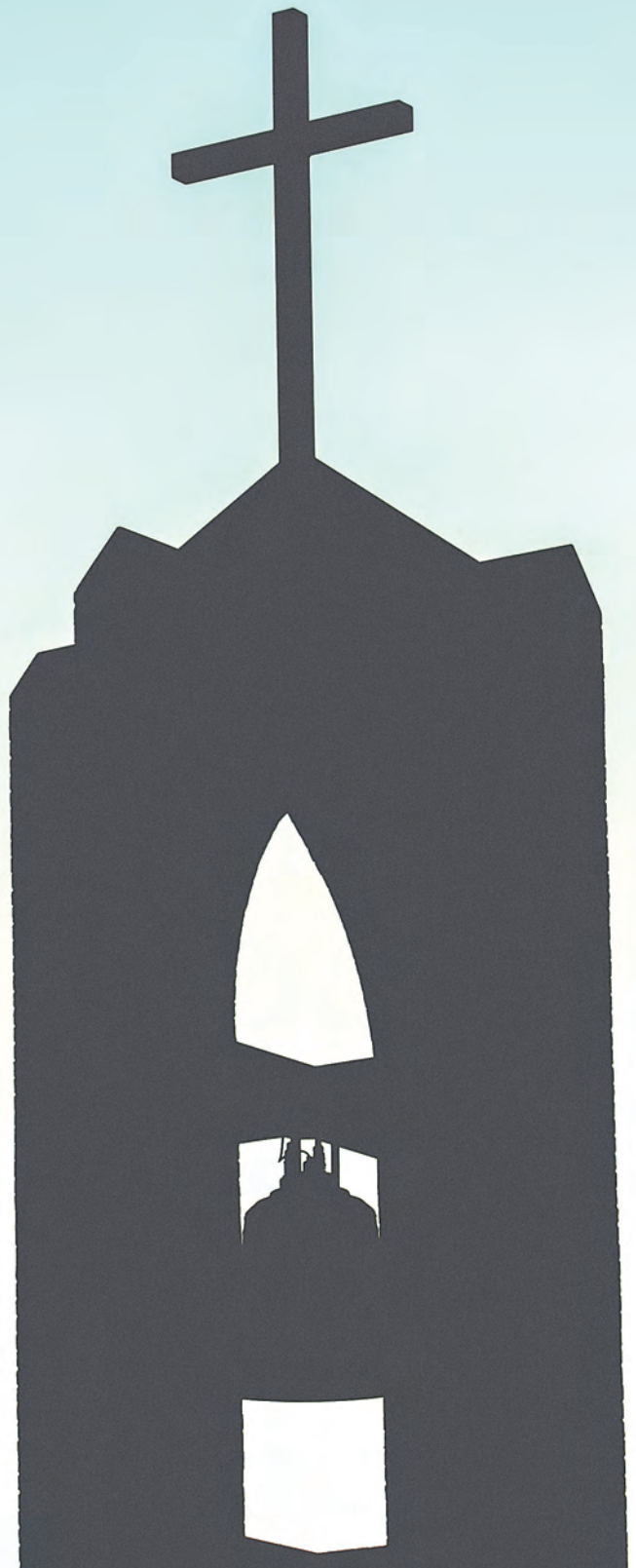
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The full research report: Building peace, ecumenically (Eaves J, 2018) is available on request: mariam.tadros@tearfund.org

This research brief can be accessed at: learn.tearfund.org/ecumenicalpeacebuildingbrief

For more on Tearfund's peacebuilding work visit: learn.tearfund.org/peacebuilding

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