



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The Religion and Peacemaking Initiative of the U.S. Institute of Peace concluded that it would be valuable to explore the extent to which faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can advance reconciliation in situations of ethnoreligious conflict. Bosnia and Herzegovina provides a ready-made laboratory for this research, given the nature of the conflict and the substantial involvement of faith-based NGOs there.

The initiative contracted with Branka Peuraca, then a graduate student at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and currently an independent consultant, to undertake this research, which involved interviews (conducted in August 2001 and from June to October 2002) with local and international staff members of numerous faith-based groups in six cities and towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Gornji Vakuf, Konjic, Tuzla, and Prijedor. The research also drew on materials of the Imagine Coexistence project, including ninety-six interviews with members of organizations active in reconstruction and reconciliation, conducted by the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This report was written by Peuraca and presents her findings. The report has benefited from substantial editorial assistance provided by Anne-Marie Smith.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

SPECIAL REPORT 103

MARCH 2003

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## Can Faith-Based NGOs Advance Interfaith Reconciliation?

### The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

#### Briefly . . .

- Reconciliation can be an immense challenge in the pursuit of sustainable peace.
- Progress toward postconflict reconciliation is being made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as evidenced by some previously unthinkable recent events.
- Some early initiatives toward promoting interfaith reconciliation undertaken by international actors were not well conceived and proved counterproductive.
- The range of initiatives undertaken by faith-based NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina has evolved over time. Taken together, their activities suggest that reconciliation may be furthered both directly and obliquely through projects as varied as soup kitchens, joint public statements, school councils, and choirs. While many faith-based NGOs can provide a record of people fed, houses rebuilt, or students enrolled, these are not their sole accomplishments. Many have also contributed to the long-term endeavor of building relationships that are critical to postconflict reconciliation.
- In a postconflict situation, it is important but not sufficient to feed, house, and clothe. International assistance, including assistance from faith-based NGOs, should also try to help people overcome the conflict that created the problem in the first place. When faith-based NGOs have focused on that need, they have often been successful. The work requires an intense commitment over a period of years and demands engagement and community spirit more than it does money and expertise. The people of faith who are likely to make such a commitment need encouragement and support.

#### Introduction

Faith-based NGOs, both local and international, play very important roles as contributors to relief and development in many zones of conflict; beyond that, some attempt to foster postconflict reconciliation, bridging ethnic and religious divisions. But can faith-

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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based NGOs be effective agents of interfaith reconciliation, particularly when they share a religion with one party to the conflict? Can they rise above their religious identities and bring groups together? Are they more likely to be agents of reconciliation or contributors to additional division and conflict?

In attempting to answer these important questions, this report assesses how activities undertaken by international and local faith-based NGOs have influenced reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since reconciliation is a long-term process, it is too soon to definitively determine what approaches have worked best. This report aims instead to discuss the great variety of methods and approaches used by a number of different NGOs, from the largest well-established international organizations to small nascent local groups. The larger purpose is to begin to answer the question posed above—about whether faith-based NGOs can be effective agents of interfaith reconciliation. While it is premature to judge the ultimate prospects for reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this research does confirm that there is currently a wide array of NGO activities that may affect that process.

## Reconciliation

A gulf exists between the end of violent conflict and the establishment of sustainable peace. Reconciliation bridges that gulf. This long-term process consists of building relationships between formerly opposed or isolated actors. It occurs in parallel with such other necessary tasks as physical reconstruction, refugee return, security provision, and formation of civil and political institutions.

While reconciliation may be conceived as the search for and acceptance of justice, truth, and forgiveness, it occurs within much more prosaic realms. In the economic sphere, it may include a willingness to hire workers across community lines or engage and meet contractual obligations with former adversaries. These are the types of relationships that enable production, trade, and investment and without which a postconflict economy cannot resume normal activity. In politics, reconciliation includes tolerance of opposition and acceptance of joint participation within formal institutions that permit collective decision making, selection and replacement of leadership, and law enforcement. But such institutions do not achieve their full purpose, representing the interests of all and legitimating the system itself, without relationships embedded in these forms—including the recognition and respect of each other's political rights. The sociocultural and religious aspects of reconciliation are also crucial, particularly where conflict has stemmed in part from issues of collective identity, be it ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious. Postconflict reconstruction in this sphere will include rebuilding schools, rededicating places of worship, formulating new language policies, and developing curricula. It also requires relationships through which people find ways to tolerate and respect each other's identities, values, and practices.

Reconciliation can be an immense challenge in the pursuit of sustainable peace. In many conflict situations, collective identities have been articulated on the basis of not only one group's uniqueness but on enmity, exclusion, and destruction of other groups. The postconflict challenge is to establish relationships through which former enemies can affirm their own collective identities while simultaneously tolerating and respecting others. These relationships may range from mere parallel coexistence, to minimal interaction, to trust, and finally to cooperation in joint efforts within a context of interdependence.

Prospects for reconciliation are affected by many factors, including local histories, identities, and resources. Increasingly, international and local NGOs may play a significant role. NGOs bring their own resources and perspectives to the postconflict situation, whether they are consciously pursuing reconciliation or are engaged in other forms of rebuilding that may foster reconciliation.

## Context of Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Broadly stated, conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been between three ethnoreligious identities: Serbian Eastern Orthodox, Bosniak Muslim, and Croat Catholic. In actuality, though, none of these three groups is homogeneous and no individual can be placed automatically in any one of them. Many individuals are of mixed origins, are part of mixed marriages, or have other strong personal ties that cross group identities. The picture is further complicated by additional identities, including nonaffiliated believers and atheists. Despite the recent history of conflict, there is also a tradition of shared community life, especially in urban centers. Many Bosnians take pride in a heritage of pluralism and tolerance, which will help in fostering reconciliation.

Progress toward postconflict reconciliation is being made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as evidenced by some previously unthinkable recent events: a Sarajevo folk singer is planning a concert in Banja Luka; a Herzegovinan Croat coach of a national soccer team has expressed his intention to include Serbian players on the team; and a Bosnian Serb winner of a national beauty contest declared she would do her best to represent her homeland—Bosnia and Herzegovina, not Republika Srpska.

Despite historical precedents for multicultural coexistence and recent progress toward reconciliation, past hatreds have not vanished. Indeed, for some, past distrust has been augmented. They are angry not only at the perpetrators of violent deeds but at perpetrators' communities that remained silent. As one foreign NGO staff member described the current situation, particularly where refugees have returned in northwest Bosnia and Herzegovina, different religious and ethnic communities aim "not to coexist at the moment, but to run separate lives for now and to leave it to time to heal wounds." The level of hostility in some areas is such that it remains unsafe for people who have helped members of a locally threatened group to reveal their actions publicly, as they risk retaliatory action from hardliners in their own communities.

Other tensions, cutting across ethnic and religious identities, may also be barriers to reconciliation. There is a widening rift, for example, in experience, outlook, and resources between those who remained in place throughout the conflict, returning refugees, and others who are still in refugee camps or are otherwise dislocated. Resentment is growing over differentials in postconflict assistance. A gap between rural dwellers and urbanites is also increasing. The latter are far more apt to be exposed to news and informed about policy debates. Outside of Sarajevo, and perhaps Tuzla, ordinary citizens are generally unaware of policy decisions and public statements. Knowledge of current events and political positions is quite superficial. Interestingly, Sarajevans tend to think that all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina share an underlying set of values, and therefore Sarajevans are more optimistic about prospects for interfaith reconciliation. Those who participate in intercommunity dialogues in more rural areas, however, perceive not only different customs among the various communities but also different basic values—leading them to expect greater difficulty along the route to reconciliation.

Salient differences also exist within the major religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Catholic order of Franciscans in northern Bosnia, for example, has a long tradition of promoting interfaith tolerance and continues to play a public role in this effort. Other parts of the Croatian Catholic hierarchy and Franciscans in the south do not share this tradition or perspective.

The Muslim community is challenged by the encounter of local Bosniak traditions with Wahabi customs that arrived together with volunteer fighters from abroad and financial aid from Saudi Arabia. For many Bosniak clergy and laity, the cultural heritage of Ottoman Bosnia includes religious pluralism. They endorse the reconstruction of Ottoman buildings—religious and nonreligious—but are disturbed by the construction of large new mosques built in a non-Bosnian style. Likewise, they are made anxious or uncomfortable by such alien customs as covering women completely or educating girls and boys separately. Nonetheless, they feel indebted to the outside aid. The interface

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between Bosniak tradition and Wahabi customs may have implications not only for interactions within the Muslim community but also for its relations with other religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Obstacles to Reconciliation

Other features of Bosnia and Herzegovina's polity also affect the reconciliation process. One is the absence of civic participation. A tradition of grassroots activism, or even of strong civic engagement, is generally lacking. Many who are now participating in various village-level councils or workshops are doing so for the first time. Even those individuals willing to pursue joint goals with members of other religions or ethnic groups lack experience and skills in doing so.

Where there is a lack of strong popular engagement, leaders may play a more important role. This is readily evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina. To varying degrees, clerics of all religious traditions carry considerable weight within their communities. This may speed the achievement of interfaith reconciliation. Clerics may lead by example. Such a simple act as an Orthodox priest and a Franciscan monk sharing coffee publicly in a café in Tuzla received attention as a demonstration of overcoming rifts between faith traditions. One NGO activist recalled that Croats warily participating in a workshop with Serbian returnees were greatly reassured and encouraged by the arrival of a Catholic priest. Another reported that in one town in central Bosnia, Croats were reluctant to join Bosniaks in activities sponsored by an NGO. When a Catholic priest newly assigned to the town encouraged participation, however, Croat youth became much more comfortable joining. When that priest was transferred, Croat attendance dropped once more. That example again demonstrates clerics' great influence: when they fail to undertake interfaith reconciliation, their followers may be that much less apt to do so.

A further factor affecting prospects for interfaith reconciliation is direct action to counter any such development. Militants in Bosnia and Herzegovina are pursuing a divisive agenda. Although the local Bosniak community does not appear to be directly involved, there have been allegations regarding linkages between purportedly humanitarian groups and Islamic terrorist organizations. Several international NGOs active in Bosnia and Herzegovina have come under suspicion for ties to Islamic terrorist groups in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. Vast expenditures by these groups cannot be accounted for, visa and employment data for individuals listed as staff members have been falsified, and allegations of illegal arms trafficking have been made. Five out of six Algerian terror suspects arrested in Sarajevo in October 2001 were working for Muslim charities there. Since then, several organizations have had their financial accounts frozen by authorities investigating terrorist links. With cases such as these receiving public attention, Islamic organizations with no ties to militant extremists are now more apt to fall under suspicion. This further complicates the potential for interfaith trust and cooperation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (See Brian Whitmore, "Saudi 'Charity' Troubling to Bosnian Muslims," *Boston Globe*, January 27, 2002, p. A22, and *Slobodna Bosna* archives, 2001.)

Some early initiatives toward promoting interfaith reconciliation undertaken by international actors were not well conceived and proved counterproductive. Efforts to rebuild mosques in such predominantly Serb cities as Banja Luka and Trebinje, for example, led to riots and one death. The rebuilding of mosques in villages near predominantly Serb Prijedor, by contrast, proceeded without incident, despite a greater history of violence and atrocities in that area. Many locals attribute the difficulties in Banja Luka and Trebinje to international pressure to reconcile, which began before the local communities were ready. A Serbian activist explained, "Media blew the Banja Luka ceremony out of proportion, international officials made a circus out of it, and local politicians were pressured to appear at the ceremony against their will." An activist from Banja Luka concurred: "I had the impression that they were ordering us to reconcile. You do not do

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that on order." By contrast, a Bosniak Muslim activist from Prijedor explained that in a nearby village the only people present were those directly concerned with the rebuilding of the mosque and that they had waited until the community was ready. She explained: "Rebuilding the mosque is not that urgent. If there is a chance that there might be violence, we should wait. No building is worth a single human life."

Activists and NGO staff members reported other instances when initiatives may have been poorly designed or participants inadequately prepared. In one case, an Orthodox priest who had agreed to participate in visits to other religions' places of worship abruptly refused upon realizing this would include a mosque. Another was disturbed when a letter from the Dalai Lama was read aloud during an interfaith meeting. It would appear that better communication and preparation might have prevented such situations. In another case, an Orthodox priest was deeply offended by a workshop exercise that asked participants to imagine God committing suicide. Perhaps the workshop should have shown more sensitivity to participants' faith.

The lack of strong civic participation, the presence of militants, and poor planning on the part of those who would promote a rapprochement are obstacles in the path toward reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Role of Faith-Based NGOs

Many religiously oriented NGOs are involved in overcoming inherent divisions and other barriers to reconciliation. They are among the more than six hundred international NGOs that were active in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end of the 1990s. Some of these organizations are explicitly religious; that is, they are engaged in providing religious services for the affiliated. Others may be termed "faith based." This broad category includes organizations generally motivated by religious values but not performing religious services. Faith-based NGOs engage in a range of activities, including promoting interfaith dialogue, providing immediate humanitarian aid, and fostering long-term reconstruction and sustainable development. These organizations generally hire international and local staff, and serve anyone in need, doing both tasks without regard to religious affiliation. They aim to enact principles of nondiscrimination and tolerance of difference in their own operations.

There is no definitive database of international faith-based groups active in interfaith reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Compiling such a list would be difficult in part because Western Christian agencies are far more apt to overtly adopt the terminology of "interfaith reconciliation," while Islamic, Orthodox, and secular groups engaged in the same type of work will describe themselves as oriented toward relief and development. Some organizations' mission statements do articulate explicitly religious values. Ask local staff members about their motivation, however, and almost all answer with humanitarian rather than religious explanations. Furthermore, they express pride in their nonsectarian provision of aid. Ask local beneficiaries to comment on the impact and effectiveness of different organizations, and they too make no distinctions between various faith-based organizations and such secular organizations as CARE International and the United Nations Development Programme. Beneficiaries point to deeds rather than mission statements.

Faith-based NGOs vary greatly. Some are global and have many years of experience, substantial material resources, and elaborate institutional structures. Others are much smaller and newer and are still defining their mode of operation. Those with fewer material resources and less organizational experience may nonetheless have other extremely valuable assets: ties to local actors, credibility, and trust. Some faith-based NGOs seek to deliver short-term humanitarian aid. Other NGOs foresee long-term commitment and involvement with local communities. While some organizations aim to help the needy, others seek to strengthen agents of social change.

In the early 1990s, several large faith-based NGOs were providing emergency humanitarian aid. These included such organizations as World Vision, Catholic Relief Services,

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and United Methodist Committee on Relief. The need for basic assistance for survival was paramount. These organizations made important contributions to basic needs and infrastructure reconstruction throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While these contributions were appreciated, the early involvement of these NGOs was also criticized. They were generally deemed inflexible, operating according to their own standard codes of practice rather than responding to local situations. Their decision making was seen as top-down, while local skillful and educated staff were undervalued. They measured their achievements quantitatively, with a focus on tangible outcomes rather than such goals as empowerment. Funding was for short, discrete projects not necessarily conducive to long-term social reconstruction. As a community development director of an international faith-based NGO explained, "Donors are impatient and do not understand that there are many factors involved besides building walls and a roof." The attention to material infrastructure was important; the inattention to human factors was problematic.

International faith-based NGOs have their own complaints. In their early work, they were bereft of local counterparts. A foreign staff member of an international NGO recalled that at first, "There was nobody we could partner with and we had to implement most of the activities we were funding. Now it is different. Local organizations have developed and we are providing funds for their activities."

In an effort to train local counterparts and respond to local needs that could not be satisfied with material reconstruction, international faith-based NGOs began offering training seminars and workshops. These were aimed at instilling skills, such as identifying community needs, preparing grant proposals, and establishing local organizations. Conflict resolution and reconciliation were not on the agenda. Indeed, organizers recall that they directly avoided potentially dangerous discussions and feared confrontations between participants from different religious and ethnic communities. One organizer recalled, "When we trained local administrative staff [from different communities], whenever someone tried to start a discussion about the past and grievances, we cut it and made it clear that we were there in order to provide them skills necessary for their work and not to discuss other issues." Exchanges across community lines did occur, but these were outside of conference rooms, during free time, and without the presence of an outside facilitator. When these exchanges went well, they provided unusual opportunities to meet and converse with members of opposing groups; they could also, however, merely reinforce stereotypes.

Other aspects of the activities of faith-based NGOs also evolved. Church World Service (CWS) is an example of a faith-based NGO with a global reach, engaged in relief and refugee assistance around the world. It aims to assist the most needy by distributing food, household supplies, and livestock for subsistence agriculture. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it also made some attempts to involve beneficiaries so that assistance was not "a purely paternalistic gesture," as one staff member explained. This staff member recalled a conversation with an old man in a village: "[He] wanted to know what we were doing there. We said we wanted to find out what would be of most help to them. Cows, he said. I asked him to gather fifteen people from the village who he considered needed cows and could take care of them. Then we all went to the market to buy cows." Repayment is in kind, as initial beneficiaries give a calf to the next family in need, or milk to an NGO that distributes it or donates it to a soup kitchen. A CWS staff member recalled that "when peasants from Mostar were told their potatoes went to a soup kitchen in Dobož, they loaded the truck with double the due amount, happy to be able to do it." Such measures add to the material sustainability of reconstruction while also permitting local actors some sense of responsibility.

Other faith-based NGOs stand out for their intention to establish longer relationships with local communities and to follow their lead, seeking to facilitate and support the initiatives already identified or undertaken by local agents of social change. Such organizations include the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW). While these organizations may lack the scale of resources and capacities of some of the larger groups, they have other strengths. Locally, activists appreci-

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ate the willingness of staff members of these NGOs to spend unstructured time getting to know them. These interactions are considered empowering in themselves, for the respect they communicate, in addition to the skills that are transferred. Foreign staff members are also praised for searching for ways to support local initiatives, rather than introducing their own preplanned programs. Their long-term commitment is also viewed positively. Beneficiaries have the sense that they have become connected to groups and individuals who will not abandon them with the next grant cycle, who will be there with ongoing interest, concern, and support.

The impact of such NGOs is not necessarily as visible or quantifiable as the humanitarian aid and material reconstruction sponsored by other groups. But they have constructed an immense treasury of credibility and trust, primarily through individual relationships between staff members and local actors. As a human rights activist from Tuzla explained, "When I see a person who comes from the QPSW office in London and instead of going to a hotel sleeps in our office during his visit, I would be so ashamed not to manage responsibly the money we get from them. In proportion to our annual budget, their grants seem so small, but sometimes they cover expenses that are inevitable and larger donors would not cover." This activist also observed, "Quakers are here for us in the moments when we badly need them and when we don't have anybody else to turn to. I have the impression that their doors are always open to us." Another local organization receiving assistance from QPSW recalled a member of its staff pitching in to help with final preparations for a conference when local staff fell ill. And another local NGO activist referred to "our friends and volunteers who have kept in touch"; only later did it become clear she was talking about QPSW staff members.

The impact of these faith-based NGOs may be less visible but nonetheless is far-reaching and sustainable. Without the persistent support of international faith-based NGOs oriented toward local empowerment and social change, many local organizations would not exist today. More often than not, a person who was making a real change in his or her community had some connection to these faith-based peace workers.

International Muslim and Orthodox communities of course have long traditions of social assistance. Although they may have less experience operating through formally constituted NGOs as their Western Christian counterparts, they have other assets those counterparts lack. The greatest of these is their presence and immense credibility in communities of their own faith, as well as strong negotiating positions with the local authorities of their own faith. Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) and International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) are among the international faith-based NGOs active in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These too have proceeded beyond immediate humanitarian aid, seeking to build sustainable peace and development. IRW, for example, has trained unemployed women in sewing and supported an NGO that markets their work. The IOCC is also supporting local initiatives, trying to build local self-sufficiency, community activism, and social responsibility through small grants to NGOs.

A number of the NGOs linked in some way to issues of religious faith are entirely local, although they depend on outside funding. A glimpse of five organizations in Sarajevo provides a sense of their range. They vary in their kind and degree of religious affiliation, in their methods, and in their objectives. Some directly pursue interfaith reconciliation; others offer aid within their own communities. The list gives some indication of the range of actions taken toward postconflict rebuilding across the entire religious spectrum.

- The organization Abraham was begun by students of theology and other individuals interested in religion and is currently developing curricula for the study of world religions to be used in high schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It aims to instill tolerance and respect toward other people, worldviews, and religions. Abraham does not have direct or formal connections with any of the religious communities or their officials. It receives support from QPSW.
- The International Multireligious Intercultural Center (IMIC) is an academic institute founded in 1990 with the aim of preventing divisions among people based on

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religion. It is a forum through which theologians, activists, and artists can communicate and exchange ideas. IMIC's voice is heard in the media and respected among intellectuals. It collaborates with the Academy of Arts and Sciences and the University of Sarajevo. As one IMIC member explained, "Our target group is those who are not necessarily religious, but who understand that religion is important. You don't need to be religious in order to know that you need to understand and know about religions present in the region."

- La Benevolencia is the humanitarian organization of the small Jewish community in Sarajevo. This community, which has fewer than fifteen hundred members, has gained enormous respect for the assistance it has made available and is unanimously perceived as a positive actor in the process of reconciliation. La Benevolencia has provided emergency medical supplies, educational activities, and other assistance to citizens regardless of religious affiliation. It could be argued that it is the only faith-based NGO that is truly multireligious, in that half its board members are not Jewish.
- Merhamet is an Islamic organization that insists on its purely humanitarian nature. Merhamet has been involved in providing various types of assistance to the needy, particularly the homeless. A staff member explained: "We never ask the name of the person in need. Everybody is welcome here." Another noted: "It is more in the Muslim tradition that when you give, you should not pay attention to whom you are giving and you should not expect anything in return."
- Dobrotvor is a Serbian humanitarian organization working with the small Orthodox community that remains in Sarajevo. It provides care for the old and sick and has a few small income-generating projects. While its resources are limited, it has helped international organizations identify the needs of the Serbian population.

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### Three Case Studies

NGO activities that may enhance reconciliation clearly cover a wide array of organizations and practices. Three cases illustrate some of the varied approaches, changing practices, and fluid relationships of faith-based NGOs as they pursue their various goals. The first case aims directly at interfaith dialogue, working with religious institutions and representatives. The second aims to get citizens of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to cooperate in civic engagement, particularly regarding school curricula. And the last focuses on interaction and reconciliation at a personal level by encouraging members of different faiths to share their musical heritage.

#### *Interfaith Dialogue*

Interfaith dialogue among clergy of the major faith traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina confronts substantial obstacles. Historically, the identities of the different faith communities have been created in part by how each distinguished itself from the others. Current relationships are charged with both the recent armed conflict and perceptions of whether communities condemned the actions of perpetrators in their midst. There is also ample misinformation about the history and recent practice of the different religious communities.

To these historical obstacles is added direct personal insecurity. By participating in interfaith dialogue, clerics may be risking their reputation, credibility, and trust within their own community. Early in the reconciliation process, some were even risking their personal safety.

Institutional differences also complicate interreligious dialogue and cooperation. The Islamic community permits greater independence for its leaders. Reis-ul-ulema Mustafa Cerić has complete autonomy to make decisions concerning all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Catholic Cardinal Vinko Puljić serves under the Vatican, following its policies and doctrines, but also has substantial autonomy in making decisions and issuing statements



for all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. By contrast, each of the four Orthodox bishops responsible for the four eparchies (territorial units of the Orthodox Church) of Bosnia and Herzegovina requires the permission of the Patriarch from Belgrade to speak in the name of the Orthodox Church. These differences have at times complicated free dialogue and joint statements among the different religious institutions, as only certain leaders are empowered to speak.

Despite these difficulties, there have been several initiatives to promote interfaith dialogue, some with international NGO sponsors and some with local sponsors. One of the earliest efforts began in 1995, when the United States–based Center for Strategic and International Studies organized workshops and seminars for religious leaders from the Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Orthodox communities. These encounters began exploring tolerance and dialogue. The World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) then built on these early meetings, serving as a neutral intermediary between leaders of the four religious traditions. WCRP organized subsequent meetings and provided logistical expertise and support. WCRP has now left Bosnia and Herzegovina, but dialogue among religious leaders continues.

In 1997, the leaders of the four religions issued a first public statement, the Declaration on Joint Moral Engagement, urging that sustainable peace be built on truth, justice, and coexistence. Facilitated by the U.S. Institute of Peace and WCRP, they created the Inter-Religious Council (IRC), consisting of the leaders of the four religious communities and their aides and advisors. Although IRC initially relied on WCRP for organizational skills and logistical support, it has expressed the determination to continue on its own.

IRC's impact may be measured not only in formal statements and public decrees, but also in the greater ease of relationships between religious leaders. In eastern Bosnia, for example, a conflict arose over a plot of land on which a mosque had been destroyed. Both the Muslim and the Orthodox communities claimed the land. Each wanted to build a house of worship on it. Following discussions among the leadership, the conflict was defused and construction prevented. Had they not already been meeting for years before the incident occurred, this outcome most likely would not have been possible.

The initial interfaith meetings that led to the creation of IRC have borne other fruit as well. Lay activists involved in organizing the early workshops among the religious leadership then started a new NGO, the Center for Religious Dialogue (CRD), which now works locally with lower-level clerics on issues of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. CRD organizes interfaith workshops throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, with special emphasis on the regions less exposed to this (or any) kind of work toward reconciliation.

Efforts at interfaith dialogue are ongoing at all levels. Each initiative seems to spawn others. No single outside NGO has been the sole catalyst or support for this process. Local successors are emerging as interfaith dialogue continues.

### ***Civic Participation***

The educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into three parts. Which curriculum is used depends on the ethnicity of the population and local government. The education of children is a primary concern to parents throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, but funding for improvements is scarce and there is little experience in civic activism. School councils sponsored by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) pursue several goals simultaneously: school improvement, interfaith cooperation, and civic participation.

In 1999, CRS launched the Parent-School Partnership Program. By 2001, fifty-seven schools throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina were receiving funds through the program. At each school, CRS holds an open meeting with teachers and parents to explain the program and invite parents to join the council. CRS facilitates the selection process of council members but, a CRS staff member emphasized, CRS is “very careful not to impose anything. It is more a process of consultations on how to make a permanent group of enthusiasts and volunteers.”

***Despite these difficulties, there have been several initiatives to promote interfaith dialogue, some with international NGO sponsors and some with local sponsors.***

Council members then participate in CRS training workshops on needs assessment, project design, and conflict resolution. Where a community is ethnically and religiously mixed, members of the council must reflect that mixture. Where a community, and therefore its school council, is homogeneous, it is paired with another homogeneous council of a different makeup during the CRS training workshops.

The parent council then generates a list of priorities and proposes projects on which grant funds will be spent. CRS provides grants of \$12,000 in the first year of a council's activity, \$6,000 in the second year, and \$3,000 in the third. The councils are required to seek the larger community's participation for 25 percent of all expenses over \$500. Community contributions usually consist of donated services. Grant proposals have focused on physical infrastructure and educational materials.

The experience in the town of Vares, in central Bosnia, is illustrative. Three elementary schools and one high school in Vares participated in the CRS program. During the second year, two of the elementary schools—one Croat, one Bosniak—decided to share one building. The two institutions, with separate headmasters, administrations, faculties, and curricula, moved under the same roof. CRS encouraged the two existing school councils to form one joint council. Community tensions surfaced soon after the merger. As a local CRS staff member recalled, "There were many discussions about the war—who expelled whom, who did what, what the international community said. . . . There were many personal elements that did not have anything to do with the current tasks of the council." CRS considers this as one stage in the process of becoming a mature council able to cooperate across religious and ethnic lines in order to pursue a common agenda of children's education. Recently, the headmaster of one school and a teacher from another wrote a project proposal together. A CRS staff member described the Vares council as one of the most successful.

The goals of the CRS program clearly go beyond school improvement. A staff member explained: "It is conflict-transformation work done through activity that concerns participants' immediate interests and involves teamwork, community building, advocacy, as well as conflict resolution." Requiring wider community participation beyond the council, as in the provision of 25 percent of expenses over \$500, is a conscious effort to transform local schools into institutions that elicit broad social engagement and responsibility. Successful councils not only improve schools but also provide valuable experience in civic participation and interfaith cooperation.

There are naysayers. A community activist in Sarajevo harbored doubts about the resilience of the councils. "The majority of the councils," this activist asserted, "are there as long as CRS is there. This project does not support community initiatives; it creates them." CRS itself does not necessarily expect even the most advanced councils to become entirely self-sufficient in three years. It is exploring possibilities of fostering networks among the councils so they might provide mutual support. Interestingly, other international faith-based NGOs are becoming involved. World Vision is supporting one school council, and the United Methodist Committee on Relief is sponsoring ten existing and twelve new school councils. Furthermore, some schools are forming councils on their own, without outside support.

### *Interpersonal Reconciliation*

In postconflict situations, there needs to be reconciliation at the level of social, political, cultural, and religious institutions. Reconciliation also has to occur at the personal level. A final example of interfaith initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina looks at one forum for personal reconciliation supported by international and local faith-based NGOs.

The Pontanima Choir is part of the *Oci u oci* (Eyes to Eyes) initiative of the Catholic order of Franciscans in Sarajevo. It receives funding from the Mennonite Central Committee, private German donors, the Anglican Church of the United Kingdom, and foreign embassies in Sarajevo. In its seven years of existence, it has grown from fifteen to sixty

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members. It began with Catholics but has grown to include Muslims, Orthodox, Jews, and unaffiliated persons. From its base at St. Anthony's Church, the choir sings a mixed repertoire of music from all religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through its concert programs, it has reached over thirty thousand people.

Franciscan Ivo Markovic's efforts to encourage an interfaith choir have been in step with his other activities—for example, organizing children's visits to churches and mosques to acquaint them with the other religions of their country. He elaborated on the connection between the choir and reconciliation: "I want to understand you and to start to love the Orthodox faith and therefore I want to sing your song. A Bosniak *ilahija* [song] is part of my culture too and I want to know this part of spirituality as well."

Members have had different and evolving reactions to the choir's repertoire. Some were quite comfortable with the mixture, especially if they had prior experience and familiarity with religious diversity. One member explained: "I am a Catholic. I never denied it, but I grew up in a Muslim neighborhood and the mosque was nearby. When the choir started, [Muslim songs] were not a new thing to me. I don't consider it *their music* because it is my music too." Other choir members had more difficulty, after the years of violent conflict between religious communities. Several choir members recalled feeling sick or disgusted when singing songs of a different tradition. Many of them had lived in Sarajevo under siege. In addition to internal inhibitions, there was also external censure. Some in the Orthodox and Muslim communities saw the choir's intention to sing songs from their traditions as a Catholic proselytizing initiative. Personal and community reactions have changed over time.

The Pontanima Choir demonstrates several facets of interfaith reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One is the linkages between local and international organizations, with foreign faith-based groups supporting local interfaith efforts. Another is fluidity and flexibility. As happened with the interfaith dialogues sponsored by various organizations and the school councils promoted by CRS, the choir took on a life of its own, evolving with its members, perhaps bringing them to experiences and perspectives they could not have anticipated when joining. Unlike formal interfaith dialogues or school councils, the choir does not bear any institutional weight. But its public presence is noted in Sarajevo, where it is perceived as one of the clearest manifestations of interfaith reconciliation.

## Conclusion

The material presented here suggests the great range of initiatives undertaken by faith-based NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These have evolved over time and include efforts by organizations with very different resources, methods, and aims. Taken together, their activities suggest that reconciliation may be furthered both directly and obliquely, through projects as varied as soup kitchens, joint public statements, school councils, and choirs. While many faith-based NGOs can provide a record of people fed, houses rebuilt, or students enrolled, these are not their sole accomplishments. Many have also contributed to the long-term endeavor of building relationships that are critical to post-conflict reconciliation.

For more information on this topic, see our web site ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), which has an online edition of this report containing links to related web sites, as well as additional information on the subject.

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