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# Faith Integration and Christian Witness in Relief and Development: Reflections and Practical Guidance for Field Teams

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This paper examines practical opportunities to strengthen faith integration within relief and development field teams through intentional development of a shared understanding of Christian witness, leveraging Christian identity (through the development of messaging statements), recognizing “sacramental moments,” engaging faith leaders and understanding unique opportunities that exist when working with mixed faith teams. Field teams often struggle to effectively and consistently integrate their Christian faith in their technical programs. Many are comprised of staff who have professional training and/or technical backgrounds, but little theological training or experience with how their Christian faith can practically inform the way their field programs are implemented. Field teams may also be comprised of individuals with diverse denominational backgrounds and Christian faith traditions, and some team members may even be of another faith, which can present challenges in developing a team-owned approach to Christian witness. Moreover, field teams may work among mixed-faith, or other-faith communities, which can present unique challenges for how Christian faith is appropriately integrated in the relief or development milieu. In addition to examining the aforementioned opportunities, this paper suggests best practices, along with practical considerations and steps to develop applicable methods, especially for restricted contexts. While these suggested practices have been developed in the context of World Vision’s Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programs, the methods presented should be easily adaptable for field activities in other development sectors.

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## Introduction

This paper offers perspectives and approaches for the integration of Christian witness in relief and development work. It provides some practical suggestions and guidance on how to assist technical field teams to better “own” the responsibility of Christian faith integration and more consistently engage in effective forms of Christian witness within the unique yet often challenging contexts in which they work.

Furthermore, the paper draws on initiatives developed in World Vision’s Water, Sanitation and

Hygiene (WASH) program, where intentional steps have been taken to integrate aspects of Christian faith into field programs. In addition to World Vision’s aim of integrating its Christian values in its approaches to relief, development, and advocacy work, the WASH program has been compelled to develop these initiatives and guidelines for two primary reasons. First, many of the communities where WASH programs are implemented are other-faith majority contexts, where explicit or direct forms of Christian witness may be inappropriate or even illegal.<sup>1</sup> Second, when World Vision begins work in new communities, WASH is often the first entry point. It is during these periods of initial entry that curiosity (and expectations) run the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term “other-faith communities” refers to those that are predominantly of faiths other than Christianity, and where more explicit or direct forms of open Christian witness are generally restricted. World Vision’s internal preference is to use “other-faith” terminology, rather than “non-Christian” terminology which can carry connotations that seem negative or exclusive. “Mixed-faith” communities are those comprised of both Christians and individuals of another faith, such as Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist.

highest – especially in communities that have had little or no exposure to any form of Christian ministry. Community members are often curious about who we are and why we want to help. These contexts, while potentially challenging, can present unique opportunities that can be strategically leveraged, not only for needed trust-building, but for Christian witness. The way we represent Christian faith is critical, as it sets the stage for ongoing community engagement (including understanding and acceptance) as we move on to other community development initiatives.

What follows are practical reflections, guidelines, and suggested initiatives to be considered by field teams working in these contexts to integrate their Christian faith into their work as they engage in technical programs among communities. An underlying assumption is that organizations that stand to benefit most from these recommendations are those that uphold a commitment to express God’s unconditional love in their work, pursue justice for all people, work without discrimination with all people regardless of their faith, and hope that people served through their ministries will live as followers of Jesus Christ. While these recommendations were developed in the context of WASH programs, the methods that follow may be easily adapted for field activities in other development sectors, as well as in some relief contexts.

## **Defining Christian Faith Integration**

In its current global strategy, one of World Vision International’s strategic imperatives is for the organization to “live out its Christian faith and calling with boldness and humility” (World Vision International 2018). To achieve this aim, four objectives are defined to support the practical outworking of Christian witness and Christian faith integration into the ministry of the organization.

- Equip leaders and staff to live out their faith as appropriate in their context, by providing training, mentoring, and guidance.
- Further develop and scale guidance and evidence-based models for integrating faith in ministry practice and tackling the roots of poverty, vulnerability, and injustice.
- Ensure that all entities consistently and clearly communicate our Christian identity and mission, with messaging adapted for their different audiences.
- Expand and deepen our partnerships with churches and faith leaders, acting as connectors, and mobilizing Christians and the Church together with other faith leaders.

World Vision has also defined sets of tools and guidelines to help equip leaders and staff achieve these objectives. Using the above objectives and resources, all World Vision entities have been asked to develop a strategic plan for Christian faith integration into their work.

## **Predicaments Challenging Field Teams’ Christian Faith Integration**

Field teams represent the “front edge” of relief and development work. They occupy the interface where our organizations intersect with the communities they are called to serve. Therefore, their capacity and disposition to both “own” and proactively engage in faith integration is crucial. Often, when implementing technical programs, field staff operate under dire and urgent circumstances, with challenging schedules and agendas in hard-to-reach, remote locations. Field staff may also face challenges of high staff turnover or understaffed teams. As a result, engagement in, and maintenance of, a clear faith integration strategy can often take a back seat to the more pressing needs of technical program implementation by over-extended field teams. There is also a tendency for this to happen among field staff with largely professional training and experience. These staff may be dedicated Christians with a deep commitment to the mission and values of the organization, but may have little theological training or limited understanding of how their Christian faith can be integrated into their professional work. In such cases, field staff may tend to defer to other organizational staff charged with spiritual or missional formation and integration (or to local church partners, if they exist) to ensure that some form of staff care and values teaching/reflection, as well as faith engagement and witness, occur during field operations. Moreover, field teams may also be composed both of persons from diverse Christian faith traditions and persons of other faiths. As such, these individuals may have very different perspectives on the meaning of Christian witness.

## **Proclamation and Demonstration of the Gospel**

Christian Humanitarian Organizations (CHOs) generally agree that their humanitarian work alone does not fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 19-20). These organizations work out of a belief that proclamation of the gospel is inconsistent with the full mandates of scripture and the examples of Jesus’ earthly ministry if, at the same time, the organization ignores needs and injustices in a broken world (see Luke 10: 25-27). Most of these organizations adhere to

the principle of integral mission, which emphasizes the importance of both proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. This principle is perhaps best detailed in the Micah Declaration and one that many CHOs affirm, as does the ACCORD Network. The Micah Declaration defines integral mission (or holistic transformation) as the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ (Micah Network).

In CHO field work, the connection between “proclamation” and spiritual consequences is usually clear, as is the connection between “demonstration” and social consequences (as well as physical, economic, and psychological consequences, see Figure 1: A and B). Staff may *proclaim* the gospel (or *bear witness to the good news of the kingdom of God*) in the hope that people will be transformed by Jesus Christ and experience spiritual renewal. The CHO drills a water well and the community’s physical and economic well-being is dramatically enhanced (Figure 1: A). But do field staff sufficiently understand the important connections between “proclamation” and social, physical, economic, and psychological consequences (Figure 1: D), and between “demonstration” and spiritual consequences (Figure 1: C). For example, the hope that comes with new life in Jesus Christ can *also* result in stronger families, enhanced well-being of children, and more caring communities. On the other hand, acceptance of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith may also lead to confusion, isolation, and cultural dissonance in families and communities. Moreover, many who have suffered long without a source of clean water may feel God has abandoned them or does not care. The drilling of a new well in such circumstances may serve to inspire community members to believe that the CHO’s actions are, in fact, a demonstration (and provision) of a loving and caring God.

To adequately carry out such an integral mission, field staff, regardless of their professional backgrounds, need to be familiar with the principles of integral mission and how it plays out in their work. They need to recognize and communicate that “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...” (James 1: 17).<sup>2</sup> When they reason that the God of creation is the source of all things, including their own work, it anchors their witness in a concrete world view.

Staff should understand not only the importance of both proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, as well as the various connections between these *and* the spiritual and social/physical well-being of communities served. Providing field teams regular opportunities to discuss and share examples of these connections is crucial to helping them think more systematically about how they can integrate Christian faith into technical programs. This exercise can also provide an important platform for reflection about how Christian witness occurs through their field programs.

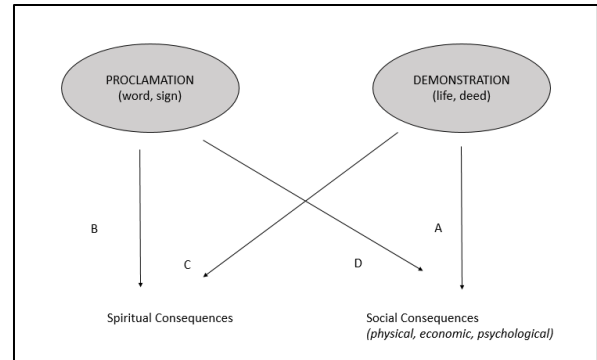


Figure 1. Integral mission – outcomes of proclamation and demonstration of the gospel (holistic transformation).

## Organizational Integrity. Developing and Owning a Shared Understanding of Christian Witness

### *Addressing predominant and diverse views of Christian witness among field teams*

Most Christians own an individual understanding of what Christian witness means, which is usually conditioned by their own experiences of Christian tradition and denominational affiliation. CHO staff likely come from a variety of Christian faith traditions (Evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox, etc.), and interpretations of the organizations’ views (or policy, if it exists) on Christian witness may be viewed through the lens of each of those traditions. Similarly, views on the most effective approach to Christian witness may often be strongly conditioned by the *predominant* Christian faith tradition from which the majority of staff come. For example, in many CHOs, an “evangelical” view of Christian witness dominates – one that is primarily focused on witness through *word* – while different forms of witness valued by other team members from less predominant Christian faith traditions may be downplayed or ignored in terms of strategic importance. This default approach may serve to isolate

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

minority faith staff from others on the team, and thus limit the development of a broader, more inclusive understanding of witness. It may also limit the team's potential spiritual impact. We suggest that, in many settings, field teams may benefit from a well-rounded and holistic understanding of Christian witness - one unfettered by denominational experience and traditions, yet fully anchored in the biblical narrative. Moreover, field teams should approach their witness with a willingness to listen and learn from the experiences of their peers and the community members with whom they work.

World Vision's core documents state that "witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word, and sign" (World Vision International 2019). Among organizations that readily associate with "evangelical" faith traditions, staff are more familiar (and comfortable) with witness through verbal witness (*word*), and less so through the benevolent work they do (*deed*). In these settings, many staff may have less understanding, experience, or comfort with forms of witness through *life* and *sign*, or even *deed* - such as the potential impact of the way we live our lives among communities, and the importance of prayer (and answers to prayer) in their work. Even those who view their "*deeds*" as their primary form of "witness" may not be equipped to do it with the kind of grace, love, and decorum that reflect a Christ-likeness so that their field approach is relational and not just transactional.

Christian staff should appreciate *how witness is viewed and lived out in Christian faith traditions other than their own*. When field teams are dominated by a single or limited view on how to engage in Christian witness, and when teams fail to value and draw upon the diversity of Christian faith traditions among themselves, opportunities for the team to own a much broader and richer appreciation of forms of witness provided for us in the biblical narrative may be precluded. Furthermore, many of these other forms of witness (such as through life and deed) may well be the most appropriate methods to employ initially in sensitive contexts.

#### ***An example: developing a team-owned understanding of Christian witness***

A powerful example of the development of a shared vision of Christian witness comes from a major CHO in Ethiopia that wrestled with these issues in a context that featured Orthodox and Evangelical Christians as well as Muslim communities. Leadership among field teams was dominated by individuals from largely evangelical backgrounds, and thus more "evangelical" (i. e. proclamation) forms of witness were valued. Yet these methods were not always effective especially among Orthodox and Muslim communities.

At the same time, Orthodox Christians on the team often felt excluded or undervalued when it came to issues of the spiritual impact of their work. Orthodox staff felt their most important contribution in terms of witness was the way they faithfully (and quietly) served and lived out their lives, in ways that glorified Christ, among poor communities. Most Evangelical staff felt this relational approach was not a true form of witness; instead, it was evidence of a lack of conviction and/or courage. Evangelical staff valued and employed bolder, more direct forms of verbal witness, which many Orthodox staff felt were culturally inappropriate and fostered both offence and suspicion in Orthodox and Muslim communities. Eventually, during a day-long retreat facilitated by the organization's spiritual nurture and formation staff, the team was able to listen to each other's views and values on Christian witness, and then explore the biblical narrative that supported each viewpoint. In the end, the team was able to adopt a broader, enriched view of how to engage in witness, resulting in each group's enhanced appreciation and value for the other's contribution to this important aspect of their work.

#### ***Practical steps for developing a team-owned understanding and statements for Christian witness***

Field teams benefit from intentional efforts to explore, understand, and value the breadth of how Christian witness is viewed across the spectrum of traditions and denominations represented. Teams thus develop more inclusive and team-owned views of how values about witness can be lived out in their work. Suggested steps for such encounters are as follows.

1. This initiative is best begun by first reviewing the organization's core documents that speak to Christian witness. Many technical field staff may not be familiar with these documents (or policies), and organizations need to ensure that all field team members are familiar with them.
2. Team members are given the opportunity to present the views on witness of their own Christian traditions and comment on how those views align with the biblical narrative and the organization's policies.
3. Taking into consideration the organization's policy statement(s) on witness, their own experience and views on witness, and the cultural/religious contexts of the communities they serve, the team then develops a *jointly-owned Christian witness statement that reflects the breadth of the team's understanding of how it will engage in witness through its field work*. Consideration can also be given to the type of

sector work the team engages in. For example, for WASH teams, the statement may be enriched by linking biblical themes around water and health to approaches to witness.

4. A final step is the development of messaging statements, which are a practical means by which field teams can be helped to appropriately articulate their Christian identity in varying contexts (This exercise is detailed later in this paper).<sup>3</sup>

Organizational staff charged with spiritual nurture and formation can assist the team with this initiative. Steps 1-3 can usually be done minimally during a half-day session, or during 1-2-hour sessions over a longer period, while step 4 generally requires at least an equal amount of time. This team statement on Christian witness should then be used for orienting new employees. It can also be incorporated regularly into meetings, devotional agendas, and team capacity-building exercises – so as to ensure continued ownership and understanding of the team’s approach to Christian witness (Similar exercises for the very different context of mixed-faith field teams are addressed later).

### ***Changing team views and mindset***

For many over-stretched, technically-oriented field teams, the prospect of folding in additional expectations around Christian witness can be daunting, with expectations of more work or a heavier agenda being the norm. What is needed is not the addition of witness-focused tasks, but rather a “cultural shift” among the team – a change in views and mindset around what it means to faithfully integrate Christian faith into technical aspects of their field work. Field teams should understand that by addressing the spiritual root causes of poverty through witness and working with local faith leaders the likelihood of sustained change in communities also increases. Moreover, teams need to change their thinking and understanding of witness in the specific context of their technical endeavors. For example, they can discuss how existing service and community dialogue events (in which the team regularly engages) can be better leveraged as opportunities for Christian witness. Examples in the WASH sector are borehole site selection dialogues with the community, community volunteer training for hygiene promotion, and other community events, where discussion about technical work can be naturally combined with opportunities for Christian witness.

### ***The dangers of domination and ethnocentrism***

Many sincere Christians entertain the belief that witness is most effective if those to whom they witness become like them. Subconsciously, this may be considered the ultimate mark of success for one who witnesses to their Christian faith among non-believers. Care must be taken, however, as this tendency may often be borne out of an intuitive or instinctive desire to *control* others with one’s beliefs, or out of one’s own insecurities, ethnocentric tendencies, and the fear of having their anchor pulled from their familiar Christian-faith moorings. Just as technical field teams need to develop an approach to Christian faith integration that provides for a rich and diverse application of Christian witness methods, staff *also* need to embrace a broader set of *expectations* on the *outcomes*. By being sensitive to the realities of the contexts they work in, staff need to temper both their approach and desired outcomes of their witness. We must remember that we each view Jesus through different filters of scriptural understanding and experience, but when we witness to others, the outcomes may differ from our own experience. Even so, we must remember that it is the same Jesus who is at work in other people, though perhaps in new and unfamiliar ways.

### **Leveraging our Christian Identity**

#### ***Mixed-faith and other-faith predominant contexts***

CHOs have the opportunity to engage and work with people of other faiths, because they are called to address the well-being of needy communities around the world without discriminating on the basis of faith. At the same time, these organizations must remain committed to their Christian identity and to the impact of their work. These two commitments often create a tension with one another, especially in mixed- and other-faith predominant contexts. Most CHOs have developed mission and vision statements in documents that detail their core values. These underpin all the organization does. They define the organization’s identity as an institution and the perspectives and behaviors expected of the organization’s leaders and staff members. This understanding is of particular importance where the organization’s programs intersect with the communities they serve. In many field programs, there remain significant opportunities to better connect the organization’s work with its Christian identity, and, when the organization’s field staff consistently understand, articulate and integrate

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<sup>3</sup> By definition, “messaging” is how you tell the story of your organization and your brand (especially in business contexts), and is closely related to “positioning,” which in business terms identifies the benefit of your product or service and its uniqueness in the market.

Christian faith into their work, this can be their most effective tool for Christian witness, especially in restricted environments. As such, it behooves field programs to identify ways to be intentional and consistent in how this identity is owned, articulated, and demonstrated. Furthermore, efforts should also be extended to equip field teams to *recognize* the strategic opportunities where their Christian identity can and should be leveraged. Examples of how to equip teams in this way are provided below.

***The problem of proselytism: knowing what it is and isn't***

As a policy, most CHOs do not use their influence to coerce people to listen or respond to a message about the Christian faith, nor do they provide humanitarian assistance *on the condition* that people respond to a message or adhere to the tenets of the Christian faith. Such practices are often referred to as proselytism.<sup>4</sup> The commitment to avoid proselytism is particularly important in restricted contexts, and the organization's assurances on this point are at times required for being allowed to work in other-faith communities. But such a policy does not need to preclude open, consistent, and sensitively communicated articulation of the organization's Christian identity in such contexts. At some point in the implementation of field work, all communities – and especially other-faith communities – are curious as to why the organization does what it does. Even in the most restricted environments where there may be cultural, religious, or legal constraints on the expression of Christian faith, community members are rarely offended when staff explain openly and winsomely their reasons and motivation for assisting communities in need. When the organization is clear and transparent about its identity and motivation (notably that we follow the commands of Jesus to help those in need regardless of their religious or political affiliations) other-faith communities are often more at ease with the CHO's presence. Moreover, transparent and open articulation of Christian identity, when done sensitively and respectfully, is not usually viewed as proselytism. True, open or direct forms of witness may be inappropriate and/or restricted in many communities, but rarely are there cultural or religious restrictions on responses to sincere questions from community members. As such, when Christian identity is leveraged in this way, over time it can serve to quietly and faithfully provoke, as Bryant Myers says, “a

question to which the gospel is the answer” (Myers 2006a, 8).

***A helpful strategy: messaging statements***

A simple and practical means by which field teams can be helped to appropriately articulate their Christian identity in varying contexts, is through the development of messaging statements. We would suggest that CHOs' national offices (as well as the organization's spiritual formation and nurture staff) facilitate opportunities for field teams to develop these statements for the varying contexts which may exist among communities within the national program (e.g., mixed-faith, other-faith and/or multi-denominational). Such statements should draw from the organization's core documents, including statements of faith and mission and vision. They serve to help technical field staff unapologetically leverage their Christian identity in ways that are transparent, accurate, and contextually appropriate. Moreover, these statements may serve to help beneficiary communities better understand the connection between the organization's Christian faith and its work. It is helpful to base these statements on shared human values and challenges, such as caring for neighbor, love, justice, compassion, mercy, the desire for healthy families, secure livelihoods, and hope for the future. The organization's broader values can be reflected in such statements as: “We believe in upholding, restoring, and honoring the dignity, value, and identity of every human being,” and, “We believe that God works through all people.”<sup>5</sup> Written to be appropriate for the context, these statements can also provide explicit connections between Christian faith and the organization's motives. Here are three illustrative examples:

- “Our motivation for serving this community flows from our understanding of the commands of Christ to help those in need.”
- “We are here to serve because of our faith's calling and not to manipulate people about their faith.”
- “The services we provide are a reflection of God's unconditional love for this community.”

In some contexts, it may also be useful to consider how to connect biblical concepts to the type of sector work the field team does (e.g., WASH, health, education).

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<sup>4</sup> Proselytism, which at times is carried out coercively, takes place whenever assistance is offered on the condition that people listen or respond to a message, or as an inducement to leave one religion or part of the Christian church to join another religion or church.

<sup>5</sup> These statements come from an internal WVI communication framework, made available to WVI employees. It is called “Giving Word to Our Faith”

We suggest developing these short statements during team building exercises or workshops for staff. One effective way of demonstrating the need for such statements is through a brief role-playing exercise where one or two volunteers from the group are asked to place themselves in a hypothetical setting where the organization is preparing to begin work in a new community. The volunteers have been sent to the community to speak to the community leader to explain the organization's proposed program, as well as articulate the organization's identity and motivation for its work. One of the workshop's organizers then plays the role of a belligerent community leader who does not trust the motivation of the organization, and has concerns about having a "Christian" organization working in his other-faith community. The objective is to have the village leader repeatedly pose challenging questions to test field staff on their preparation for providing appropriate and accurate answers, answers that leverage the opportunity to articulate the organization's Christian identity and motivation in an appropriate way, and thus pave the way for future dialogue about these issues. This exercise usually demonstrates how poorly prepared field staff are to handle such situations in an effective way. It also sets the stage for workshop participants to reflect on the types of messaging statements they need in such contexts.

The resulting messaging statements should be brief and limited to specific contexts the field teams expect to encounter. Moreover, brief, simple statements serve to help field teams memorize and employ them when opportunities arise (even if their employment of the statements is essentially paraphrased). All field team members should be well acquainted with these statements. As with the above-proposed Christian witness statement, messaging statements should be used in orientation of new staff hires and regularly incorporated into reflection/devotional agendas and capacity-building exercises. These exercises are more effective if there is ample opportunity for repetition and practice in articulating these statements. Increasing familiarity will help staff feel more prepared for those moments when they are needed.

### ***Opportunities to leverage our Christian identity***

In general, our experience shows that many more strategic opportunities exist to tell the story than are typically leveraged in programs managed by our field teams. There are certainly multiple opportunities to leverage our identity during one-to-one encounters with community members, but we also encourage staff to take advantage of leveraging opportunities when the community is gathered for purposes related to program implementation (e.g., events related to training,

community sensitization, and commissioning or certification). At many of these gatherings not only are community members present, but also community leaders and government representatives who also stand to benefit from a better understanding of our identity and motivations. The more they come to understand how a CHO's faith identity informs its work, the better these stakeholders can articulate that perspective to others in their networks, thus helping to spread that understanding throughout the community. At such gatherings, it is always strategic for field teams to consistently seize the opportunity to say a word about the organization's identity and reasons for the work it does. Messaging statements introduced in the previous section can often be effectively employed during these settings.

It is important during individual or group encounters to be prepared to address *perceptions* held by the community (or its leaders). For example, in World Vision's WASH programs we often hear expressions of gratitude from served communities for the provision of safe water. Yet we always encourage our field teams to be prepared in such circumstances to leverage the opportunity through responses (based on developed messaging statements) that articulate what we believe has happened in the community. We intentionally note that it is not solely out of sheer altruism or benevolence that World Vision has come and provided water. Rather, it is God who has motivated and enabled World Vision to assist in the provision of water because of his love for the community and its people. It is God who has provided this water, not World Vision.

### **Recognizing and Leveraging "Sacramental Moments"**

In the rollout of field programs it is important to faithfully infuse among staff an acknowledgment that God is in the process, because staff need to better understand (and outwardly affirm) that their technical knowledge is in fact a reflection of the activity and character of a loving God. In our experience, throughout the process of field implementation, most field teams need to be better equipped to identify sacramental moments that can be leveraged to reveal God's hand in the organization's work. A sacrament is an event that has a sacred character or spiritual (or mystical) significance. For example, Jesus leveraged the annual Passover meal to unpack the spiritual significance of his impending death (and resurrection). Some two thousand years later, the church remains impacted by that "sacramental moment" when we celebrate communion or the Eucharist. Other examples of sacramental moments include Jesus' encounters with the woman at the well in Samaria and Zacchaeus in

Jericho. Examples from World Vision's WASH programs would be geophysical work and borehole site location, the process of well drilling, pump installation, and software rollout (e.g., borehole and pump maintenance, as well as hygiene training). At times, communities assume geophysical work to be acts of magic or the miraculous. Field staff can leverage this part of the process as a time to stop and give thanks to God for his gift of knowledge of how best to use his creation. When World Vision engages in project agreements with the community, we can recognize these as more than legal agreements on paper; we can also leverage them as covenant agreements that reflect something sacred, emphasizing God's caring relationship with his people. (Myers 2006b, "Reflections...")

Field staff must develop the sensitivity to identify potentially sacramental moments, as well as learn to discern how best to leverage such opportunities. This comes through prayer and preparation of the heart. We thus encourage field teams to spend time regularly to reflect upon, explore, and share their experiences of identifying and leveraging such moments in their work. In World Vision, employees participate in a "Mission Immersion Program" that helps them consider how the organization's mission, vision, and core values, with a particular emphasis on its Christian identity, practically inform how they approach their work. World Vision Senior Leadership Teams of field and support offices also conduct a biennial reflection and learning process focused on how staff and external partners (including adults and children) familiar with World Vision's work collaborate to live out the organization's Christian identity. In general, technical interventions can be leveraged as "sacramental moments" in which the community encounters the tangible fingerprints of God. Field teams and the community can capture stories and other qualitative information of how the community has experienced God's love and care through this work. These stories, in turn, can be used to construct case studies about how faith is expressed and produced through the CHO's work. If field teams become so preoccupied in the implementation of the organization's technical programs, and do not pause long enough to identify these potentially sacred moments, they may be missing out on the reason God has brought them to these communities.

## **Engaging Faith Leaders**

### ***Why engage faith leaders***

There is a growing body of literature that confirms the importance of development organizations' efforts in adopting approaches that bring together social and spiritual considerations (United Nations 2012).

Engagement with faith leaders plays a major role in these approaches (Le Roux, et al. 2016). Nearly 85% of the world's people consider themselves to be religious, a percentage that tends to be much higher among poor communities where CHOs focus their work (Pew Forum 2012). As faith-based organizations, CHOs are thus in a position to engage with the spirituality of the communities they serve. In some respects, faith-based organizations are much better positioned than many secular humanitarian organizations to engage in this way, even across different faiths (Backues 2009). As with most CHOs, World Vision never puts pressure on people to change their faith, nor does it use people's faith orientation as a condition for the aid it provides. World Vision employees are simply expected to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the source of, and the strength behind, all of its work. This perspective is generally respected by faith leaders, be they Christian or of another faith. This approach opens remarkable doors of opportunity to mobilize local faith leaders as community advocates for relief and development initiatives, especially in the challenging domain of attitude and behavior change needed for improved community health. Local faith leaders are often the gatekeepers in their communities, and engaging them as collaborating advocates and agents of change in their communities can be strategic (BBC World Service 2005).

### ***Methods of engaging local faith leaders***

CHOs are increasingly exploring the benefits of engaging with faith communities, especially through faith leaders. For its part, World Vision has championed the engagement of faith communities through its Channels of Hope (CoH) model to promote child well-being. The CoH model mobilizes faith leaders and other community leaders in a 10-day training program to "move the heart, inform the mind, and motivate a sustained and effective response" to core issues affecting their communities, such as HIV and AIDS, maternal and child health, gender equity and gender-based violence, and child protection. The training equips faith leaders to break down walls between faiths in their own communities, and to better understand and apply their sacred texts to key social issues (World Vision International 2013; Lee 2016).

Building on the CoH model, World Vision's WASH program has developed a two-day workshop that targets local faith leaders in communities where new WASH programs are being initiated. Faith leaders gather to reflect on their own faith perspectives and to discuss aspects of good hygiene practice. The goal is to mobilize them as advocates for WASH initiatives in their communities. During these workshops, faith leaders learn about the technical aspects of water and



sanitation, and the science of good hygiene (usually through a presentation by a CHO field team member). A leader from each represented faith is then invited to share about aspects of WASH from their own faith perspective (as supported by their sacred texts), providing a unique time of exchange and learning for all. Faith leaders discuss how they can work together to enhance the health of their communities. Finally, they develop and present action plans detailing how they can collaborate to promote good hygiene practice in their communities. Most morning and afternoon sessions are opened in prayer (with a focus on prayer for the community and for God's guidance during the workshop), with faith leaders from different faith orientations or church denominations (e.g., imam, pastor, priest) given equal and alternating opportunity to lead the prayers. Faith leaders typically complete these workshops with greater respect and trust across faith boundaries and better equipped to effectively address their respective congregations on matters of hygiene, and to collaborate with World Vision field teams in a range of hygiene promotion efforts.

Various adaptations of this method of faith leader engagement (and mobilization) can be applied to most any type of community development program, and field teams should be encouraged to consider employing a method appropriate to their local contexts. As in other faith integration exercises, field teams may wish to engage organizational staff charged with spiritual nurture and formation to assist and moderate these workshops. Naturally, workshop participants should be encouraged to avoid sensitive and/or divisive topics around theological differences, keeping in mind that it is the well-being of the community that brings them to a common table. The implementation of successful workshops among leaders of different faiths therefore requires that certain rules and standards of engagement are established to assure that the exchange remains respectful and fruitful for all. These rules (or boundaries) should be clearly articulated at the onset of the workshop, along with the workshop's objectives and expected outcomes.

### *Outcomes*

During these workshops, field teams and local faith leaders learn that when they are intentional about bringing their respective knowledge and perspectives to the same table, trust and common ground can be established among people of diverse faith (and denominational) backgrounds, especially when united around a shared desire to impact the lives of vulnerable communities. During the process, field teams and local faith leaders come to know one another and develop habits of working together, which provides a unique and strategic platform to achieve program objectives in the

community. In World Vision's WASH program, and through the action plans developed in these workshops, we have seen faith leaders develop sermon outlines on hygiene, create and broadcast hygiene promotion talks on local radio and television, and conduct joint presentations (e.g., an imam and pastor together) on good hygiene practice among district schools in mixed-faith communities.

This type of engagement also provides another opportunity for the CHO to demonstrate its Christian identity and values among faith leaders of other faith groups in ways that are appropriate and sensitive to the diverse milieus where CHOs serve. It provides local Christian leaders (especially in other-faith majority contexts) an opportunity to learn in a profound way about the culture and views of the communities. For leaders of other faiths, it provides a unique opportunity to be exposed to Christian scripture and the CHO's biblical values and motivation, especially the CHO's perspectives on the nature of a loving and caring God. Moreover, engaging other faith leaders in this manner serves to fulfill our biblical mandate to "love our neighbor" and fulfill the role of "peacemakers" (see Matthew 22: 37-40, I John 4: 7, Matthew 5: 9). We encourage field teams to also pray intentionally for faith leaders during these exercises - not only that they would build trust and habits of working together for the good of their communities, but that leaders of other faiths would experience "sacramental moments" during times of learning and working together.

Perhaps the most poignant example of this in scripture is Jethro's encounters with Moses, which began at a well in Midian and finished in Moses' tent after the exodus (Exodus 2: 15-22, 18: 1-12). Jethro, a priest of another faith, was so impacted by the encounter and narrative of Moses that he declared, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they (the Egyptians) dealt arrogantly with the people." Jethro then "brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God" (Exodus 18: 11-12). Reciprocally, this "priest of Midian" provided advice and counsel on establishing a system of delegated, legal decision-making. This story reinforces that God can work through all people, of all faiths, to establish his work and fulfill his purpose.

### *Boundaries and thresholds*

Through this type of engagement, we have learned that the boundaries among people of diverse cultures and faiths are not always as restrictive as often perceived. While boundaries certainly exist, we have learned that the landscape among these boundaries is actually wide and far-reaching. When this landscape is

explored together, as it is in faith leader engagement, faith leaders, along with CHO staff, build trust and learn to value each other.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest challenges occur where there is a history of tensions among various faith groups, ethnicities, and even church denominations. These tensions and the lack of trust they engender can, at times, also be found among CHO staff, who may come from very different backgrounds and life experiences. In such settings, there is often a hesitancy or ambivalence to take the initial, often intimidating, step across the threshold of interfaith or inter-denominational dialogue. As such, faith engagement work often begins by helping staff take courageous steps instead of succumbing to the understandable temptation to stay on safe ground. Once this initial threshold is traversed, the intimidation factor usually begins to dissipate. As stated earlier, World Vision's new global strategy calls us to "live out our Christian faith and calling with boldness and humility" (World Vision International 2018). We are learning that boldness calls us to step across these initial thresholds without fear, while humility compels us to do this with sensitivity and respect for others, always listening and ready to learn.

Some may wonder if such interfaith engagement represents a step towards compromising our Christian values and identity. They ask what the contours and boundaries of interfaith engagement should be so such compromise does not take place. We suggest that, minimally, interfaith engagement should respect, but not *promote* other faiths. For example, in World Vision we often share prayers among people of other faiths – inviting people of other faiths to pray for our work and the outcomes of our community interventions. But during interfaith engagements our staff do not participate in joint acts of worship together. We believe that inviting people of other faiths to pray reflects our belief that God hears the petitions of all people who pray with a sincere heart. As CHOs explore possible methods of interfaith engagement, and its associated contours and boundaries, a helpful and simple measure is the question, "*Will this type of engagement serve to lead people towards Christ or away from him?*"

## Mixed-Faith Field Teams

### *Context*

Many CHOs hold to a policy of engaging in their field work through partnership with the local church, and many of these organizations hire only Christian staff, usually local Christians, to implement their field programs (Narducci 2019). This approach certainly has

its merits in Christian majority countries, and in countries where there is a strong Christian presence and a sufficient cadre of Christians well-trained in various professional disciplines. Yet many communities in need of both humanitarian work and exposure to the gospel are found in countries where local churches do not exist and where few local Christians are qualified for key types of development work. A policy of exclusive employment may therefore limit opportunities to impact some of the world's neediest and least-reached communities. In such cases, the costs and risks involved in bringing Christian expatriates to do such jobs, expatriates who may have limited understanding of local culture, may not always be the best stewardship of limited resources, especially when we are in the urgent business of trying to save and improve people's lives among communities in other-faith contexts.

Some CHOs, like World Vision, adopt this model when appropriate, especially in Christian majority contexts. But in contexts where people of another faith are in the majority, they may hire staff of other faiths in order to accomplish urgent humanitarian tasks and to make effective use of the organization's resources. Some worry that this approach compromises the organization's Christian identity and limits the opportunity for Christian witness. We would like to suggest another perspective. First, it is important that CHOs find ways to engage effectively in other-faith contexts, so as to address the needs of all people facing injustice and crisis. Second, few opportunities may exist for a legitimate and faithful Christian presence other than through the provision of humanitarian assistance. In order to meet such humanitarian needs in effective, timely, and sustainable ways, the work of CHOs can be enhanced by the engagement of qualified staff of other faiths. Granted, when field teams include persons of other faiths, some obvious challenges can arise, like intra team conflicts stemming from religious differences, and mixed or unclear messaging from field teams to target communities. While these challenges must certainly be addressed, we suggest that CHOs give attention to both understanding and leveraging the *opportunities* mixed-faith teams can provide.

### *Expectations, orientation and team building for staff of other faiths*

When staff of other faiths are employed by CHOs, it is often done to fill strategic positions for which qualified Christian staff are not available, like truck drivers, public health workers, or well drillers. In general, staff of other faiths do not occupy management or senior level positions in CHOs. As such, there are often limits to how far they can progress in the

promotion process of the organization. These conditions should be made clear during the hiring process. During the orientation process, the CHO should ensure that staff of other faiths are well-exposed to the organization's Christian identity and core values. Prospective employees must willingly commit to working within the context of an organization that follows the mandates of scripture and the example of Jesus to engage the poor, regardless of their religious, social, or cultural status. Adherence to certain lifestyle expectations for all CHO staff should also be made clear. Concurrently, these staff should be assured that there are no expectations that they convert to the Christian faith, and that their work performance will be assessed independent of their faith orientation.

During ongoing staff training and capacity building, it is helpful to provide opportunities for staff of other faiths to reflect on how their own faith values can be lived out through the ministry of the CHO. These helpful connections are often found around such shared values as helping those in need, addressing societal and economic injustices, and community building. At these times it is helpful to provide opportunities for these staff to reflect and exchange experiences on challenges they may face as employees of a Christian organization, and how they can effectively provide constructive feedback to community members who may question this association. It is important that Christian staff be involved in these transparent exchanges, as it helps them better understand the challenges their colleagues may face - thus strengthening the coherence and impact of the entire team. We also suggest providing opportunities for these staff to develop messaging statements which articulate why they work for a Christian organization, and what values they share with their Christian colleagues. This exercise can be done when the team works on messaging statements on their Christian identity. When World Vision WASH teams work on Christian identity messaging statements, there is a separate, concurrent session for other-faith staff to work on messaging statements more appropriate for their context. All capacity and team building exercises among mixed-faith teams should include the building of understanding, tolerance, trust and mutual respect among their members.

### ***Opportunities***

When CHOs engage with majority other-faith communities through mixed-faith teams, numerous opportunities emerge for the organization to be uniquely effective in its humanitarian work, leverage its Christian identity, and live out its biblically inspired values, and thus demonstrate the love of Christ for all people. In a number of World Vision's programs, we

have found that the only way to sustain access to communities in some very restricted environments is to work with mixed-faith teams. When other-faith communities observe the mutual respect that exists within our mixed-faith teams, trust-building and acceptance of the presence of a Christian organization working in their community is often accelerated. When delicate issues of distrust arise due to our Christian identity, it is often other-faith staff who are able to best articulate our motives, dispel misunderstandings, and initiate the building of trust that paves the way for effective and long-term community interaction. When communities observe the mutual respect that exists among mixed-faith teams, a powerful message is sent about our Christian values of love, respect, and honoring/recognizing the dignity of each individual. Frequently, community members note that the CHO's willingness to engage staff from their faith indicates a deep respect for their culture and values. This, in turn, can earn the CHO the right to be listened to as it seeks to impact behaviors and practices that make for more healthy communities. This facilitates the community's perception of the CHO's work of building a healthier community as a reflection of the work of a loving and caring God. Even in the most restricted contexts, as the community observes the work, comportment, and attitudes of the field team, they will over time be exposed (often in discreet and winsome ways) to the organization's Christian values. This in itself can be a significant and impactful witness in communities that may otherwise have none.

The individual impact on staff of other faiths working alongside Christians should also not be ignored. When staff are consistently exposed to the CHO's identity and core values, scripture, Christ-honoring prayers and devotional reflections, and when they feel respected and appreciated by Christian staff, they can be deeply affected. In turn, the impact of these experiences invariably spills over to the community as they interact with our other-faith staff.

In summary, the engagement of mixed-faith teams can serve to facilitate the CHO's ability to be a sustained, faithful Christian presence in otherwise very restricted environments and among communities with little or no previous exposure to Christian work or the gospel. In these contexts, where forms of open witness are forbidden or ill-advised, developing such a sustained presence can nevertheless serve to awaken the community to the notion of a caring and loving God, and, perhaps more strategically, gently provoke "a question to which the gospel is the answer" (Myers 2006a, 8).

## Measuring Impact

As with all aspects of relief and development work, it is important that priority be given to evidence-based interventions. For this reason, there is a need to build evidence which demonstrates the effectiveness of our efforts in leveraging our Christian identity and in Christian witness. The same holds true for how effectively interfaith engagement impacts our community development outcomes. Presently, while there is qualitative evidence that supports this work, quantitative evidence remains scant. One reason for this is that development organizations have, in years past, not prioritized gathering this type of evidence. Another, perhaps more compelling, reason is the complexity of establishing and measuring such indicators. We therefore encourage CHOs to consider how this evidence can be gathered. It is especially important for CHOs crafting new initiatives to give attention to these faith-driven issues during initial planning. When the CHO begins to think about how it will leverage its Christian identity and engage in witness, we suggest as a first step that field teams be asked to think about their *desired spiritual impact(s)* in the community. Once these goals are established, the next, and more challenging, step is to consider how these desired spiritual impacts can be measured (see Bronkema Forthcoming). In faith leader engagement, the intended impact is often tied to desired changes of attitude, behavior, and practices in the community. Such changes must be measured in the community. They must also be linked back to the influence of local faith leaders (as opposed to, or distinct from, other influences such as CHO staff, government agents, and other community workers and/or influencers). As CHOs begin exploring these metrics, we encourage dialogue and exchange with others so that these experiences and learnings can be shared.

## Concluding Remarks

We hope the reflections, experiences and suggestions shared here will serve as a practical tool for CHO field teams as they look to integrate their Christian faith in field programs in more intentional and effective ways. We also hope the contents of this paper will serve to broaden CHOs' understanding of the many opportunities we have to leverage our Christian identity and cultivate a more comprehensive appreciation for diverse forms of Christian witness in our work, especially in mixed- and other-faith contexts. Finally, as CHOs engage in these initiatives, we remind them to consider the second (and less recalled) part of Peter's well-known admonition in I Peter 3: 15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks

you to give the reason for the hope that you have. *But do this with gentleness and respect*" (NIV).

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