

# Going beyond the Rhetoric: The Muslim Aid/UMCOR Partnership in Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

Poverty, inequity, and social injustice are matters of conscience and demand a systematic response. Civil society plays a key role in development with Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) at the forefront of initiatives aimed at helping to achieve increased tolerance, social cohesion and understanding.

Faith communities have undeniably had as strong a history of internecine strife and struggle as they have of cooperation and collaboration. It is against this framework of internal and external disagreement that there is a need to build and sustain existing links and to explore new initiatives.

This paper highlights practical examples of dialogue and collaboration between Muslim Aid and UMCOR showing how different faith communities make natural allies for the promotion and success of cross border linking and play a part in making humanitarian work more efficient and effective whilst showing that inter-faith cooperation means something practical as well as spiritual.

## Introduction

On 26 June 2007, a ground-breaking partnership was formalized at the Houses of Parliament in London. This alliance between the UK Islamic NGO Muslim Aid (MA) and the US Christian NGO The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) was unique in that it was designed to bridge the gap between the interfaith dialogue initiatives which operate at the international, regional and country level and grass roots action amongst disadvantaged communities.

What is symbolic about this partnership is that it originated out of the complex conflict in Northeast Sri Lanka, utilizing the unique relationship that each organization had with their respective faith communities and community faith leaders. This article will examine some of the lessons learnt from the partnership amidst significant challenges and limitations before providing some suggestions as to how in similar conflict scenarios, faith can be used as a tool for reconciliation.

## History of the Conflict

It is not my intention to provide a history lesson of the conflict and the causes behind the conflict<sup>1</sup>, suffice to say, that history will have to be briefly revisited in order to provide the context for the conflict as well as to identify the pertinent issues for the future<sup>2</sup>.

The legacy of the colonial period has been blamed by most analysts for sewing the seed of ethnic divisions in post-1948 Sri Lanka. The colonial period under the British fostered and emphasized a new concept of colonial identities<sup>3</sup>, weakening the process of ethnic assimilation that had existed hitherto (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999, 99-135). Sinhala nationalism emerged in the nineteenth century as a counter-colonial movement that used Buddhist identity to mobilize popular support against Christian missionaries and later British capitalist interests (Moore 1989, 190). Thus from an early time, Sinhala nationalist movements became intertwined with Buddhism. Sinhala nationalism was also irked by what it saw as the excessive political demands of Tamil leaders and the disproportionate power and position Tamils had gained under British rule<sup>4</sup>.

Upon independence, it was inevitable the Sinhalese would redefine ethnic relations as they wished, and establish a voting system on ethnic lines<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, constitutional arrangements at independence lacked sufficient safeguards for minority rights<sup>6</sup>. However, it was not until 1956 that the full political logic of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism would be realized when, in a move for pure political gain, the opposition party campaigning on an uncompromising nationalist platform of “Sinhala Only”<sup>7</sup> swept into power. This victory sought to reverse the preferential colonial treatment of Tamil elites. It was, however, a disastrous policy, which led to the minorities being sidelined and the start of decades of confrontation between the Tamils and Sinhalese. The policy also set in motion a process that dropped the

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1 There are many other much more well qualified people and well documented reports on the subject (a few which I have provided in the bibliography).

2 I realise that this can be dismissed as gross simplification of the causes. However it is not the mandate of this article to explore the historical causes of the conflict, but to explore this in relation to the future of the country

3 The British had divided Sri Lanka into three main ethnicities: Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. Muslims are classed separately because of a slight difference in culture, food and dress. Within the Sinhala and Tamil Ethnicities, there is a further division based on religion as you have Sinhalese Buddhists, Christians and Muslims and within the Tamil community you also have Hindus, Christians and Muslims

4 With Tamils having a disproportionate share of government, university and professional jobs – largely due to better education – many Sinhalese felt excluded from political and economic power. For example in 1956, Tamils were 30 % of the Ceylon Administrative Service, half the clerical service, 60% of engineers and doctors and 40% of the armed forces despite the Sinhalese being 70% of the population (International Crisis Group 2007, 5).

5 It was the product of a contradiction between a democratic system in which 70% of ethnic voters were previously underrepresented in the State.

6 Section 29(2) of the Soulbury Constitution, independent Ceylon’s first, states: “No law shall make a person or any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions are not made liable. No law shall confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions. Any law made in contravention of sub section (2) shall to the extent of such contravention be void”. This only restricted parliament from enacting discriminatory laws but gave no protection against discriminatory practices (International Crisis Group 2007, 5).

7 Sinhala Only was a system to establish Sinhala as the single official language for government business within 24 hours of election and capture the votes of rural, Sinhala-educated elite.

Tamil Language (and consequently Tamil speakers mainly from the minority Tamil and Muslim communities) from having equal legal status<sup>8</sup>.

By the 1970s, it was clear that the Government was pressing ahead with its attempts to decrease the dominant positions of Tamils (and other minorities) in state sectors and later in the private sector, thereby exacerbating ethnic tensions. Gradually, civil disobedience led to the emergence of small militant Tamil groups<sup>9</sup> and the first demands for a separate Tamil state as a bargaining position in the hope of reaching a compromise of a devolution package<sup>10</sup> was made<sup>11</sup>.

In 1983 with the murder of 13 policemen by the LTTE politically motivated anti-Tamil riots were sparked in Colombo, leading to the murder of as many as 1000 Tamils and the displacement of thousands of others<sup>12</sup>. This alleged pogrom, despite coming as a major shock to the country, still provided an opportunity for the marginal militant Tamil groups to gain new supporters and to internationalize their struggle. The eighties and nineties proved to be violent episodes in Sri Lanka's young history. In particular, with the defeat of the Indian Peacekeeping Force<sup>13</sup>, the mass displacement of Muslims from the north in 1990<sup>14</sup>, the assassinations of key Sri Lankan leaders (both political and military) and the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the LTTE emerged as one of the world's most ruthless terrorist organizations, known for its use of suicide bombers and the recruitment of child soldiers. This also posed a challenge for the Church (mainly those of the Roman Catholic faith) in Sri Lanka, which split along ethnic lines. The Sinhalese Christians more often than not sided with the government, whilst Tamil Christians, who were mainly from the North and East of the country, were sympathetic to the LTTE. Thus the Church and organizations linked to the Church have often been unfairly accused of being complicit and sympathetic towards the LTTE based on these issues.

## **History of the Partnership between MA and UMCOR**

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8 The Tamils were now the ones who felt excluded by a language policy and its effects on the availability of public sector jobs and services and started their largely non violent civil disobedience by democratic Tamil parties, but it was clear that Sri Lanka's path had been intertwined with the concept of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

9 It was at this stage that the LTTE, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (one amongst many Tamil militant groups) started to blossom.

10 The devolution package was to give some autonomy to the northern and eastern territories (in which Tamils were dominant).

11 This was something that the State would never accept, as it was felt that this would lead to the breakup of the country.

12 This led to the mass migration of Tamils seeking refuge to places like Canada, UK and US thereby encouraging support for the 'Tamil' cause. It has been known as one of the darkest days in Sri Lanka's history and is often referred to as Black July, particularly as the security forces did very little to help the Tamils, supposedly at the orders of the government. Later on evidence has shown that the government of the day (and ministers at that time) had been part of the anti Tamil riots (Jayatileka 2010). In 2004, then President Chandrika Kumaratunge tended a public apology for this act (Sunday Observer 2004).

13 A disastrous attempt by the Indian government to interfere both militarily and politically in the conflict in 1987.

14 About 100,000 Muslims were given 24 hours by the LTTE (without warning or reason) to leave the northern province. They eventually settled around the capital Colombo or in an area called Puttalam (3 hours north of Colombo) where they have been in refugee camps till today (International Crisis Group 2007).

The partnership between MA and UMCOR began during the 2006 “Muttur Crisis,” a complex political emergency in North East Sri Lanka (Clarke 2008).<sup>15</sup> Both organizations were active in the region and surrounding areas, helping to rebuild houses and to restore livelihoods ruined during the tsunami. Sensing the grave and immediate need posed by renewed fighting, both organizations decided to work together to respond effectively. This partnership enabled economies of scale and effective coordination but also had some other, unexpected outcomes. Both agencies worked in coordination with their respective faith and community leaders and councils to coordinate the mobilization of thousands of volunteers who brought food and other relief items to the IDP camps and distribution centers. This enabled individual volunteers, contributors and receiving communities to be exposed to the principle of non-discriminatory assistance based on need – something quite unique in many communities in Sri Lanka where much is divided along ethno-religious lines. Discussions centered on the imperative of both faiths to serve humanity and to reduce the suffering of the disadvantaged.

UMCOR and MA discussed the observations on the lessening of tensions towards aid workers and, by analyzing field discussions with communities and faith leaders learned that the example of perceived Christian and Muslim ‘enemies’ working together to provide assistance had made people re-consider their opinions of NGOs. The result was a marked decrease in inter-community violence coupled with a significant increase in the delivery and utilization of humanitarian and developmental assistance. The inter-community contact provided by the working methodology of the partnership (which facilitated the formation of community development committees led by community faith leaders) and saw interfaith community cooperation and initiatives continuing long after the international presence had left.

### **Next Steps**

In Sri Lanka, the two organizations began to develop a three-way partnership that included the Methodist Church of Sri Lanka (MCSL) and, most significantly, to launch a joint initiative to promote interfaith dialogue on peace issues, known as People Accelerating Towards Human Synergy (PATHS).

A set of grassroots community peace consultations and seminars was undertaken jointly by UMCOR, MA and MCSL between August and December 2007 around the country. In all of these consultations, people of different faiths, cultures and ethnicities were brought together to discuss issues of social tension and initiatives towards developing acceptance and understanding among the people in order to reunite them in their diversity for the betterment of the country.

What was significant from these sets of workshops was the fact that issues normally presented as contentious, and therefore needing solutions in order to advance peace in this country, were not mentioned at all as impediments for peaceful co-existence among the different communities. The workshops felt that the spirit of belonging to the country should be allowed to take root and the spirit of sharing and caring for each other (as humans) should be allowed to prosper so that no citizen of Sri Lanka would be alienated on account of religion, ethnicity, or

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<sup>15</sup> See Clarke 2008 for more details about the history of the partnership

territorial affinity. The workshops unanimously recognized that lack of consultation with the people, and the assumption that answers to the current national crises can only be hatched within the political circles are serious shortcomings the country faces in its peace efforts today.

In 2008, the consultations culminated in an international conference where around 200 religious leaders gathered together to look at post-conflict reconciliation from an interfaith and spiritual perspective. Delegates from across the country and the world deliberated for three days to arrive at a consensus that entailed understanding the need to move away from apportioning blame for the deceit and destruction, for the killing and maiming of combatants and civilians, and for the missed opportunities to settle the problem in the country. It was understood that to go down the route that had been tread before would never move the country beyond the conflict. Delegates recognized the need to take a new and bold step that would cast differences aside.

The conference demonstrated that people have the wish, the will, and the capacity through the collective spiritual strength powered by their respective religious foundations to make the leap required for the change necessary for the country. Delegates agreed that people and communities had been excluded from defining and taking responsibility for their own progress.

The spiritual guiding principles necessary to infuse human values and guide future policies for reconciliation and nation building were discussed under the following themes:

1. Honoring unity and celebrating diversity: From various teachings it was realized that there is space for every living being while cherishing diversity of climate, history, heritage, temperaments, and talents of the human race that inhabits this space. This recognized that each human born in a country is a trust of the whole in that country; any advantage of part of that country is best preserved and enjoyed by promoting the comparative advantage of the whole country to the whole world;
2. Equity and Justice: Justice and equity are the guiding principles for human well-being and must be adhered to in order to maximize development of the population and to safeguard a country. In order to apply equity, opportunities need to be fairly distributed, and justice is the vehicle through which equity can be ensured. Access to opportunities will not be equitable unless backed by resource commitment;
3. Eradicating social prejudices: Past social inequities among men, women, and children may have been caused by different circumstances for survival. Differently-abled people also have not been fully integrated into the society. To create a climate of harmony and peaceful co-existence, all fields of human endeavor will have to involve, without prejudice, every section of the people;
4. Morality and accountability in leadership: Trustworthiness is the heart of all human interaction and engagement. Those who are put in public trust should bear the responsibility of keeping that trust and must be willing to be held accountable for the manner in which they

exercise authority. Morality, guided by strong spiritual conviction, should become the foundation of leadership at all levels if true progress is to be achieved;

5. Resource use and environmental safety: Spiritual and moral principles should ensure technological and economic considerations are appropriate for resource use. Saving natural capital for future generations will be an important consideration as against the temptation, for instance, of exploiting natural resources beyond their renewable capacity;

6. Consultation and advisory groups: Constant monitoring and awareness of global changes and social implications will be required.

Based on these spiritual principles, the delegates agreed on a resolution and comprehensive action plan designed to bring all stakeholders together with the purpose of addressing the national issue.

### Lessons Learned

MA and UMCOR identified the following key attributes of the partnership in order to enable FBOs to work together and improve operational effectiveness (Hovey and Saleem 2008, 66-67):

- **The ability to work effectively in an insecure environment:** The sight of two different faith-based organizations working together had a calming effect in many conflict-affected communities. It is doubtful that this could have been achieved in such a short space of time without local faith leaders being engaged by an FBO with which they could identify.
- **The ability to work for common causes:** The common belief in serving humanity contributes to the ability to work together and can largely eliminate the competitiveness over resources in relief and development.
- **Working within networks:** Religions offer cultural, social and political networks unsurpassed by any other. An FBO can "plug into" this network, gaining immediate access to faith leaders – community "gatekeepers" – and thus an entry point to communities.
- **Sustainable empowerment and programming:** In traditional societies, making sustainable progress in empowering minorities and vulnerable groups (such as women) without exposing them to danger is difficult. However, although some faith leaders may wish to preserve traditional roles, most have the wellbeing of their communities at heart and can be agents for change. By working with these leaders, a long-term process of empowerment in its truest sense was initiated. The long-term presence of faith representatives in communities enables relief and development programs to be supported long after the original implementing partner has left.
- **Peace, reconciliation, respect and understanding:** The partners found that peace does not emanate from high-level political agreements but from communities on the ground. One of the most surprising aspects of the partnership was that it was the first

time the majority of people had witnessed different faiths working together in a tangible manner. This is perhaps the area in which this partnership will be most effective: acting as a link between inter-faith dialogue and community action, translating rhetoric into practical action that demonstrates the benefit of dialogue in bringing about support for disadvantaged communities.

- **The ability to work for common causes:** The partnership is about developing an understanding, acceptance of, and respect for the diversity of cultures and religions and translating that into practical meaningful and tangible action such as the common belief in serving humanity contributes to the ability to work together and can largely eliminate the competitiveness over resources in relief and development as well as bring about an understanding of “unity in diversity,” in the sense that within a society of diverse identities, there are still things that can unite us, and this should be celebrated and encouraged.



**Conclusion**

In traditional societies, making sustainable progress in empowering minorities without exposing them to danger is difficult. While progress on this can be slow, the community faith leader can be an agent of change in these circumstances. While traditional roles are often preserved by faith leaders, and it must be recognized that some faith leaders are the cause of some problems, the majority are not and have the well-being of their communities at heart. The partnership found that both their tsunami and conflict responses put them in daily contact with a wide range of faith leaders, some of whom were (for example) more open to empowering women than others. By working with these leaders, a long-term process of empowerment in its truest sense was initiated, and by virtue of the continual presence of faith in Sri Lanka, the partners are confident that the process will be sustained for generations.

The partnership between UMCOR and MA meant that, in a region divided along ethno-religious lines, people would receive assistance from a Christian or Muslim NGO whose staff may be Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or any other faith, as well as atheist. This raised questions as to why these people of other faiths should be helping them where in the past issues were seen as a problem solely for that particular faith community. For many, this was the first time that interfaith cooperation meant something practical as well as spiritual, and it caused people to begin to view faith matters and communities of different faiths in a new light. This is perhaps the area in which this partnership will be most effective – acting as a link between interfaith dialogue and communities, translating rhetoric into practical action that demonstrates the benefit of dialogue to disadvantaged communities. Talk means nothing if your child dies of hunger.

The partnership of MA with UMCOR reached out beyond religious communities to benefit people in need, no matter what their religious faith, thereby giving much-needed hope and the chance for a new peace-building paradigm.

Hence the experience of MA-UMCOR can address the issue of social tension that could arise in a diverse society due to ignorance. This path towards dialogue and interaction has already been initiated by the partnership in the hope that it will start a march towards peace from the grass roots. There is hope that by being engaged and affording people the chance to express themselves, perceptions and stereotypical views that exist as a result of ignorance, misunderstandings, and a lack of communication will be eliminated, thereby paving the way for acceptance and understanding so that people can unite in their diversity for the betterment of this country.

The partners believe that the model provides an example to a wider world that organizations and peoples of different faiths can and do work together to set theological differences aside and work towards common goals, such as relieving suffering and poverty wherever they are found.

In Sri Lanka, the UMCOR-MA partnership demonstrated that there is a huge, untapped potential in engaging with faith. This coming together of faiths, which are often perceived to be in opposition to each other, can serve as an example to all, that organizations and people can work together to further the cause of humanitarianism without compromising their individuality or beliefs. It underlines the value of faith-based engagement to practical ends, which goes



beyond dialogues. It is perhaps the ‘missing link’ between high-level interfaith dialogues and community action.

A postscript to this story now is that the UMCOR-MA partnership has stalled due to various operational constraints that mainly arise within the field of international development especially as a result of staff turnover. However, the seeds that were sown at the 2008 faith leader’s conference have ensured that the principles and the methodologies that the partnership imbibed continue to bear fruit. This has led to the formation of the North East Interfaith Forum for Reconciliation (NEIFR) which recently submitted a proposal to the Lessons Learnt Rehabilitation Commission (LLRC) that was set up by the Government to investigate the lessons learnt in the wake of the end of the war. In their submission, the NEIFR recommended the formation of Committees of Conscience (to advise the government) and reconciliation and peace committee (to work at the grass roots level)

From the experiences shown, linking faith-based organizations together is a powerful tool for the promotion of dialogue, tolerance, interfaith cooperation, and harmonious living. It should be enhanced through a comprehensive education strategy, both formal and informal, that breaks down the seemingly insurmountable divide between “us” and “them.” This education should begin at home, within families and small communities, where the benefit of dialogue and cooperation can be seen and felt. It should roll through schools, institutes of higher education and ultimately politicians, legislators, governments and multi-lateral organizations, including those present here today.

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He was previously the Sri Lankan country director of British based NGO Muslim Aid, where he oversaw post tsunami and post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.

His main interest is in building bridges between communities to help further respect, understanding and acceptance. He was instrumental in developing a unique partnership in Sri Lanka between Muslim Aid and UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief), based in the States, which was heralded by the Commonwealth Foundation as the ‘missing link’ between interfaith dialogue and grass roots action. The partnership was praised by the UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown in a speech at the UN in November 2008 as an example of British Muslims working closely with their US Christian counterparts to solve real problems in South Asia.

Using this partnership, Amjad was instrumental in bringing religious and civil society leaders together in December 2008 to discuss real practical ways of reconciliation post conflict in Sri Lanka. Amjad is currently consulting with the Congress of Religions and The Methodist Church in Sri Lanka to establish an Interfaith Coalition for Peace to undertake practical projects

using spirituality as a resource for reconciliation and rehabilitation. This culminated in a submission to the Government on the 1st of Dec of recommendations for post conflict reconciliation.