



Best Practices: Strengthening Respect for Religious Pluralism on Mt. Zion

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Contact:

Sharon Rosen
Co-Director, Jerusalem office
Search for Common Ground
PO Box 49411 9149302
Jerusalem
+972 25 81 20 49
srosen@sfcg.org

Adrienne Lemon
Senior DM&E Regional Specialist
Search for Common Ground
32, Avenue Kunkiko, Rohero II
Bujumbura, Burundi
+257 22 21 96 96
alemon@sfcg.org

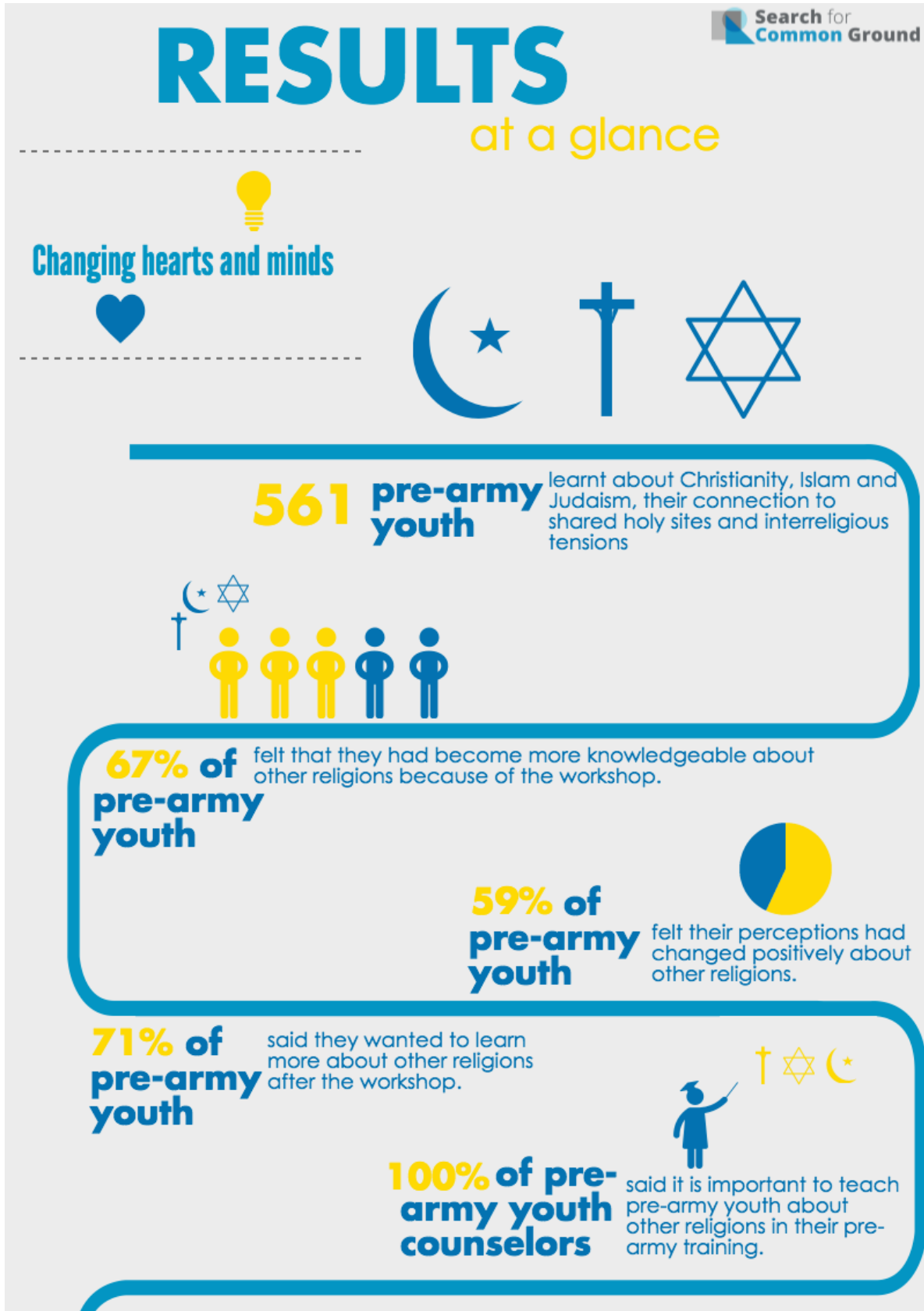
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Project

Sharing Holy Sites in Jerusalem

From 1 September 2015 to 1 June 2016 with funding from the Robert Bosch Foundation, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), in cooperation with the Jerusalem Intercultural Centre (JICC), has implemented workshops on religious issues for Israeli pre-army groups. The workshops took place within pre-army education programs (called ‘MECHINA’ in Hebrew – a voluntary preparatory year for high school graduates before army service) when groups visit Jerusalem. The workshops provide information in an experiential way about the three Abrahamic religions in Jerusalem (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) and deal with interreligious tensions. The students discuss the challenges and opportunities that arise regarding shared sacred places. The **overall goal** of this project was to strengthen respect for religious pluralism among Israeli youth. The **specific objective** was to develop greater awareness among Israeli pre-army youth of the attachments that religious people of the Abrahamic faiths feel towards their holy sites. In total 561 participants (17-19 years old) participated in 27 workshops.

This project was implemented in parallel with another SFCG project to address interreligious tensions entitled Window on Mt. Zion.

Window on Mount Zion

The Window on Mount Zion project implemented by SFCG from 2015 to 2016, with financial support from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), is comprised of activities on the ground on Mount Zion including a) the “Window on Mount Zion” volunteer training and activities b) Mt. Zion residents meetings and c) Police training. The volunteers were trained to regularly monitor holy sites. The police training took a very similar form to the pre-army training described above and aimed to boost appreciation for diverse religious connection to holy sites. The project also established and maintained a Registry of Attacks on Holy Sites. **Specific project objectives** were to 1) Enhanced collaboration among religious, security, municipal and national government stake-holders to address religious tensions in Jerusalem; and 2) Increased coordination to protect holy sites and the people visiting them on Mt Zion.

Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites

Both projects presented here fit into and are an integral part of a larger initiative to safeguard holy sites in the Holy Land based on SFCG’s Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites (hereafter “Universal Code”; see Annex 1). This global initiative is spearheaded by SFCG’s Jerusalem office, led by its co-director, Sharon Rosen, as SFCG’s global expert on interreligious issues. The purpose of the Universal Code is both to better safeguard holy sites globally and to support interreligious cooperation. The Universal Code is currently being implemented as a field project among Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land. But, it extends far beyond the Holy Land. A pilot project, begun in 2011, is still continuing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and field

projects were launched in 2014 in Indonesia and Nigeria, and in Sri Lanka, India and Tunisia in 2015. Finally, efforts are being made to support the development of a UN resolution in the spirit of the Universal Code.

Results

The project implemented by SFCG in Jerusalem had a significant impact on the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of direct beneficiaries, as well as their communities. While these impacts are observable only in the present, they show signs of sustainability, creating a lasting effect on the diverse people and relationships on Mt. Zion. The observed results of this project are divided below into those relating to knowledge and attitude changes, and those relating to behavioral changes.

Changing Hearts and Minds

It is clear from post-training evaluations, as well as interviews conducted with counselors leading the pre-army groups, that during the course of their training, pre-army youth experienced changes in their knowledge of and desire to learn about other religions, as well as attitudes towards the attachment of other people to their holy sites. Of the 561 youth who participated in the trainings, 335 (59.7%) were surveyed. The survey results revealed key changes in the youth's knowledge of and attitudes about other religions and their holy sites. The results revealed by the survey were supported by feedback from counselors during a series of interviews conducted several months after the trainings.

Knowledge about other religions

81.8% of participants felt that they had learned something new in the training, while 67.2% said they had become more knowledgeable about other religions because of the workshop. Additionally, 61.5% felt the workshop had clarified misconceptions they had had about other religions and their followers.

Increased sensitivity to the attachments of different people to their holy sites

When it came to attitudes about other religions, 58.8% of the participants expressed that, following the training, their perceptions had changed positively about other religions. As one counselor explained “The workshop was really great for us and it really opened my students’ minds.” Another counselor explained,

They (the pre-army youth) said they had never thought about the religious aspects before. It gave them a chance to look at other religions. They didn't know anything about Christianity or other religions. It gave them an opening to think about it.

This was echoed by another who explained “Usually we just talk about Judaism, but in this workshop we talked about the three religions.” Overall, there was a consensus that the workshop had “opened their students’ eyes” – this refrain was repeated by all counselors in different words.

Desire to learn more about other faiths in the future

In addition to the new knowledge attained during the training, it seems that the learning likely did not stop at the end of the workshop. 71.3% of the participants expressed a desire to learn more about other religions after the workshop. One counselor interviewed felt this newfound interest was the key impact of the project:

These workshops do a lot to open interest. They (the participants) didn’t know they were interested in these things before the training. That’s the main success.

Beyond this, another counselor felt that the training had also prepared the youth for deeper positive engagement in other activities in their pre-army education program:

We invest a lot of time in meeting Arab Israeli Christians and so I would say that this workshop added to their curiosity for later encounters it has deepened and enriched our experience.

This suggests another layer of impact of the training. While the most direct impact of the training is on the perceptions, attitudes and knowledge of youth towards and about other religions, these individual changes also prime youth for further transformation through future interactions with members of other faiths, or similar activities geared towards respecting religious pluralism.

Overall, the pre-army counselors similarly expressed their support for the training. 100% of the counselors felt that it is important to engage pre-army youth in workshops on other religions in their pre-army training. 83.3% claimed that they would bring more students to these kinds of workshops in the future. There was an openness to and appreciation for the material and approach of the workshops, on the part of both the youth and counselors, which suggested their impact will not be short-lived.

Inspiring Action

Beyond these changes in knowledge and attitudes, there were important impacts in other respects as well. These included students planning to become leaders in coexistence, the establishment of a neutral space on Mt. Zion (JICC) for inter-religious dialogue and collective action, students taking the initiative to learn more post-training or to share their knowledge and experience with others, and increased participation in inter-religious community events. One counselor summed it up saying, “Our students want to do more.”

The training had an impact on what the youth envisioned themselves doing in the future. Every

year the counselors conduct a survey with the army youth and this year they added a question about what the youth would like to do in the future. The youth were asked specifically if they would like to participate in communal leadership. If they indicated they would, they were asked what they would like to focus on: Judaism, politics or coexistence. One of the counselors said, “75% from my mechina (pre-army group) said ‘coexistence’ and I think that is because of this kind of workshop.”

But students did more than plan to take action. Some “went to Jerusalem again and did a tour on religious sites...more Christian sites.” Others went to the West Bank, “a problematic area for different religions.” Other students planned to bring others to do the same tour they had done as a group:

“One of my [former] students called me and said she is still thinking about what we did in those workshops and she said **she wants to take her colleagues to do the same tour** and she asked about contact details”

- Counselor

As this student is now in the army, it is clear that the impact of the training is lasting and can proliferate as those who attended begin to share their new ideas and experience.

Finally, youth participation in the training may have also catalyzed an increase in youth participation in other events focused on coexistence. One counselor said,

We have a lot of projects that we run every year... we organize something for the whole area where we ask everyone from different religions to come and we do an entire day. I think this year we had the biggest. We had 300 participants and there was a lot of motivation and interest.

While it is impossible to confirm whether the increased interest in this activity is necessarily linked to the training, it does indicate another possible avenue of impact.

Sustainability

Despite the encouraging action taken by the youth, the most indelible impacts of these project activities are likely yet to be fully realized. In the coming years, the changes in perception and understanding brought about from the trainings will hopefully endure, creating lasting change for the youth and their community.

Pre-army Youth

While there were no follow-up surveys conducted with the pre-army youth who participated in trainings, 71.3% of the participants agreed that they wanted to learn more about other religions after the workshop. The affirmation of commitment to continued learning about other religions from the youth suggests the likelihood that this training will have a lasting impact on them.

Furthermore, the counselors who were interviewed months after the training expressed that the impact they had observed on the youth was sustainable. One said, “[The training] has definitely affected them and one can see that definitely at the end of the year. I feel that my students have changed.” While this evidence indicates a likely sustainable impact, only when these youth enter the army and must patrol some of the very sites they visited and discussed together in the training, will the true impact of the trainings be known.

Counselors

Both the surveys and interviews with the counselors demonstrated a deep appreciation for and support of the pre-army trainings. In the survey 100% of the counselors agreed that this kind of training was important for pre-army youth and 83.3% of them strongly agreed that they would bring more students to these kinds of workshops. Overall, they felt the training fitted in well with their own efforts and activities and felt it was important for the youth. This acceptance and support of the training suggests sustainability of the impacts on the youth in that the counselors are likely to be open to support the youth in their efforts to learn more about other religions (as 71.3% of them said they intended to do). Furthermore, it suggests sustainability of the project model. If counselors were appreciative of the training and recognized its value, they are likely to welcome future similar projects involving their students.

JICC

Perhaps the most promising impacts in terms of sustainability were those observed on the JICC itself. The JICC has become the collective voice of Mount Zion's residents. But, it has also grown to be a new space for dialogue on the Mount, which will continue to reap benefits, into the future. The possible future benefits of this are difficult to overestimate: dialogues, mediation/negotiations, conflict resolution inter-cultural and inter-religious activities, exchanges and events, etc. While the JICC of course existed prior to the project activities, its new and growing status in the community as a neutral space and symbol of community solidarity indicates expanded future possibilities for impact.

Best Practices and Opportunities

This section presents best practices identified in this project and discusses the opportunities for expanding this successful model to other areas in Jerusalem, or further afield.

Best Practices

The successes of this project can help to inform similar projects in the future on Mt. Zion or in other locations. From the data collected, several practices of this project have been identified which should be replicated in similar programming to ensure similar positive results. They include: the program of the training, the timing and context of the training, and the selection of the training facilitator.

Program of the training

The positive impact of the training was found to be linked to the program style and approach chosen. Specifically, the sequence of the training components and the inclusion of a tour to locations of spiritual importance to multiple religions was identified to have been successful. In terms of the sequence, one counselor explained that having a classroom introduction or lecture session first meant that when the students did the tour to different religious locations, “it wasn’t very new and strange for them, because they already had an introduction.” Another counselor echoed this underlining the importance of the diverse elements, “I think the setting was very good - a good mixture of meeting people, going for a tour, and preparation indoor beforehand.”

The physical presence at sacred locations also helped to connect the youth with what they had been taught. One counselor said, “My students came to a deep understanding of this especially when we were at the tomb that was sacred for Muslims, Christians and Jews and in the workshop Merav (project manager) explained to us why it was sacred.” This is an important point because it underscores how coupling a lecture component with actual site visits allows students to personally connect with what they learn in the classroom, deepening their understanding.

Timing and context of the training

Another best practice identified in this project was the timing and context of the training. The training was conducted with pre-army youth during their trip to Jerusalem for other pre-army activities (led by the counselors). As one counselor explained,

We did a week with this concept of ‘religion and the state’ and we met lots of people and did lots of activities and this tour (on Mt. Zion) gave us an idea of how the three religions meet in one place and how Israel should deal with these dilemmas.

Even as part of a week long program the training stood out in its contribution. The training also amplified the impact of other activities conducted during this time (led by the counselors). As noted previously, the training prepared the youth for deeper engagement in other activities with similar goals. As one of the counselors was previously quoted, “this workshop added to [the youth’s] curiosity for later encounters it has deepened and enriched our experience.” Holding this kind of training in the context of other activities means that both the training and other

activities are more beneficial. Another counselor explained, “We came to this workshop during a week in Jerusalem to explore the conflict and religion in Jerusalem, so this was the first day and it was exactly what we needed.... It was a good way to start discussing all the complexities of Jerusalem.” This quote reaffirms the fact that the training is most useful at the beginning of a visit like this, to set the tone and prepare students to engage positively with other activities.

Selection of the training facilitator

Finally, feedback revealed that the impact of these kinds of trainings on youth truly hinges on the selection of good facilitators to lead them. If the facilitator is strong, the impact is stronger. Several counselors praised the facilitators, one explaining the importance of:

...choos[ing] someone who connects with people. When you go on these tours you can remember 70 percent of the information. But, what you remember the most is the experience and the thoughts on the dilemmas and the issues. And the guides did a great job at that. You can't get a pure academic to talk to the students, he won't connect with them.

This is important because it underlines the need for careful recruitment practices to ensure facilitators are engaging and personable when it comes to training youth in order to hold their attention and help them to connect with the subject matter.

Opportunities

In addition to best practices identified above, opportunities for deepened impact and expansion of the project were also revealed. These opportunities were linked to the development of the concept of the “sacred” in the training, along with the expansion of the training to include other sites in Israel (if feasible).

While the training dealt with the concept of the sacred by presenting and discussing how and why different religions consider certain religious sites sacred, the training didn't engage directly with the concept of “the sacred.” One counselor explained, “What can be improved I think is to discuss the word sacred and the meaning of it and the history of it. Sacred, ‘kadosh’ [in Hebrew], has changed over the years. It is good to see what it means to students.” The counselor's suggestion indicates an opportunity for additional framing content to be added to the training in order to better contextualize the discussion as well as boost interaction. This would likely also help to root the concepts and facts presented later in the program to this personal understanding of “the sacred.”

Additionally, there exists an opportunity to expand the project to include other sacred locations in Israel. One counselor suggested adding sites like the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif, or one of the larger churches - locations which “people hear about in the news, but never go to.” The

underlying point the counselor was making was that sites like Mt. Zion may be less interesting to an 18 year-old than somewhere more “dramatic.” However, he acknowledged that there are security concerns and that this might not be possible. This opportunity, thus, depends on whether sites like these are safe venues for similar activities. If so, they represent a possibility to even further engage youth and therefore to deepen the impact.

Finally, during the course of the data collection and analysis, it became clear that the counselors are key actors in the success of the project model. In similar future projects they should be engaged early and often during the design of the training program to ensure the content is appropriate, accessible and links with the rest of the pre-army education program in order to maximize the resonance between to two. As identified above, this connection has potential to create positive synergies between their mechina program and the training.

Annex 1

UNIVERSAL CODE OF CONDUCT ON HOLY SITES¹

PREAMBLE

We, religious leaders and representatives of faith traditions from all regions of the globe, declare our commitment to seek peace and pursue it in accordance with the call of our respective faith traditions. We endorse this Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites (“Universal Code”) whose purpose is to reflect and serve this goal.

Holy Sites are places of profound significance and sacred religious attachment whose special character and integrity are to be preserved and protected against all violence and desecration. In focusing on issues of definitions, preservation, access, sharing, conflict prevention and resolution, reconstruction, memorialization, expropriation, education, establishment, excavation and research, this Universal Code lays out the foundation for a cooperative, concrete implementation plan for preventing and ending conflict in relation to sacred places.

Resolved to cooperate in the spirit of dialogue and a search for common ground, based on respect for each other, for the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and for the integrity of each religious tradition,

Sharing the vision of a world where holy sites are universally acknowledged as sacred to their respective religions or faith traditions, and where the attachment of persons and communities to their holy sites is respected by everyone, regardless of their belief,

Acknowledging that holy sites have been foci of contention or targets of destruction in many conflicts around the world, and bearing in mind the particular vulnerability of the holy sites of religious minorities,

Seeking to set out a framework of principles for preserving holy sites, guaranteeing the religious freedom to use them, and promoting them as places of peace, harmony and reconciliation,

Recognising the positive role religious leaders can play in addressing conflicts pertaining to holy sites, and reaffirming the moral responsibility to speak up for the protection of the holy sites of others, regardless of religion,

Building on international conventions and norms that safeguard the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights, preserve cultural heritage, and safeguard civilians in armed conflicts,

¹ The *Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites* was developed, in consultation with religious leaders and experts from the world’s major faiths, by a working group of representatives from the following non-governmental organisations: One World in Dialogue, Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, Religions for Peace and Search for Common Ground. Funding for the Code was received from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We religious leaders and representatives of faith traditions solemnly pledge to respect and work towards the realisation throughout the world of the following:

PROVISIONS

Article 1. Definitions

For the purposes of this Code, holy sites are understood as places of religious significance to particular religious communities. They include, but are not limited to, places of worship, cemeteries and shrines, incorporating their immediate surroundings when these form an integral part of the site.

For the purposes of this Code, holy sites are places of defined and limited area that are designated as such by each religious community and in agreement with the relevant public authorities, according to its diverse heritages and customs, recognising also that a single site can be sacred to more than one community.

Article 2. Preservation of holy sites

Holy sites shall be preserved for present and future generations, with dignity, integrity and respect for their name and identity. They shall be preserved both as sites of religious significance, and as historical, cultural and ecological legacies of their communities and of humankind. They shall not be desecrated or damaged, nor shall religious communities be forcibly deprived of their holy sites.

Where necessary to ensure the preservation of a holy site, the relevant authorities² should consider establishing a protective zone around it, prohibiting or restricting construction or development, without prejudice to property rights.

If a holy site is subjected to certain restrictions due to its designation as a national heritage site, these should not be such as to unduly limit its continued functioning as a holy site under these restrictions.

Article 3. Access

The access of any person to a holy site shall be subject only to such restrictions as are mandated by religious regulations pertaining to the site, or are necessary for its protection and the safe and undisturbed conduct of worship. Anyone given access to holy sites should do so with respect to the nature, the purpose and the ethos of the respective site.

The civil authorities shall not arbitrarily prohibit the entry into the country of visitors and pilgrims to holy sites, nor arbitrarily prohibit the presence of foreign personnel who hold specific roles related to the sites.

Article 4. Sites sacred to more than one religion

Where a site is mutually recognised as sacred in the established traditions of more than one religious community, the relevant authorities shall consult with these communities to set up a legal arrangement whereby adherents of each community are ensured access to the site for religious purposes and preservation of the site is the equal responsibility of the religious communities concerned.

² For the purposes of this Code, the term 'relevant authorities' refers to authorities (e.g. religious, political, military, legal, etc. depending on the specific location) that may be involved in decision-making concerning a holy site.

Article 5. Conflict prevention and resolution

A forum comprising religious authorities and other relevant bodies shall be established to ensure regular communication and coordination. All conflicts or threats relating to holy sites shall be immediately referred to this forum for handling.

Article 6. Reconstruction and memorialisation

The relevant authorities shall take measures to facilitate the reconstruction or memorialisation of a holy site destroyed or damaged by physical violence, according to the wishes of the religious community concerned.

The necessary permissions to this end shall be granted, as prescribed by law and with due regard to property rights, without undue delay, and without imposing special legal or administrative obstacles.

Article 7. Expropriation or nationalisation

In the case of proposed expropriation or nationalisation of any part of a holy site, the religious community or communities concerned shall be adequately represented and formally consulted on all aspects of the process. The relevant authority shall make an impact assessment suggesting provisions for the protection of cultural heritage, for the appropriate use of the site with respect for its religious tradition, and for the continuity of religious practice. The religious community shall have recourse to the courts if agreement cannot be reached.

Where parts of a holy site have been nationalised in the past, the restitution of such property to the religious community should be encouraged.

Article 8. Education and public speech

In their public pronouncements and educational activities, all parties shall promote the preservation of holy sites, acknowledge the significance of holy sites of others as places of worship and sites of identity, respect the sensitivities of others with regard to these sites, and stress their spiritual value rather than any strategic, territorial or military significance. The attachment of a group to its holy site shall not be denied.

Religious communities shall be consulted regarding the public promotion of their holy sites for touristic, scientific, educational and other purposes. Such promotion shall respect the identity and religious traditions of the community concerned.

Article 9. Establishing holy sites

The right of all religious communities to establish and maintain existing holy sites, with due regard to the rights of others, and after due process, shall be recognised as an integral part of the freedom of religion or belief.

An occupying power shall not establish nor allow the establishment of any permanent new holy site without due regard for the property and other recognised rights of the population of an occupied territory.

Article 10. Excavations and research

Archaeological excavations may be carried out on holy sites only after consultation and with the mutual agreement of the recognised authorities of all religious communities to which the site is sacred, as prescribed by law, and with minimal interference with the religious use of the site.

Historical findings regarding the distant past of a site shall not prejudice present arrangements of ownership and control, nor shall they be abused to question a religious community's customary identification with the site.

ANNEX

A GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

We religious leaders and representatives of faith traditions aspire to a world where all people can worship at their holy sites in freedom and safety. This Universal Code has been developed to provide a cooperative framework for the implementation of this aspiration.

Implementation

At its very core, implementation of the Universal Code is based on inter-religious cooperation and collaboration with relevant authorities leading to the institutionalisation of activities in one, or across several countries for the protection of sacred places.

We encourage religious leaders, interfaith bodies and other faith organisations to implement the Code, in particular by creating pilot projects in their countries for the protection of sacred places, based on all or part of the Universal Code and adapted as needed to local situations.

Implementation can take varied forms according to the local needs of different communities. It can include education, monitoring, documentation, joint visits and denunciations by religious leaders to attacked holy sites, among other activities.

Monitoring:

We encourage the establishment of monitoring bodies, developing from the forum mentioned in article 5, to oversee the implementation of the Universal Code on local, regional or national levels as appropriate.

We recommend that a monitoring body be comprised of authorised representatives of relevant authorities, and that, inter alia, it:

- Draws up a list of holy sites to be acknowledged as falling under the provisions of this Universal Code.
- Considers any dispute over the status of a site, and seeks to resolve it in a spirit of dialogue, reconciliation, and solidarity.
- Advises the authorities as appropriate on all issues relating to holy sites.
- Publicises regular reports on its work and the progress made towards the implementation of the Universal Code in its area.

In time, as the number of regions implementing the Universal Code expands, we recommend the establishment of an international mechanism to monitor the safeguarding of holy sites worldwide. Such an international monitor could promote the adoption of this Universal Code in all relevant forums, cooperate with relevant international agencies, encourage the establishment of monitoring bodies, assist the monitoring bodies in their work, document

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and analyse progress toward the implementation of the Universal Code worldwide, and provide an annual report on the status of holy sites.

We, religious leaders and representatives of faith traditions recognise our profound responsibility to work towards the realisation of the vision articulated by this Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites.