If we are going to succeed in transforming our world into a healthier, just, and more peaceful one, we must focus our main efforts on building inclusive societies. Globalization has demonstrated how interconnected we are, and hopefully we will learn one of the essential lessons from COVID-19—that we are also inextricably interdependent. Countries close borders in an attempt to protect their citizens’ health. This may help in the short term, but it is only through international collaboration on fighting the pandemic that this distressing period of our lives will speedily pass. Sharing information and resources, working together on speedily developing a vaccine with equal and inexpensive access for all, and supporting humanitarian and economic needs around the world are just some of the collaborative measures needed. COVID-19’s wake-up call is telling us not to return, when this is over, to the divisive and unjust ways of the past that hurt us and our environment but to take a different trajectory toward building a fairer and peaceful world.

How does this relate to the role of religion today? Can it help develop a strategy that ensures the cultivation and sustainment of inclusive, peaceful societies?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that religion per se cannot develop a strategy. We live in a magnificently diverse world of different religions, faiths, and beliefs, and each is believed, understood, and practiced within its own context, tradition, and culture. Religious beliefs can be perceived as (and sometimes are) exclusivist, even divisive when they promote one set of beliefs as superior to all others. Yet all religions and faiths aspire to universal peace and human dignity. More and more, the world of interfaith connection has opened up opportunities for religious believers to celebrate their special uniqueness while at the same time learn about and appreciate the commonalities that are to be found within religious diversity. These activities in themselves support the goal of building inclusive societies.

But if we cannot talk generally about the role of religion in developing a strategy of inclusion, there are religious actors playing this important role. I intentionally use the term actors in order to include people who may not have formal religious authority, titles, or qualifications. Religious actors include global, national, and community players—men, women, and youth—community lay leaders, educators, and activists whose faith infuses their actions. They are influential and trusted people within their communities, have many assets at their disposal, and are well positioned to promote peace. In addition, the thousands of faith-based organizations that
implement humanitarian, developmental, and other activities also play a crucial role in helping people to live in dignity while still practicing their own faith.

This has been especially evident during the pandemic, as religious actors and faith-based organizations have been some of the most trusted first responders, playing essential roles such as explaining safety regulations, adapting religious rituals, and providing food, education, and succour to communities. A senior advisor to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) told me that “the role played by faith actors in ensuring and supporting the resilience shown by so many and under such difficult circumstances needs to be more widely acknowledged by policy makers and factored into key policy decisions as we recover from the effects of the pandemic” (email correspondence with Dr. Kishan Manocha, senior advisor on Freedom of Religion and Belief at the OSCE, May 14, 2020). It is only recently that (mostly Western) countries that have consistently separated issues of religion and state have begun to recognize the importance of including religious actors in discussions for effective policymaking, particularly if the subject under review has a religious dimension.

For believers, religion provides a framework for understanding the material and spiritual world and how to live their lives accordingly. It is an inextricable aspect of their identity, of who they are and who they are not. Given that of the world’s seven billion people today, nearly six billion identify as members of religious communities (Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*, December 2012), religious actors have a crucial role to play as integral members of society in ensuring that diversity does not lead to disharmony and violence but to a celebration of the richness within society. But sadly, deeply held religious identities can also be a lightning rod for conflict and a source for fractured societies. When fear, ignorance, and self-righteousness rear their ugly heads, people are stigmatized, scapegoated, and blamed because of their religious beliefs. Various religious minorities, for example, in different countries and across social media, have been blamed for our present pandemic, resulting in concomitant justifications for violence.

If “violence is the ultimate violation of human dignity” (Search for Common Ground, “Our Statement on the Tensions in the United States” [sparked by the killing of George Floyd], https://www.sfcg.org/statement-on-tensions-united-states-george-floyd/, accessed June 2020), then the role of religious actors becomes all the more relevant given their religious aspirations for universal peace and human dignity. To address these injustices, the human being’s inalienable dignity must be the infrastructure on which to build our efforts. Once we get to know and appreciate one another, we can together build the inclusive societies needed for our well-being.

For the past fifteen years I have had the privilege of working at Search for Common Ground, the world’s largest international nongovernmental organization dedicated to peacebuilding. For nearly forty years the organization has been working to transform conflict into understanding and cooperation around our differences. One of our guiding principles is to include people from all sides of a conflict in order to build relationships of trust that lead to changed attitudes and behaviors. Although not a faith-based organization, Search for Common Ground has recognized the critical importance of engaging religious actors to build enduring peace.

Following are two initiatives where the engagement of religious actors has offered strategies for building peaceful societies. They focus on the root causes of conflict and emphasize inclusion as a guiding principle to reduce interreligious tensions.

1. Protecting Holy Sites by Promoting Mutual Respect and Collaboration

For more than a decade I have represented Search for Common Ground in a dedicated partnership with the Religions for Peace network and two Norwegian organizations to protect and preserve holy sites. With assistance from senior religious leaders worldwide, we developed the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites (www.codeonholysites.org), whose purpose is to safeguard sacred spaces and promote interreligious reconciliation. The Universal Code offers...
In Nigeria, holy sites have been in the crossfire of conflict. In the northern regions of the country, holy sites have suffered damages during clashes between Christian farmers and Muslim herders. A woman cries while trying to console a woman who lost her husband during the funeral service for people killed during clashes between cattle herders and farmers, on January 11, 2018, in the Benue state capital, Makurdi.

practical guidelines for protecting places of worship and includes a bold call for cooperation among all relevant authorities, including religious actors, who are often in conflict. In cases where state authorities fail to effectively safeguard sacred spaces, the Universal Code enables bottom-up community-level activities by empowering religious actors—men, women, and youth—to play their part.

The Universal Code has been endorsed by interfaith networks, religious communities, and leaders worldwide (examples include the Religions for Peace World Council, The Nishkam Gurudwar [Sikh, UK], President of the All India Council of Imams and Mosques, the World Council of Churches, the Hindu Forum of Europe, the Muslim Council of Britain, and the Council of Religious Community Leaders in Israel).

Last year, in the wake of devastating attacks on holy sites as people prayed in their churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples in different parts of the world, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was tasked by the UN Secretary-General with developing an urgent plan of action (https://www.unaoc.org/2019/09/launch-of-plan-of-action-to-safeguard-religious-sites/) for safeguarding holy sites. We partnered with UNAOC to adapt the wording of the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites to align with the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites. Over the years, as we’ve implemented this Universal Code, we have seen how mutual trust has flowered among people who mistrusted and feared one another, and faith leaders are collaborating with civil authorities in places as diverse as Nigeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sri Lanka, and the Holy Land.

**Nigeria**

Search for Common Ground works in Nigeria to prevent ethnoreligious violence, transform violent extremism, implement early-warning response efforts, and promote accountability. Our efforts demonstrate that, by and large, despite the violence, conflicts are not inherently sectarian, although they often play out along religious lines. Nigeria, in fact, is marked by interreligious acceptance. A 2010 Pew study shows that 87 percent of Nigerian citizens believe religion plays an important role in their life, and 71 percent think that it is a good thing for people of other faiths to have freedom to practice their beliefs (https://www.pewforum.org/2010/04/15/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa/).

Against this backdrop, we engaged male and female Christian and Muslim community religious leaders in Northern Nigeria to build consensus within their communities around the principle that holy places are sites for peace and reconciliation rather than targets for attack. The ability of religious community leaders to come together across faith lines in a conflict zone was a significant step in itself toward facilitating collaboration and joint action. Local, regional, and national conferences were held across the three northern zones of Nigeria, ending in media conferences that highlighted the relationship between protecting holy sites and addressing hate speech, particularly by some religious leaders. There were also calls to counter misinformation, abuse, and rumors that cause confusion and raise tension between religious communities that in extreme cases leads to recruitment by violent extremist organizations. Particular attention was paid to engaging youth through a photo and video competition calling for a demonstrated recognition of holy sites as places of worship, peace, and dialogue.

Sheikh Nurudeen Lemu, from the Da’wah Institute of Nigeria, noted that “once a place of worship has been demolished, the conflict changes its identity from its real cause to a religious one . . . [everybody] takes sides. If we can find a way of keeping religious sites, sacred places, out of the conflict and have an agreement about that, it becomes easier to diagnose the problems and to treat them.” Pastor Margaret Inusa Meka of the Glorious Life International Church, Jos, added, “I think that if we can have that common ground, then we are taking a step towards peace in God’s world” (https://www.sfcg.org/holy-sites-nigeria/).

**Mount Zion, Jerusalem, Holy Land**

In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and frequent violence around holy sites, Search for Common Ground’s Jerusalem program, together with the Jerusalem Intercultural Center based on Mount Zion, worked to reduce interreligious tensions, build cooperation, protect places of worship, and turn Mount Zion into a center that celebrates the heritages of all three religions attached to the location: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Just outside Jerusalem’s Old City walls, Mount Zion is a highly sensitive location given its shared holy site.

Centuries-long conflict over ownership and religious rights, fueled by rivalry and intolerance, had resulted in an atmosphere of suspicion and violence. This initiative, which began in 2015, aimed at changing this atmosphere by building...
trust and cooperation on issues of common interest. Activities included engaging religious actors with representatives from government ministries, the municipality, and law enforcement agencies to identify shared concerns and find collaborative solutions; establishing a body of volunteers to help maintain a harmonious atmosphere and assist with religious services; and organizing workshops and site visits for Jerusalem Old City’s law enforcement authorities and youth to increase interreligious sensitivity.

The results have been quite spectacular given the initial mistrust and intermittent violent behavior. For the first time ever, a 2016 desecration of the Dormition Abbey, located on Mount Zion, elicited a joint public condemnation by religious leaders living on the mount (the statement noted, “We, residents of Mount Zion, call on the public to preserve the security and mutual respect of the Holy Places to all religions on Mount Zion. When one of these places is desecrated, it affects not only the site itself, but also all other holy sites on Mount Zion”). Local authorities were enlisted to repair safety hazards; law enforcement improved; a Mount Zion website was developed celebrating the attachments of all the religions to the mount, all of which contributed to a reduction in violence. Over a thousand youth have toured the shared holy site and participated in workshops to expand understanding of the different religious attachments.

In one activity, an interfaith group of volunteers cleaned up years of garbage and restored tombstones in the famous Muslim Dajani Cemeteries while being supplied with refreshments from the local Ultra-Orthodox Jewish seminary. These may seem like small steps, but they build trust across hardened divides, foster critical discussions about protecting spaces for all faiths, and promote understanding that undermines acts of hate.

2. Kyrgyzstan: Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief

As a post-Soviet country, Kyrgyzstan has a complex relationship with religion and state. Rooted in Soviet communist ideals, many in Kyrgyzstan maintain that religion must not influence state laws, and in turn it is the state’s role to regulate and control religious groups. The resurgence of Islam in Kyrgyzstan after independence led to a profound level of mistrust between state authorities, who feared the rise of religious extremism, and some religious communities. Consequently, this has influenced how the police, judiciary, and other state instruments relate to Kyrgyzstan’s religious communities.

Search for Common Ground works in Kyrgyzstan to promote a culture of mutual respect amid political, religious, and ethnic tensions. Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Kyrgyzstan is an initiative that engages religious leaders, government authorities, and civil society organizations to jointly foster institutional legal reform and an environment of interreligious acceptance. Since June 2018, Search for Common Ground, in partnership with Kyrgyzstan’s State Committee for Religious Affairs, has organized fourteen public sessions across the country to address amendments to Kyrgyzstan’s draft law On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Five hundred and ninety-one representatives from state and law enforcement bodies, religious organizations (including Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha’i senior religious leaders), academic and educational institutions, human rights organizations, and the media participated in these public hearings. The religious actors who participated in this project had a hand in formulating new government legislation that directly affects the religious rights of their communities (Gulnara Asilbekova and Kanekey Jailobaeva, “Final Evaluation: Promoting Religious Freedom through Government and Civil Society Collaboration in the Kyrgyz Republic,” Search for Common Ground, July 2017).

We’ve learned three main lessons from these initiatives:

- Religious actors play a critical role in building inclusive societies. Religious men, women, and youth, particularly those working at the community level, need to be encouraged to engage in building interreligious relationships, cooperating on issues of common concern, and using their influence to promote inclusion.

- Collaboration, not arms, builds peaceful societies. Investments of time, effort, and resources are needed to engage and train religious actors in building mutual trust if we want to deal with root causes and sustain peaceful solutions. Continually pouring more and more resources into security has proven to be insufficient in protecting humanity.

- Multistakeholder approaches are essential. Inclusion also means collaboration among local, national, and intergovernmental sectors; law enforcement authorities; the media; civil society organizations; and courts of justice, among others.

In this way, religious actors can live up to their highest aspirations, hold the dignity of each and every human being in their hearts, and cultivate inclusive societies that leave no one behind.