



An African woman praying at home.

Do you recognize any of these in your organization?

If so, you need to transition to a strategic religious engagement approach

What is religious engagement?

Religious engagements are activities to understand more about and work effectively with diverse faith actors to achieve humanitarian, development, and peace goals. Religious engagement work can range in scale from small, informal meetings between faith and international actors, for example, to large-scale, multi-million dollar programmes.

The status quo in religious engagement is not strategic

Six major sticking points of previous religious engagement:

1



Coordination and Integration

- Too many of the current engagements are unsystematic, uncoordinated, and duplicative
- There are rarely plans for the results of consultations with faith actors to be integrated into appropriate systems and structures within an organisation, so consultations have limited effects and are often repeated every few years.

2



Transactional vs. Substantial and Relational

- Religious engagements have become a “transactional commodity,”¹ which risks antagonistic partnerships
- Equitable partnerships with faith actors are ones that extend over time and prioritise relationship building but are few and far between. Instead, short-term, and one-off engagements are the norm.

3



Global Policy Convenings versus More Concerted National and Regional Programming

- Global convenings tend towards more abstract discussion and lack nuance about the contextual and programme-specific reality of religious engagement
- Instead, country-level engagement should focus on both mainstreaming and targeting religious engagement to sectoral program staff where implementation with local faith actors can occur.

1. Azza Karam, “Religion & Development: An Enhanced Approach or a Transaction?,” *Inter Press Service*, April 12, 2019, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/04/religion-development-enhanced-approach-transaction/>.



Buddhist monk hands

Evidence of Religious Engagement Impact

- There is not a lack of evidence on working with and by faith actors in development (see JLI's State of the Evidence report for more), but there is a lack of evidence on how religious engagements strategies from international actors have been implemented and whether they have worked or not
- Increase accountability from international actors in order to demonstrate the results of religious.



4

Inclusion and Representation

- Too often the religious engagement is only with high-level religious leaders or only the most prominent FBOs
- Careful faith actor mapping helps understand the dynamics of religious leadership and avoid reinforcing power imbalances between faith actors, including women and youth leaders.



5

Ideological Divides

- While ideological differences can create very real barriers, efforts to understand, overcome, or positively engage differences are not visible. Staff are left to deal with tricky conversations without guidance, which can lead to errors and deepening divides.



6

How can we work on ideological disagreements that are hindering the advancement of partnerships?

There is no quick trick to solving deep differences and disagreements. But ignoring them can also lead to problems further down the road.

Key Ideas:

- Understanding that rights are universal but not uniform and will be contextualized in line with different religious traditions and the ways in which they have held similar rights for millennia.
- There is no substitute for building trust over time. Work on relationships before moments of crisis and discuss issues where there is common ground first.

How can JLI help you and what is our methodology for strategic religious engagement?

JLI has a strategy for improved religious engagement. Here are the key points of our recommended strategy to overcome the issues with the status quo. Our recommended strategy refocuses efforts on understanding the organisation's previous religious engagements and the organisational culture that will inform religious engagements, rather than only looking to advice from external faith actors who are neither familiar with nor can create change internally.

The first principle of good religious engagement is to look internally first. This is based on two main needs: you need to know yourself and you need to know your organisation.

Steps include forming an internal working group, conducting an internal review and mapping to understand the full scope of your current faith partnerships and projects, and working through internal reflection processes to understand staff and organisational values towards religious

engagement. This internal work will help clarify priorities and can then lead to drafting of an action plan or strategy.

The real implementation of religious engagement ultimately happens at country and local levels in programmes and projects where direct engagement with communities will take place.

A plan for strategic religious engagement can be developed to work within an organisation's overall programming strategies and plans for a country, rather than being added on as an extra that is not well integrated into other priorities.

Organisational religious engagement strategies must be grounded in and relevant to the organisation's own ways of working and work culture.

Strategic religious engagement happens across a project cycle. We can help you from the very early steps and throughout the entire project cycle. It will vary depending on the context, your type of project and particular needs. A key first step is a context-specific mapping and

context analysis to understand who and how to partner with appropriate faith actors, before working with faith actor partners to jointly design projects. Other steps may include information on religious dynamics in standard reporting and monitoring templates for projects and understanding how to include a strategic religious engagement lens in evaluation.

Finally, maintaining accountability is key – it is critical to report back on progress of the implementation of the action plan to all those who have been involved in its development.

Why do we need to examine our own values and perspectives to strategically engage with religions?

- Everyone is working from a value-base. Examining our values help us understand our own position in relation to strategic religious engagement.
- Religions are highly influential in societies and cannot be avoided in our work. You will (and probably already have) encountered religions in your work.
- There are some understandable and common reasons for avoiding talking about and working with religions. But not talking about religions does not mean that religious beliefs and practices are irrelevant. Ignoring religious beliefs and practices can lead to more problems than it solves.
- Understanding why we avoid the topic of religion and how to constructively talk about it can help us become better colleagues and open up new opportunities for projects and partnerships.



Girls praying

Religious literacy can help with your internal work to build staff knowledge and an organisational culture that understands how to analyse the roles of religions in society.

Religious literacy means understanding four key points:

1. “Religions are internally **diverse** as opposed to uniform;
2. Religions **evolve** and change over time as opposed to being ahistorical and static;
3. Religious influences are **embedded** in all dimensions of culture as opposed to the assumption that religions function in discrete, isolated, private contexts
4. There is a “difference between analyzing religions in society [i.e., understanding many perspectives exist – this is religious literacy] and discussing religious norms [i.e., this is the ultimate truth/our belief – this is for religious believers to discuss and is not necessary for strategic religious engagement].”²

You are not expected to be a theologian or religions expert! But these four points can help you understand how religions are involved in and influencing humanitarian, development, and peace work.

**KEY TAKEAWAY TO REMEMBER:
RELIGIONS ARE DIVERSE,
EVOLVING,
AND EMBEDDED.**