

1 **Peacemakers in Action**

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Center for Interreligious Understanding

By day, Hind Kabawat is glued to her smartphone, coordinating channels for medical aid, Skyping with religious and political leaders on all sides of Syria's turmoil, and planning for reconciliation. By night, her heart is breaking as she reads news of another village destroyed and re-reads emails from friends warning that she should not – cannot – return home to Syria. In the midst of it all, this Damascene Christian stands before a crowd of peace activists, raising her husky voice to chant, “Al-sha'b al-Sūry wahid! The Syrian people are one!”

Thousands of miles to the south, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bishop Ntambo Nkulu stands in front of his house, watching a car approach as his wife and mother flee through the back door. A bodyguard emerges, armed and ready to shoot, followed by the notorious warlord Chinja-Chinja. Adorned with his gruesome trophies of battle, the warlord immediately kneels, asking the bishop to pray for him. Fully knowing the terror this man had wrought, the bishop gives his blessing and warmly welcomes Chinja-Chinja into his home.

Paused at a flipchart in rural Pakistan, marker raised, Azhar “Azi” Hussain stands before a room of Wahhabi madrasa educators. The Pakistani-American trainer turns to face an irate participant who is challenging aspects of his identity – Shi’a, university-educated, US-affiliated. Increasingly agitated, the hardline leader rails against Azi’s program and announces his intent to kill the “American agent.” Azi listens intently, planning how he will turn this around.

These are scenes from the daily lives of the religiously motivated men and women named *Peacemakers in Action* by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. They are part of a select group of peace activists whose religious beliefs move them to confront violence and seek stability in their conflict-ridden communities. Their stories are both

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powerful and ordinary. Dramatic scenes mix with steady routines like those of Osnat Aram-Daphna and Najeeba Sirhan, respectively a Jewish and a Muslim principal in Galilee, making a daily effort to ensure that their students know and respect one another. For such individuals, peace is not just a word, but the defining vision of their chosen vocation. Along with the countless unknown individuals who have struggled and died for peace over the millennia, these *Peacemakers* are the backbone of the emerging – and ever evolving – field of religious peacebuilding.

Religious Peacebuilding: An Evolving Field

Throughout history, the pursuit of peace has been a recurring theme in religious practice, often overshadowed by more visible tendencies toward violence. Countless individuals have struggled for peace based on faith, including: St. Francis of Assisi, who worked to end a murderous Crusade; the Pashtun Abdul Ghaffar Kahn, who led a peaceful movement to end British colonial rule; and Aaron of the Torah, “a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace.”¹ As we name such historic religious actors, we are mindful that they were not alone. Other men and women existed alongside them, unknown to history, their lessons lost to future generations.

Alongside these individuals, there are the religious groups and institutions that shared their vision and work. Though religious organizations are unquestionably part of the global history of conflict, others have advocated for peace. Particularly during the last century, a range of action-oriented, religious institutions emerged, dedicated to creating a more peaceful world. Among those widely recognized for their leadership are the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Rabbis for Human Rights, World Council of Religions for Peace, American Friends Service Committee, the Sikh Coalition, the Mennonite Central Committee, United Religions Initiative, the Salam Institute, Interfaith Encounter Association, Pax Christi International, and the Community of Sant’Egidio.

In more recent times, this tradition of individual and institutional religious peacebuilding has received greater acknowledgment, with the lessons from their work increasingly informing a recognized academic and practical field. The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding became engaged in this arena early on with our *Peacemakers in Action* initiative and case studies of the work and vocation of individual religious peacebuilders. Simultaneously, scholars such as Scott Appleby, Marc Gopin, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Cynthia Sampson,

John Paul Lederach, David Smock, and Abdulaziz Sachedina documented and explored the positive role that religion can play in peacebuilding processes.² The scholarship thus started to catch up to the long history of practice, and religious peacebuilders are now finding inroads in official peace and development agendas.³ As a result, practitioners and scholars – and more recently policymakers and diplomats – are beginning to recognize individual and institutional religious peacemaking, as well as the spiritual and social peculiarities of religion that make it an effective peacebuilding tool.

The field has taken shape in fits and starts. As meaning-making humans, we tend to characterize such evolution neatly, as a steady progression. We use phrases such as “the rise of the field of peacebuilding,” as if describing a smooth ascent to greater knowledge and effective practices. But a closer inspection reveals that this field of religious peacebuilding – like all fields – is frequently shifting in response to the constant flow of new ideas and experiences.

This is evident in the development of the field’s terminology, which is drawn from a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, political science, negotiation, diplomacy, and beyond. It is in a constant process of definition and redefinition that splits, refines, and discards. Already, the field has moved from its early framing of “conflict resolution” to constructs including “conflict transformation,” “peacemaking,” and more recently to “peacebuilding,” a development promoted by leading scholars in the field such as Scott Appleby and David Little, among others.⁴

Lisa Schirch offers a concise discussion of this shift. She points out that the term “conflict resolution” is focused on a negative concept, and it implies that conflicts are capable of permanent settlement – a suggestion at odds with history and the outcomes of many conflict processes over time. “Peacebuilding” is more suitable because, in Schirch’s words, it is “an ‘umbrella term’ or ‘meta-term’ to encompass other terms such as conflict resolution, management, mitigation, prevention, or transformation.” She further explains that, “It is preferred by those who want a focus on the larger goals of peace and security rather than on the problem of conflict.”⁵ Many have turned to this idea of “peacebuilding,” with its long-term focus on managing relational issues in a way that excludes violence and works toward a common prosperity. Even this thoughtful formulation, however, is unlikely to end the discussion on how best to frame the field. Concepts continue to slam into each other, marking and demarcating the theoretical space. Indeed, as of this writing, newer language of

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“strategic peacebuilding” is again starting to reshape our understanding of the field.⁶

Indeed, as the language evolves, so do the lines delineating which activities properly fall within the parameters of this work. The fields of peacebuilding, development, education, security, health, political science, etc. often overlap. We note this in the lives and work of the *Peacemakers in Action*. The contexts in which they work inevitably change, and they often adapt to fill the roles needed in their societies. Thus, even as their vision may remain constant, how they pursue that vision is not always the same. For example, Alimamy Koroma of Sierra Leone was profiled in our first volume of case studies for his efforts to mediate a peace agreement as the head of the Inter-Religious Council. He then transitioned to a government role as the Minister of Works, Housing, and Infrastructure Development. There, he continued to focus on sustaining peace and building prosperity in the country, but no longer through direct peacebuilding. As the nation’s needs had shifted, so did his role.

On this shifting ground, Tanenbaum has built a working definition of peacebuilding similar to the one described by Schirch, who notes that the term now covers “many different activities that nonviolently prevent, limit, resolve, or transform conflict, and create peaceful and just societies.”⁷ Within this broad construct, our emphasis is on the work of individual peacebuilders whose prime motivation is religion and on the multiple vantage points from which they work to create peace and prosperity.⁸

Tanenbaum narrows its focus further to individuals who have worked at the grassroots because they are the ones forging the field of “religious peacebuilding” every day. While academics articulate the theory of the field, local actors like Tanenbaum’s *Peacemakers* animate the theory and contribute to its development in their practices. In their work on human rights regimes, the anthropologists Mark Goodale and Sally Engle Merry cogently summarize the importance of such grassroots actors:

Non-elites – peasant intellectuals, villages activists, government workers, rural politicians, neighborhood council members – are very often important human rights theorists, so that the idea of human rights is perhaps most consequentially shaped and conceptualized outside the centers of elite discourse, even if what can be understood as the organic philosophy of human rights is often mistakenly described as “practice” (i.e., in false opposition to “theory”).⁹

The idea of religious peacebuilding is shaped by the *Peacemakers in Action* and those like them. Working within and across multiple

disciplines, they interpret and reinterpret, define and redefine, improvise, improve, falter with, peddle back from, embellish, and cut away at what we call “religious peacebuilding.” Their work gives form to the theory, and from their specific examples we collectively create and clarify the abstract image that is the vocation of religious peacebuilding.

In this ever-redefining environment, the field will gain strength as more diverse concepts are brought to bear on it. That is why Tanenbaum shines a light on work being done in the corners far from the public eye, to call attention to a vibrant range of peace activists. Tanenbaum, with the help of its friends and partners, seeks out a diverse set of individuals from across religious and geopolitical contexts in order to share their stories and voices. In so doing, we hope we’ve helped to broaden the understanding of what religious peacebuilding entails and who is considered a religious peacebuilder. Their work may exist outside today’s common conceptions of peacebuilding, but, by documenting their stories, we hope to create a space for such efforts to be recognized as peacebuilding under tomorrow’s umbrella.

Tanenbaum’s *Peacemakers in Action*

Tanenbaum’s *Peacemakers in Action* initiative grew out of a lunch conversation in 1997 between the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and Tanenbaum’s founder and board president, Dr. Georgette Bennett. They were discussing religious men and women who were working for peace in armed conflicts, unrecognized by the larger world and often in great jeopardy. Ambassador Holbrooke postulated that publicly recognizing such unknown religious peacebuilders could raise their profile, making it more difficult for their opponents to marginalize or harm them. With this in mind, Tanenbaum named Friar Ivo Markovic of Bosnia and Herzegovina as its first *Peacemaker in Action* in 1998.

Since then, the *Peacemakers in Action* initiative has developed in new directions. Rather than a one-time recognition, the award given to each *Peacemaker* is now an entry point to a network of peacebuilders involved with Tanenbaum and with one another in a wide array of peace-seeking activities. Together, Tanenbaum and the *Peacemakers* are plotting a course for the program to provide increasing value to their work, their communities, and the field of religious peacebuilding.

Tanenbaum selects two new *Peacemakers in Action* every two years. Candidates are solicited through a global nominations process and reviewed by leading scholars and experts in the field of religious

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peacebuilding who comprise Tanenbaum's Program Advisory Council.¹⁰ To date, Tanenbaum has proudly recognized twenty-eight *Peacemakers in Action* working in twenty-one conflict zones and representing four religious traditions.

Tanenbaum has five criteria that all its religious peacebuilders must satisfy. They are:

1. Religious motivation: The *Peacemakers'* work must be fueled by their religious beliefs. Predictably, some awardees hold formal positions of religious leadership but many others do not.
2. Armed conflict: The *Peacemakers* work or have worked in an area of armed conflict.
3. At risk: The *Peacemakers'* lives and/or liberty have been at risk as they pursued peace.
4. Locally based: They are closely connected to the conflict situation at the local level. Most *Peacemaker* awardees are indigenous to the communities they serve. However, a few have left their original home countries and spent many years deeply embedded in a new environment.
5. Relatively unknown: Despite their impact, they have not received significant international attention or support at the time of selection.

While this rigorous selection process quickly enabled us to identify an outstanding and diverse cohort of *Peacemakers*, we also encountered some unanticipated weaknesses. Early on, we noticed that we were receiving very few nominations of women. Men tended to nominate men, and women tended to nominate men. As a result, far more men than women were becoming *Peacemakers*. Of the sixteen *Peacemakers* featured in our first volume of case studies, only two were women. A cursory glance at a list of Nobel Peace Prize Laureates will tell you that we are not the only ones to experience this phenomenon; indeed, our lack of female *Peacemakers* reflected a similar dearth in the wider study of religious peacebuilding.

We have a few theories about why this happens. First, most traditional religious power positions are dominated by men. As Marc Gopin aptly notes, to find female religious peacebuilders, we need to look beyond traditional religious leadership roles, particularly in Islam and Judaism, where women are so often excluded.¹¹ This exclusion is compounded by the fact that people tend to view only certain types of activities – negotiation, diplomacy, policymaking, etc. – as peacemaking, and women

historically inhabit these roles less often than men. However, as a wider variety of roles and activities are understood as components of peacebuilding, it becomes undeniable that women are key actors. The failure to identify them thus leaves a void in the field. To move forward, we must recognize, study, and utilize the strategies and techniques demonstrated in the experiences of women peacebuilders.

Tanenbaum established the *Women's Peace Initiative* award in 2006 to address this issue. The first recipients, Hind Kabawat, Najeeba Sirhan, and Osnat Aram-Daphna, are profiled in this volume. The award originally focused on identifying female *Peacemakers* in the Middle East/North Africa region, where we were aware of women working behind the scenes for peace and where new ways of going about peacebuilding are desperately needed. Tanenbaum has recently opened up the *Peacemakers in Action* award to women peacebuilders worldwide and has committed to identifying at least one female *Peacemaker* in every award cycle. Since placing this emphasis on women, Tanenbaum has tripled the number of women selected as *Peacemakers in Action*. With these new partners, we hope to expand the literature about religiously motivated women working for peace and the strategies they use.

Others have likewise identified the need to bring women's voices to the fore, including the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's Women PeaceMakers program; the United States Institute of Peace's Gender and Peacebuilding Program; the Women, Religion, and Peace: Experience, Perspectives, and Policy Implications project of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs; and the World Faiths Development Dialogue. The payoffs of this trend are twofold: first, by recognizing how women create peace – on the main stage or the back stage – women can be empowered to play a greater role in peace processes. Second, overlooked methods of interrupting conflict cycles are more likely to be identified and more readily replicated to build and nourish sustainable communities.

While we hope that Tanenbaum's efforts regarding women peacebuilders will help to correct a historic imbalance, we are aware that our selection process has yet to recognize other deserving groups. For instance, few of the nominations we receive are adherents of non-Abrahamic faiths, non-English speakers, or people under the age of 40. We recognize that these realities have an unseen impact on our *Peacemakers in Action* program, on those who continue to be overlooked, and on the field at large. Our targeted efforts to seek peacebuilders from non-Abrahamic faiths led us to Dishani Jayaweera, named our first

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Buddhist *Peacemaker in Action* in 2012.¹² Recognizing Dishani was a step forward, but we still have much to learn about the barriers preventing marginalized peacebuilders from accessing our program and how we can remove those barriers. We expect that as knowledge and capacities in the field continue to grow, religious peacebuilders who were once excluded will find their place in the *Peacemakers in Action* community.

As noted, becoming a *Peacemaker in Action* results in more than an award and cash prize. It is also the beginning of an ongoing relationship with Tanenbaum, a community of other peacebuilders, and a range of opportunities. First, Tanenbaum works with the *Peacemakers* to build public recognition for their efforts and achievements through events and publications. For some, becoming a *Peacemaker in Action* has helped their work to grow, and even saved their lives just as Ambassador Holbrooke envisioned it would. For others, public promotion by a secular American organization with a Jewish namesake is a political inconvenience, or even a life-threatening liability. Accordingly, we communicate closely with the *Peacemakers* to determine the appropriate levels of exposure.

Next, Tanenbaum creates an in-depth case study of the *Peacemakers'* lives and work. The goals and methodology of these cases are detailed below. Working closely with the *Peacemakers*, we aim to share their stories and offer their lessons to the field. You hold the results of that effort in your hands. A full book could be written about each of these peacebuilders, and we fully understand that certain critical questions within these case studies are left unanswered. We have opened the door slightly and we invite you to push it open more fully, contributing to this growing field of knowledge.

Finally, each new awardee becomes a member of Tanenbaum's *Peacemakers in Action Network*. This *Network* is a unique and powerful resource for collective action, personal growth, and mutual support. It took shape over the course of many years, developing from a loose web of relationships into a community of practice united in a common purpose.

Though the *Peacemakers* share a common vision, they have different approaches and are a study in remarkable contrasts. For example, Ricardo Esquivia overcame poverty and discrimination as the son of an indigenous mother and a black father, two of the most marginalized groups in Colombian society. On the other side of the world, Hind Kabawat leveraged her privileged upbringing to forge powerful connections among the Syrian elite in her pursuit of peace. As Tanenbaum has

long noted, these religious peacebuilders include those who talk rapidly and often, and those who mainly listen; some who joke easily and others who are deeply serious; some who step into the circle to dance and those who watch and clap. They run the gamut of professions, from educators, environmentalists, musicians, and trainers, to public servants, activists, clerics – and more. Yet despite their diversity, the *Peacemakers* have been drawn together from the beginning, recognizing each other as peers and partners in the struggle for peace.

Peacemakers form relationships at Working Retreats, which Tanenbaum convenes in order to offer support, training, and an opportunity to exchange ideas with fellow practitioners. We held the first Working Retreat in 2004 in Amman, Jordan. There, the *Peacemakers* received expert training in various aspects of religion and peacebuilding. What became clear, however, was that the most valuable aspect of the Amman Working Retreat was the connections that the *Peacemakers* were forming with each other – connections that continued to grow at subsequent Working Retreats in 2005, 2007, 2011, and 2013.

The *Peacemaker* community that emerged is a source of energy, restoration, and innovation that exceeded Tanenbaum's original vision. While some *Peacemakers* are embraced in their communities, many feel a deep sense of isolation because few around them truly understand the often harsh realities of their lives. For those individuals in particular, *Peacemaker* Retreats are a revitalizing experience. Others seize on the Retreats as professional opportunities to seek advice, to gain new skills and knowledge, and to learn from their fellow *Peacemakers*.

By their third Retreat, the *Peacemakers* expressly acknowledged that they had much to offer one another and began to explore the idea of a formal network. They asked Tanenbaum to work with them over the ensuing years to determine how they might structure their relationships to support ongoing engagement and collective action. And in August 2011, at their fourth Working Retreat, the *Peacemakers* finalized their plans, asked Tanenbaum to serve as facilitator, and established the *Peacemakers in Action Network*.

With a stated goal of working together to seek the transformation of conflicts and reconciliation of people in building a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world, this living community of the *Peacemakers in Action Network* is the newest and, perhaps, the most exciting initiative at Tanenbaum. *Peacemaker* communication is flourishing. Equally promising, an ambitious vision for cooperative efforts is emerging as the *Peacemakers* imagine the possibilities of their collective impact. At the

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time of this writing, the *Network* has already conducted several targeted peacebuilding interventions by small groups of *Peacemakers* working on the ground. In Nigeria, Honduras, South Africa, and Syria, they lent their expertise, reputations, and examples to their *Network* colleagues, with hosting *Peacemakers* reporting strong positive outcomes.¹³ For the *Peacemakers* involved, interventions offer many of the same rewards of the Working Retreats, with the benefit of watching and learning from their fellow *Peacemakers* “*in Action*.”

The evolution of the *Network* is indicative of the rising importance of networks in peacebuilding generally. For-profit industries have been using network models for years to improve productivity through information sharing and innovation.¹⁴ As communications technology has become more widely available, peacebuilders have likewise availed themselves of this model of cooperation. Peacebuilder networks have emerged, including the Alliance for Peacebuilding, founded in 1999, which connects worldwide peacebuilders through an online gateway, events, an annual meeting, and collaborative projects. The Peace and Collaborative Development Network, created in 2007, is another online space promoting information exchange and interaction among international peacebuilders, and boasts over 25,000 members. As such collaborations increase, opportunities to learn and share better practices, to innovate, and to simply connect with like-minded individuals and organizations will likely lead to more work for peace, more local voices entering the scholarly and theoretical peacebuilding discourse, and greater resilience of peacebuilders on the ground.

Tanenbaum Case Studies: Lessons in Religious Peacebuilding

While the *Network* represents an exciting foray into the power of collective action to contribute to peacebuilding, Tanenbaum’s *Peacemakers in Action* initiative at its core is about individuals. This is most evident in our publication of case studies of the lives and work of our *Peacemakers in Action*. Our interest in doing this is threefold: first, we seek to distill the lessons these individuals can teach us about practical peacebuilding; second, we intend to amplify little-known voices at the periphery of the mainstream peacebuilding discourse (but at the center of its lived reality); and, finally, we strive to illuminate the vocation of religious peacebuilding, as distinct from other religious vocational pursuits such as congregational stewardship.