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Editor's note

In areas rife with conflict, intergroup communication does not come easy, and any form of reconciliation seems even further out of reach. However, when we fall back on humanity's most fundamental instincts – the desire to listen, understand, and accept – such dialogue no longer remains an excuse to judge others. Instead, it manifests into a space for acknowledging past mistakes, providing the opportunity for competing communities to construct a future together. Under 'Focus' of this issue, we travel to Lebanon, where we get a glimpse of the meaning behind interfaith dialogue and the ministry of reconciliation. We also invite CEDAR's partner and staunch advocate of peacebuilding Dr. Kwok Wai Luen to share how the Bible encourages believers to hold onto hope in the face of adversity, as well as introduce our collaborative work of sowing seeds of peace in Hong Kong.

Focus

'This generation doesn't want sectarianism' – Lebanon's Interfaith Dialogue Project

Written by Edward Lai (Senior Communications Officer)

'We are all a pair of hands. Even though we come from different backgrounds – be it Christianity, Sunni or Shia Islam, or Druze – we take to the streets to serve this place together. This generation doesn't want sectarianism. We are Lebanon. And we will build Lebanon again!' These were the words of Mohamad, a Lebanese beneficiary of CEDAR's relief project. Despite having lost his right foot in an accident, Mohamad picked up a broom, steered his own wheelchair, and swept rubble and debris off the streets of Beirut with his son after Lebanon's capital had suffered a catastrophic explosion at its port in the August of 2020.

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Mohamad's actions touched the residents of his community, who rushed out in solidarity to quickly repair the damaged building or distribute supplies to the victims in need of humanitarian relief. Plagued by political sectarianism, the local citizens' unity and restoring force are precisely the social capital the country needs for its revitalisation.

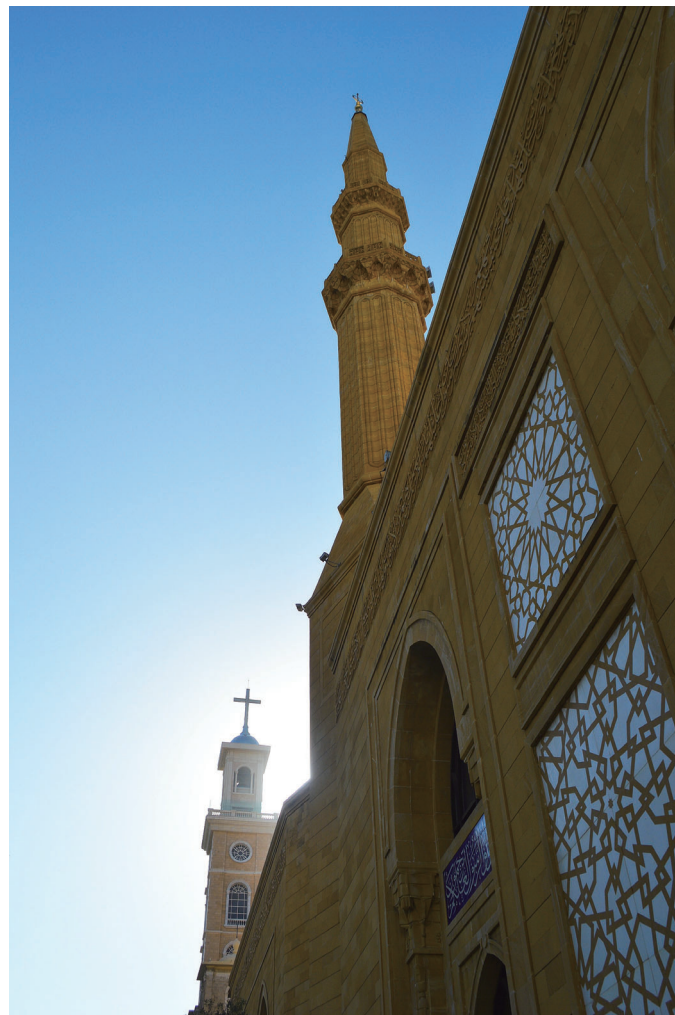


Mohamad, in a wheelchair, was cleaning the streets after the explosion

Competing for the Battlefield

The people of Lebanon's unanimous voice of saying no to sectarianism has echoed through the streets of various protests and demonstrations during the country's recent breakouts of political and economic crises. As the most religiously complicated country in the Middle East (officially, Lebanon has recognised 18 religious groups: four Muslim sects, 12 Christian sects, the Druze sect and Judaism), Lebanon has its unique geopolitical and historical factors influencing the formation of the modern sectarian politics. Situated on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, it stands at the gateway of various civilisations. Throughout its history, people of different sectarian forces have come to compete for their powers and interests in the region.

As a division of power between the elites, Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing structure was created on its independence in 1943. Three key government positions of president, prime minister, and speaker have traditionally been split between a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shia Muslim. However, this sectarian distribution of power has become a source of conflict between sects: as a way to maintain influence, political leaders would provide numerous legal and illegal benefits to the sectarian groups they represent, which not only causes a long-term chain of nepotism and corruption but consequently exacerbates the division between members belonging to differing parties. Moreover, with the Syrian war's violent outbreak leading to countless Muslim refugees fleeing to Lebanon, the drastic change in the composition of Lebanon's population has, unfortunately, led to increased contention between the locals and refugees with every passing day. Therefore, without a civil interreligious dialogue to encourage conversation and establish a healthy, mutually beneficial culture of peaceful coexistence and codependence between Lebanon's many ethnic and religious groups, we may one day see yet another sociopolitical crisis inevitably emerges.



The Saint George Maronite Cathedral (left) and the Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque (right) in Beirut, Lebanon

Ethnic conflicts in Sidon

For example, in Sidon, a port city situated in the south of Lebanon, many relatively conservative Muslim refugees and local Christians live side by side. The relationship between these two religious communities is strained. CEDAR's partner Foundation for Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Lebanon (FFRL) revealed that many local Christians are incredibly hostile to Muslims from Syria, even calling them 'social parasites'. This attitude of hostility leads Syrian Muslims to worry about being deported by authorities back to their war-torn homes. However, the intergroup prejudice does not stop there, as it sadly extends to younger generations as well, leading to some teenaged locals inciting physical violence towards the outgroups. Simultaneously, other teenagers are so vulnerable to their anxiety and depression that they become easy targets for recruitment into extremist groups, against which schools and governmental organisations have no effective countermeasures.

In light of Sidon's situation, CEDAR has been supporting FFRL in providing a safe environment for young adults of different faiths (Islam and Christianity) to have honest, constructive dialogues and recreational space for them to do activities together. This year, we hosted workshops and a camp focusing on 'Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation' for about 30 Muslim and Christian youths aged 15-25. These activities raised the young adults' awareness and increased their knowledge of different religions while eliminating preconceived misconceptions of each other's faiths. Additionally, these activities enabled these youths to manage their conflicts, teaching them to turn crises into reconciliation



Interfaith dialogue between religious leaders

opportunities. We strongly believe that the youth are the cornerstone to Lebanon's future. Their accumulated experience of cooperating and collaborating with different ethnic and religious groups will eventually be conducive to overcoming institutional prejudice and historical distrust towards people of varying factions and origins. Such a breakthrough does not merely facilitate the advancement of Lebanon's civil society but ultimately establishes a solid foundation for quashing sectarianism in the future.

Sowing the Seeds of Peace

We are delighted to see this peace project receive the enthusiastic participation of Lebanon's various religious groups. Through their networks, we invited leaders of Christianity and Islam to share their respective views on four fundamental concepts of reconciliation - "truth", "mercy", "justice", and "peace" (derived from the Psalm 85:10 of the Bible), and examine how interpersonal reconciliation fosters community development. Local churches are also partnered with us to ensure the youths are kept company and are well-nurtured in their manifestation as peace ambassadors in their communities.

'Communicating with people from different religions and backgrounds has been easier than I thought. Through learning about their lives and thoughts, I feel like we've come to understand and respect each other. If we ever hope to accept ourselves, we must first accept those around us - regardless of their beliefs or how they dress. They are nevertheless our brothers and sisters on this earth. Sometimes, going out with them, eating at the same table, and all the jokes we share make me forget that we hold different beliefs, so this interfaith dialogue has been quite a journey of learning how to be mutually encouraging and respectful.' – Project participant Nicole

'This interfaith dialogue and reconciliation project taught me to accept other religions. I learned that to develop our country and live peacefully, we must first unite and be free from sectarian conflicts. When I was young and still growing, I was taught to fear Muslims, but now I love them and see them as my brothers and sisters.' – Project participant Elie

Reconciliation has always been a long, delicate process requiring conflicting parties to open their minds, leave their comfort zones, and find ways to encounter each other.

Because of the tact and patience this process necessitates, our project will take at least two years. In this time, we will build mutual trust with the participants, and near the end, we will encourage them to draft an action plan with the common goal of contributing and giving back to the community, no matter how small the action may be.

May we hear the Lebanese's call to end sectarianism, and may we be of support to them in the rebuilding and restoration of their country to its former glory, as the Pearl of the Middle East.

(Some photos are provided by FFRL)

Back to the Bible

The Righteous will Live by Faith

Written by Dr. Kwok Wai Luen (Associate Professor of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University)



Scripture reading: Romans 1:17

When I was a relatively new believer, I would sometimes come across this saying in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11: "The righteous will live by faith". Seeing that Paul taught the relationship between the law and God's grace, I always thought this particular verse was quite obviously about being saved by grace through faith. However, I later came to realise

that Paul's words were actually an allusion to Habakkuk 2:4. When we read this passage together with Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians, it becomes clear that Habakkuk's words of 'the righteous will live by faith' are, in reality, an encouragement for overcoming hardships in an arduous life.

The prophet Habakkuk said 'but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness' (Habakkuk 2:4). However, this did not refer to the proof that he needed to be saved. When the Lord had warned He was delivering justice and punishing the people of Judah through the Chaldeans of Israel, Habakkuk could not help himself and asked the Lord this: 'Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?' (Habakkuk 1:13) The response to this, it turned out, was the old adage 'the righteous will live by faith'. This passage did not point to the change of circumstances that the prophet endured; rather, it was God's promise that while the wicked would eventually be dealt with, it would only be done in God's own way, in His own time. And meanwhile, as we all await His judgment, we should continue to live through our faith in Him and the righteousness He bestows upon us, as we are saved by His grace.

One could argue that God did not directly respond to Habakkuk's question or resolve any of our doubts. However, we must not forget that the Bible has told us that as long as we believe in God, 'the righteous will live by faith' – and by extension, we will also have the power to overcome every trial and tribulation. Moreover, when we trust in God, only then do we become more beautiful, tenacious, and extraordinary in the face of adversity.

There are three things we need to recognise:

Firstly, we need to understand that we have no way of changing every single unsatisfactory thing in our life. What we can do, however, is change our attitude towards these matters. Often, a transformation or shift in mindset can in turn strengthen us when we need to deal with our problems.

Secondly, we must realise that the one we believe in is our just and loving God, and that He will never forsake us. Our Lord is always there to support and take care of us, even at our weakest and most vulnerable moments. One such instance of these low points can be seen in Job's confession, which I find quite profound. Job lost nearly his entire family, was accused and slandered by his friends, had his integrity called into question, and yet despite it all, he stood firm in the Lord. A similar sentiment was seen in the prayer of Habakkuk, who said this in his own time of difficulty: 'yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength...' (Habakkuk 3:18-19). The way that Habakkuk chose to rejoice in the Lord in spite of his circumstances should serve as a reminder that God is always on our side.

Lastly and most importantly, we have to remember that whenever we are suffering or embroiled in a harrowing ordeal, we will inevitably discover that even suffering and pain are blessings in disguise. Just as Josephine So Yan Pui had so wisely said while still fighting cancer: 'There are only blessings, no curses'. Her life clearly was not free of hardship and agony, but she nevertheless found a source of strength and spirit that gave her courage and helped her face her misfortunes.

Our dearest Father, we ask You to let us experience the strength of 'the righteous' who 'live by faith' in our most troubling, desperate times. We pray that You call on us to support and take care of each other through faith, such that we can experience living by faith during our hardest times.

The original passage in Chinese was published in CEDAR's app '施予達仁'.

Download the app and read more devotional articles:
link.cedarfund.org/app-242-e

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2021/2022 Operating Statements In the period of Jul 21 - Aug 21

Income	HK\$ 2,307,264
Donations	1,795,065
Grants	-
Appeal for Relief	500,963
Other Income	11,236

Expenditure	HK\$ 3,752,769
Development Projects - Asia	1,479,714
- China	757,845
- Africa	368,725
Disaster Relief & Rehabilitation Projects	329,978
Partnership Development	509,297
Administration	307,210

Surplus/(Deficit) HK\$ (1,445,505)

The annual budget for 07/2021 to 06/2022 is HK\$23,129,000.

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Learn a Little More

Cultivating Peace in Hong Kong

Written by Edward Lai (Senior Communications Officer)



Dr. Kwok Wai Luen

He is a professor, wearing various hats of administrative management in university. Although he is a busy bee, he always spends time listening to youngsters' desires and struggles. Regarding the recent unprecedented socio-political changes in Hong Kong, he believes that there are still many things to do for the common good, and more companions are needed for collaborations.

When we asked about his goal in the next ten years, he responded without a second thought that it must be cultivating the value of peacebuilding in communities. It is 'cultivating' because peace cannot be built in one day but years. It is 'building' because peace is not given but built by people, which, in his view, is the church mandate and Christians' duty.

While some teased him of being unrealistic and idealistic, he gathered experts of various fields to set the peacebuilding project frame and learnt by doing. He shared the ideas of the project with CEDAR last year, and we found both of us to be of the same mind. With our frontline experience in overseas, CEDAR decided to join hands with Wai Luen to plant the seed of peace among Hong Kong citizens in such a turbulent era.

He is Dr. Kwok, who prefers others even his students, to call him by his first name, Wai Luen. In the following, Wai Luen will discuss the objectives and key elements of the peacebuilding project in Hong Kong.

CEDAR: What is the 'Cultivating Peace' project about?

Wai Luen: It is about discovering novel possibilities in the present Hong Kong society. It emphasises peace as a substantial concept covering at least four aspects: inner peace, interpersonal peace, communal peace and finally, social peace. Hence, the cultivation of peace is not distant. It starts by asking every Hongkong citizen: is their condition of the inner-self filled with anger that needs treating? Do they yearn to be listened to? Then for interpersonal conflicts in churches and other places, how should we reconcile with each other so that the church communities practise the Bible's teaching and become the lamps on the earth? These are what we can do now. Therefore, this project is practical, challenging all participants to become peacebuilders and do small things in their groups or communities, such as creating

a space for genuine conversation among people and cultivating their groups to be communities with truth, mercy, justice and peace.

CEDAR: Who are the targets of this project? And how does this project challenge participants to practise the above aspects of peace?

Wai Luen: We organise a series of activities in churches and schools to improve the participants' understanding and experience in building peace. We welcome pastors, teachers and social workers to experience this peacebuilding journey and brainstorm how to spot the opportunities and find the direction for cultivating peace in their sectors. By involving leaders of various sectors in the project, we hope that they will act as catalysts to promote peace in their communities.

We started running this project last September in churches and later organised classes and activities for university students and secondary school students. The current team of instructors includes Dr. Kwok Wai Luen, CEDAR's staff and experts in various fields, such as psychology, counselling, conflict mediation and social work. Through workshops on emotion management, spiritual practices, listening-oriented dialogue, conflict mediation skills, and reflection on CEDAR's overseas peace and reconciliation projects, we hope to empower participants to be peacebuilders and light a candle of hope in this hopeless world.

We are going to hold the 'Peacebuilding: A Way Out for Societies in Conflict' Symposium on 6 Nov 2021 at Hong Kong Baptist University, which will gather various local and overseas peacebuilders in one place to share their thoughts and experiences on making social impacts, and most importantly, make a collective effort in ways that could help build peace in Hong Kong.

Remark: Cultivating Peace is a project organised by the Centre for Sino-Christian Studies of Hong Kong Baptist University and CEDAR Fund, with the aim to promote the idea of peacebuilding in the society for reconciliation and transformation.

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Peacebuilding: A Way Out for Societies in Conflict

Date: 2021.11.6 (Sat)
Time: 09:15 - 16:45
Venue: Hong Kong Baptist University
Languages: English and Cantonese
Keynote Speaker: Prof. John Paul Lederach
Registration Fee: HK\$100

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