



# Guidance for Conservationists on Working with Faith Groups

WWF's Beliefs & Values Programme



This document is a product of WWF's Beliefs & Values Programme, inspired by a three year project of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) that culminated in issuing Guidelines for Interacting with Faith-Based Leaders and Communities in 2018.\*

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\* SCB's Guidelines, [https://conbio.org/images/content\\_2014scholarships/SCB\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Interacting\\_with\\_Faith-based\\_Leaders\\_and\\_Communities\\_\(1\).pdf](https://conbio.org/images/content_2014scholarships/SCB_Guidelines_for_Interacting_with_Faith-based_Leaders_and_Communities_(1).pdf)

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## What is the Purpose of this document?

**The conservation sector is increasingly engaging with faith communities in ways that acknowledge their unique worldviews and relationships with nature.\***

Such nature conservation projects address the full range of conservation themes, including human-wildlife conflict, the illegal wildlife trade, forest protection and restoration, advocacy, consumption, and behavior change.

Influential faith leaders from every religious tradition, including The Holy Father Pope Francis, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the national clerical council of Indonesia, have issued calls to their communities to protect and restore nature as part of their religious duty. Around the world, faith communities are leading practical initiatives to conserve nature, from Christian

action in the Amazon, to Islamic fatwas on wildlife trade and water conservation, to Buddhist monks patrolling forests in Southeast Asia.

Despite their growing importance, faith and nature partnerships and projects are still new in mainstream conservation. More encouragement and support are needed to facilitate conservationists' engagement with this unique stakeholder group.

**This Guidance is designed to assist conservation project managers interested in developing and managing effective partnerships with religious communities.**

We also include a [Faith Assessment template](#), to support the collection of relevant information on faiths in your project area. These tools are designed to be part of and complement your project's stakeholder and situational analyses.

\* Here we use the term 'faith' to encompass both mainstream religious and Indigenous spiritual traditions.



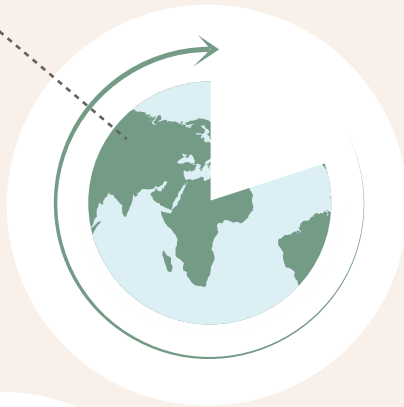
## Why Faith & Conservation Partnerships?

Effective nature conservation depends on the engagement of all of society. Most of the global population, especially in the most biodiverse countries, affiliates with a religious or spiritual tradition, and every faith tradition has teachings that speak to care for nature. Many conservationists are also people of faith, including people around you. Yet to date faiths have been a generally under-represented stakeholder group in conservation, often overlooked in the creation of partnerships that can bring us closer to the communities we work with.

# Faith groups can be powerful allies in conservation

## 84%

of the world's population affiliates with a spiritual tradition.<sup>1</sup>



## 8%

of the Earth's habitable landmass is managed by faiths,<sup>2</sup> including 5% of commercial forests.<sup>3</sup>



**All Faith traditions** speak to care for nature.



## 1/2

of the world's schools are managed by the faiths.<sup>5</sup>



### Faith leaders

around the world are trusted moral guides.

### Community centres

Faiths have millions of houses of worship and extensive community and communication networks, including women and youth groups and media houses.



### Investments

Faiths hold billions of dollars of investments on global stock markets.<sup>4</sup>

### Environmental action

*"Faiths run millions of environmental protection activities and projects. This happens in parishes, synagogues, mosques, temples, gurdwaras sacred sites, holy rivers, pilgrimage routes, and other places of spiritual significance throughout the world. As such assets owners, faiths are major civil society stakeholders."*

- Martin Palmer



## How does this align with Inclusive Conservation?

Working with faith actors is an approach that respects traditional knowledge systems and recognises the great diversity of beliefs and values that people hold about nature in different parts of the world. This is grounded on foundations of cultural sensitivity, social equity, and human rights.

With their focus on social welfare and justice, faith-based organisations (FBOs) can also lift up the voices of those who have been most disenfranchised. By communicating the unique needs and perspectives of their members, FBOs can help shape more inclusive forms of advocacy and decision-making around climate and nature policies and activities.



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# Key recommendations

Phases of Engagement with Faith Actors

## 1 Understanding the Context



## 2 Initiating contact



## 3 Implementing Together



## 4 Exiting the partnership





# ① Understanding the Context



## A Frame Your Mindset

### Be aware of your own cultural starting point and the conservation narrative that is dominant in your society

What preconceptions may help or hinder the development of your faith partnership? Ask yourself whether your perspective on how conservation should operate may have been influenced, for example, by a highly scientific worldview or a Western perspective. Realise how such factors may have shaped your understanding of nature and of human relationships with animals, plants and natural resources. At the same time, be aware that faith actors may have their own preconceptions of conservationists as having very different views and values from their own.

### Be open to different understandings of human-nature relationships

In many faith communities, such relationships not only concern humans, animals and plants, but can also include gods, prophets, spirits, and ancestors. Many Indigenous and spiritual communities view such beings as part of and not separate from the human world. Each faith community has its own unique relationship with the natural world, and their motivations to protect nature may also differ substantially from faith to faith, and from mainstream conservation perspectives.

In the Shinto religion of Japan, for example, the forest is considered the dwelling place of ancestral spirits that take care of the community. While Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions see humans as having more of a stewardship role vis-à-vis nature and believe it is our responsibility to safeguard the forest.

### Realise that there are many concepts of what nature is, and how nature is valued

Consider, for example, issues related to wildlife and land:

- » **Sacred species:** Animal and plant species can have special meaning for different faith groups. They can be seen as messengers, incarnations of humans, carriers of spirits, or descendants of individual species that played a cultural/religious role in the past. A tiger, for example, may be considered a top predator in a scientific world view, but for a faith community it can represent an ancestral spirit to be honoured and protected.

- » **Sacred natural sites:** Land can have a specific cultural/spiritual significance. Sacred sites can have special geographical features (e.g., holy mountains, rocks, rivers, trees), can be locations of significant occurrences in the past, or be ancestral graveyards. Appreciate also that many of today's formal protected areas have arisen around traditional sacred natural sites.

*“Faith communities with which The Nature Conservancy has worked watch everything the researcher does and says. The researcher’s integrity is critical to a successful relationship.”*

Craig Bienz, The Nature Conservancy

### Unpack the existing preconceptions that you and your staff may already carry about the faith community you wish to partner with

Ask yourself what you already know about the community, including its beliefs and traditions. What do you think are some of the shared values between you and the faith community? Differences may be the easiest to identify at first, but trying to unpack commonalities can help you focus on opportunities for collaboration. For example, values such as simple living, willingness to care for nature, a sense of responsibility for all living beings, and stewardship, are often endorsed by religious and conservation communities alike.

*“Our relationship to nature or even biodiversity is deeply personal and often also cultural and spiritual in a sense that it is linked not only to religion but also to ethics, recreation, philosophy, ritual and many other values. These deep values need to co-exist with the deeper, and sometimes diverging values of others in order to successfully create sustainable pathways for governing and managing nature.”*

Bas Verschuuren, Wageningen University





### Understand your potential role in the partnership

It is important to recognise that faith groups around the world are already engaged in countless environmental initiatives, inspired by the teachings in their traditions to protect and restore nature. They have the dedication and often the resources for environmental action. However, they may lack technical knowledge that conservation partners can provide to ensure their activities are as impactful as possible. The joining of science and faith in strong partnerships can therefore be a powerful force for change. But working with faith partners often involves conservationists taking a supportive rather than a leadership role, providing technical advice that can help guide and empower faith actors. This can in turn catalyse greater conservation action and have a ripple effect across vast communities, in ways that are beyond the scope of any short-term project.

### Ensure a healthy, humble starting point

The faith community is the expert on their faith. While research and data can give you an impression of how the faith community connects to nature and where your entry points could be, take enough time to listen to people of faith in your target area to better understand the local context, and people's living spiritual connection to the land and its wildlife.

*“Get rid of the ‘expert’ vs ‘community’, colonial mentality completely. There are many spiritual communities who know better how to protect their places than ‘professional conservationists’. So, figure out how you can support them, and not how they can help you achieve your conservation goals. You will never ‘build trust’ if you actively try to. This can only be done if you work spontaneously, from a place of service and compassion, and with a completely open heart. Trust will follow.”*

Liza Zogib, DiversEarth



## B Be informed

### Research the basic teachings and practices of the local faith tradition(s)

This should include their relationship to nature, in order to understand their guiding motivations to protect species or places. An initial understanding of how the local faith operates allows you to be better prepared to do a deeper scoping into existing relationships and networks, both across religious institutions, as well as between faith leaders, their communities and local governments. Don't forget to add to this initial research a mapping of local faith institutions and networks.

### Identify a researcher who has a sociological or anthropological background

You can do this either by looking to your local staff, hiring a consultant, or making links with universities or NGOs with knowledge of the local faith context. This will help you gather the information you need to engage with the faith community in a socially and culturally responsible way.

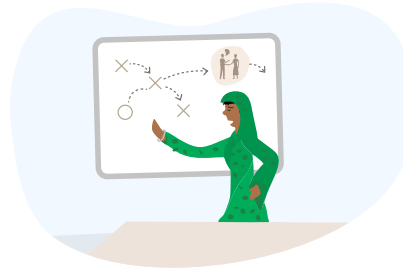
**RESOURCE TIP**

#### Faith Assessment Template

- » See [Annex 1](#) for a helpful Faith Assessment to conduct this basic research including: mapping faith groups in your area, understanding local faith beliefs and practices, identifying key religious leaders, faith governance structures and institutions, understanding inter-faith relationships, and those between faith actors and government bodies.

*“Before engaging with a faith-based community, we find out if they are engaged in any conservation efforts and what their attitudes, actions, culture, and interpretations of cherished texts pertaining to flora and fauna are. Planning to construct our projects from these starting points has proven helpful.”*

Helena Buras, Fauna & Flora International



## C Identify Key Players/ Representatives

### Understand the different types of faith actors

You may come across a wide variety of faith actors in your work, from highly organised international networks, to individual houses of worship, to community groups with no formal structures. They may belong to a formal religious tradition or to an Indigenous spiritual tradition, or a mixture of both. The nature of your partnership will vary accordingly. These actors can include:

- » Faith leaders: Individuals who are recognised as spiritual leaders within their faith communities, such as pastors, priests, imams, rabbis and Indigenous leaders.
- » Faith-based Organisations (FBOs): Civil society organisations that are created based on faith values. This term can refer to a single faith congregation or house of worship, or a national or international faith network such as the 600-million-member World Evangelical Alliance, or can include related organisations such as religious charities and development organisations.
- » Faith-based schools, universities and seminaries: Faiths run almost half the world's schools and have thousands of universities and seminaries.
- » Traditional and mainstream health care providers: Faiths manage about a third of the world's healthcare, and - such as with Daoism and Buddhism - can be providers of traditional medicines that are often the main source of health care in many communities.
- » Faith-based media: Many FBOs operate their own media channels – radio, tv, journals and social media.
- » Spiritual communities - Groups of people who come together to share their religious beliefs or practices. some of these groups might fall outside of traditional formal religious institutions, and may also be recognised as indigenous peoples.
- » Faith-based financial managers and entrepreneurs: There is a major movement of FBOs directing their significant financial portfolios towards social and environmental investing, and many high-profile entrepreneurs who are motivated by faith values or principles, such as fair trade or ethical investing. See for example, FaithInvest: <https://www.faitheinvest.org/>



- » Faith-based donors: Individuals or organisations that provide financial support for faith-based initiatives.
- » Faith-based scholars: Individuals who study religion and its impact on society, such as theologians or religious studies professors.
- » The Laity: Individuals or groups outside the formal faith institution who are actively engaged with faith-based activism and advocacy for social or political change based on their religious beliefs, such as faith-based peace activists or social justice advocates. These are important members of a faith community, many of whom will be engines of change, questioning what their faith traditions are doing about the environment and exerting pressure on faith structures to respond.
- » Faith-based donors: Individuals or organisations that provide financial support for faith-based initiatives.
- » Faith-based scholars: Individuals who study religion and its impact on society, such as theologians or religious studies professors.

### Identify the appropriate faith representatives in your context

Research who from the faith community might be the appropriate person with whom to initiate contact. Often a top-level religious leader is not the best first point of contact. The faith representative will ideally have responsibility and credibility within the community, be a representative voice of the community, but also have enough time to engage with the project in a meaningful and practical way.

### Identify the right liaison in your team

It is critical to have a team member who can liaise in a sensitive and effective way with your intended faith partner. Identify an appropriate “faith liaison” on your team who can facilitate your contact with the faith community. This could be a member of your staff who is part of the faith community already and who can help you navigate cultural differences in a respectful manner. This may be the same person who carried out the initial Faith Assessment. This step is critical in making or breaking faith partnerships. It is important that, as conservationists, we recognise that others with community-based expertise are often best placed to carry out this role with faith partners.

*“Identifying someone who could speak with Buddhist leaders in their language was key to the efforts of The Taimen Fund to engage them in protecting the taimen fishery in the Eg-Uur River Valley in Mongolia. Interpreters/liaisons included a local Mongolian coordinator, and also, when trust was gained, liaisons from within the monastic body.”*

Sue Higgins, Centre for Large Landscape Conservation



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② Initiating contact

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## ② Initiating contact



### A Initiate contact

#### Convene an initial meeting with all the main faith groups in your region

It is good practice to convene an initial meeting with all the main faith groups identified in your faith mapping exercise, so as not to show bias when choosing your partners. Even if one faith group is dominant in your area, ideally your first meeting would be multi-faith. Often there are established inter-faith networks that you can approach as a first step. Seek the advice of your faith liaison on hierarchical norms and protocols to ensure you meet with the key religious leadership in this first meeting. Seek your faith liaison's advice on how best to run the meeting in a way that is sensitive to the local tradition and protocols. For example, in Buddhist culture, it is rude to point your feet towards a monk.

*"We were conscious of not alienating any one faith group. We therefore organised a meeting with the inter-faith committee that comprises leaders from various faith based organizations. In our first meeting we listened to their needs and priorities and discussed how we might collaborate on forest restoration. They were most interested in restoring water sources and supporting local livelihoods. Many of the faith representatives also act as peace advisors in the country and view inter-faith work on the environment through the lens of peacebuilding."*

Azaria Kilimba, WWF Tanzania

#### Share and listen

In this meeting, share your own background, goals and hopes for the project in the most transparent way possible. Think carefully about how to explain your project in language and ways in which the faith leader and members of the community will understand. Ask faith leaders what their own perspectives are on the issues and goals you have shared, and what kinds of goals and expectations they might have, both for the project and for the community in general. For example, what are their priorities for community well-being and how might nature care fit in? Be mindful also that it takes time to build trust, and that there can be historical differences and miscommunications that need time to repair.

*"Showing interest and participating in the heritage of the members of the faith community in central Italy proved important for building trust. A researcher's failure to demonstrate care for the community members and for their centuries-old traditions may convey a condescending and unfriendly attitude that must be avoided."*

Fabrizio Fabrizoli, University of Zurich

*"I have been in meetings where colleagues walked away when an elder opened the meeting with a prayer. They have explained to me later that they are atheists and do not want to take part in such a ceremony. What happens in such situations is that it is difficult to afterwards achieve mutual respect and trust. It could be that the people we visit or work together with cannot even imagine that others do not have a faith, traditional belief systems, natural beliefs or other beliefs. What a person/visitor can do instead is to lower their head, close their eyes and clasp the hands together and spend that moment to think about what they can respectfully say to greet the elder who is performing the prayer, and to thank the community for receiving us."*

Maria Schultz, WWF SE



### B Find common ground

Finding common ground is important for effective partnerships. Although you may not express your attitudes towards nature in similar ways to your faith colleagues, your background research will have identified areas of shared values - such as a desire to safeguard nature, to live simply, and to not overconsume or produce high levels of waste.

#### Bridge gaps between your goals and those of the community

We all carry vested interests that can lead to unconscious behaviours. This can include a tendency to think about what the faith group can do for your conservation project, rather than engaging the community members as equal partners. Try to align with faith priorities: many faith actors come to conservation through the lens of social well-being, valuing education, health and livelihoods.



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2 Initiating contact

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## Find common ground (Continued)

*“Working with a variety of Christian communities with differing levels of scientific knowledge, A Rocha researchers ground at least part of our communications in Biblical language in an effort to establish a bridge between science and faith. We seek to gain a scientific understanding of the location, habitat and/or species under consideration and to relate this information to Christian terminology or theology. For example, during our work on microplastics in the Mediterranean, we used social media to highlight our scientific research and asked why Christians should care. We settled on the language of loving God and neighbor as touchstones that relate actions to reduce microplastic pollution.”*

Robert Sluka, A Rocha International

### Be mindful of communication differences

Communication is key. Your faith liaison is there to help you bridge common misunderstandings and communication differences. Reaching agreement is by no means always easy, and requires patience, openness and flexibility. Be mindful of potential communication differences and seek support from your faith liaison in order to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications:

- » **Communicating concerns and priorities:** Partners may express these differently. Faiths may voice priorities related to spiritual values such as stewardship and social justice, while nature conservationists may focus on scientific indicators of ecosystem and species protection.
- » **Communicating evidence:** Conservationists may rely on data and scientific evidence when communicating, while faiths may rely on their teachings and wisdom when representing their views in meetings.
- » **Communication style:** Conservationists may communicate in a direct, scientific manner, while faiths may use storytelling and metaphor to convey their message. The terminology used by both parties can differ significantly, with the use of scientific terms for biodiversity and theological language to describe the sacredness of nature.

*“Scientists are busy people. When we go into the field, we want to use each minute to collect data. However, we need to plan to spend time with people in the local community, because they decide if we can stay or come back. In the Andean communities of Peru where Pentecostal church leaders are highly influential, we had to reprogram our research activities to attend church meetings where we were able to explain our motives and the importance of our work.”*

Oscar Gonzalez, University of Florida

*“When interacting with Evangelical Christians, I am careful to avoid the topics of evolution and anthropogenic global warming. Both are prone to get across when engaged in conservation of reptiles and birds in biodiversity hotspots in California and Caribbean islands.”*

William Hayes, Loma Linda University

*“In my tiger and forest conservation project in central India, we first approached the priests (babbas – intermediaries who make contact with spirits) to know if they are predisposed to protecting forests and wildlife. We subsequently built relationships with the faith leaders who shared our goals. Our next effort to collaborate with them will focus on helping reduce the communities’ use of snares and poisons to trap and kill non-target species.”*

Shekhar Kolipaka, Leo Foundation

### Reflect on the institutional fit and value addition

When creating new partnerships, it is always important to analyse whether the core values and priorities of the faith group align with those of your team and organisation. Are there any obvious opposing views regarding human rights, gender equality, Indigenous Peoples’ rights, and other fundamental principles? Also be mindful not to be drawn into possible power politics in the local faith community. Can you work with your partner in ways that are respectful of their views but stay within the ethical limits of your organisation?

Translate this reflection and mutual agreement through MOUs, contracts or any formal agreement format where it can be clarified what both parties are working on together and what standards they will hold to.

*“When studying the role of indigenous religious beliefs about conservation in southeastern Nigeria, we learned that traditional shrine priests do not allow women to participate in ceremonies or enter sacred groves. Women also have limited roles in community governance. However, they are actively involved in church activities, and many churches have women’s groups. Thus, to effectively engage and empower women in the community in conservation planning and awareness, working with and through women’s church groups is important.”*

Lynne R. Baker, Institute for Development, Ecology, Conservation, and Cooperation



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③ Implementing together

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## ③ Implementing Together



### A Build and foster an equitable relationship

Once common ground has been established, invite faith representatives to join your project as equal partners, to support true and lasting local ownership. High-level faith leaders can be invited but it is crucial to also include a faith representative who has the time to work with the project team on planning, strategic development, and who can help lead project activities on the ground.

Including a staff person or consultant with social science credentials and ideally with a good understanding of local faith traditions will help the team navigate between different knowledge systems and understand social and cultural dynamics.



### B Work together to set clear goals for the collaboration & Agree on mutually beneficial outcomes

Throughout this phase, be prepared to adjust project goals to accommodate the actual needs and perspectives of your faith partners. Remind yourself that this relationship is meant to ensure that both conservation and faith groups benefit in ways that are valuable and meaningful to them.

*“ARC learned to be realistic about the financial needs and constraints of faith groups in northern and southern areas of India. In many cases these groups may earn contributions/income in ways that are not aligned with conservation objectives. We found that we needed to understand these issues and find ways to balance conservation and financial needs of the religious authorities for the upkeep of their temples.”*

Chantal Elkin, WWF-UK (formerly with ARC)



### B Foster the relationship over time

Once the partnership is created, consider ways to demonstrate commitment in the relationship over the long term. It is helpful to organise regular opportunities for meeting and discussion being mindful of faiths' calendars and traditions.

Remain flexible in your approach to faith partnerships. As you learn more about your partner's needs and priorities, you may need to adjust your plans or strategies to better align with their goals. This can help to build a sense of true collaboration, rather than a one-sided relationship. Remember that as in all relationships, a firm foundation of mutual trust and respect needs to be built over time.

*“It was immediately apparent to me that my values and perspectives were significantly different from the Indigenous Peoples I encountered in south-central Oregon when studying the effectiveness of forest and river restoration. I respected them as individuals and built a trustful relationship by joining them in their daily activities.”*

Craig Bien, The Nature Conservancy





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4 Exiting the partnership

## 4 Exiting the partnership



### A Ensure local ownership & respect

#### Reflect on the partnership

Ensure from the beginning of your collaboration that it is designed to ensure local faith leadership, so that the shared project and respective goals are not dependent on the conservation team's presence and support alone.

#### Maintain open communication

Once the project ends, maintaining open communication with faith partners can facilitate future engagement.

Reflect upon your role in the partnership until the day the collaboration ends: What impact did my role have, what am I and the faith partners leaving with? Assess together with your team whether the benefits initially agreed upon were met.

*"When working on wildlife interactions in central India with people who believe in forest spirits, the village chiefs introduced us to 'spirit intercessors' who agreed to work with us. We then introduced a para-ecologist who created a relationship with the intercessors, and we could slowly back off. The entire affair became a local project, and we external agents became monitors who provided para-ecologists with our inputs."*

Shekhar Kolipaka, Leo Foundation

*"Researchers in the Fraser Lab at Concordia University who studied the management of walleye fisheries in a Cree community in Mistissini, Quebec submitted a written report at a community meeting and gave a presentation outlining the research findings, offering suggestions for better managing the fisheries, and answering questions."*

Elizabeth Lawrence, Concordia University

#### Be sure to close off in a respectful manner

Think about a final meeting or ceremony with your faith partners to bring closure to your collaboration in a way that respects the partnership you have created.

Be sure that any documentation on the project and partnership from your end has been shared with the faith actors.



*"Post research visits helped me solidify friendships, mutualism, and trust among the Yoruba faith leaders and communities in southwestern Nigeria. They appear to be open to allowing more study of their ethnobotanical knowledge in the future."*

Temitope Borokini, University of Nevada

→ Please contact the Beliefs & Values Programme to share your own experiences of working with faith partners.



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# Endnotes

- 1 Harriet Sherwood, "Religion: why faith is becoming more and more popular," The Guardian, August 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>.
- 2 'FBOs (faith based organisations) control 8% of the Earth's habitable land and 5% of commercial forests' United Nations Environment Programme, Faith for Earth Initiative, Faith for Earth Dialogue at UNEA 5.2 (2022)
- 3 Pew Research Centre, The Global Religious Landscape, Report. (December 18, 2012). <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>
- 4 Brian Grim and Melissa Grim, "The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society," Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion 12, no. 3 (2016): 2.
- 5 UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Partnering with Religious Communities for Children, 2012, [https://www.rfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/RfP\\_Partnering\\_with\\_Religious\\_Communities\\_for\\_Children\\_UNICEF.pdf](https://www.rfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/RfP_Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_UNICEF.pdf).





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## Annex 1

# Conducting a Faith Assessment

*WWF's Beliefs & Values Programme*



This tool is designed to help programme managers gather essential information on faith actors in a given landscape. The faith assessment can serve as an accompaniment to Stakeholder and Situational Analysis tools when looking at engagement with important actors in a landscape, supporting more inclusive and effective conservation.

## Conducting a faith assessment can help you:

- » Understand the overall faith context in your area, including local faith demographics, dynamics and systems of governance;
- » Provide insight into how people's faith influences their relationship and behaviours towards nature;
- » Help identify potential areas of collaboration with faith actors;
- » Clarify the support faiths may need from your team of conservationists, and;
- » Highlight how faith perspectives and practices may also enrich your conservation approaches.





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# 1 Practical - How to carry out a Faith Assessment

## ✓ Do no harm.

Consider beforehand what risks are involved in a faith assessment in your area. Carefully consider the potentially negative outcomes for the local communities. Consider how best to approach faith communities as a science-based conservationist, especially when you are not from the community. Research on faiths can be sensitive in certain contexts. Faith communities may be apprehensive about conservation organisations based on historical divisions between science and faith.

## ✓ Engage a social science expert.

Carry out this assessment, if possible, with support from a member of staff, partner or consultant with a social science background. This will ensure the assessment is conducted in a participatory way with the resources and expertise needed.

## ✓ Conduct a 'Due Diligence' exercise.

As with any stakeholder, research the ethical practices of the organisations and people you have identified as potentially interesting interviewees/partners/counterparts. Are they/their organisations on international sanctions lists, linked to unethical and/or polluting practices, mentioned in trustworthy local news reports as linked to unethical behaviour (e.g., corruption, abuse, crime)? This is intended to ensure potential partners, faith leaders or counterparts you engage with do not contradict the ethical and best practice standards of your own organisation.



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### **Conduct basic background research.**

Familiarise yourself with the general background on the relevant religious traditions. There are many resources you can access that speak to how different faith traditions view nature and their teachings related to the environment, such as [YALE](#) and [ARC](#).

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### **Look for local resources.**

In addition, there may be more relevant eco-theology resources about faith and nature relationships in your region that can localise your knowledge and give you insight into the language and terminology that local faith actors use when talking about nature. There may be an expert at a local university or NGO who can be of great help in understanding the faith-nature dynamics in your region. Also ask the members of your own staff about their knowledge of faith actors in the target area. Searching social media pages of identified faith groups can also provide information about local grassroots faith and conservation initiatives.

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### **Seek collaboration with local partners.**

Explore whether there are other existing faith-conservation collaborations in your region – perhaps with a faith-based NGO or development organisation or university – whose work could be built on or complemented rather than you starting from scratch or duplicating efforts.



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## 2 Mapping faith communities

**A good place to start a Faith Assessment is by mapping the faith communities present in your landscape.**

National census data and/or publicly available records can offer some good initial data on faith demographics. But keep in mind that official data on religious practices usually covers people's responses to census and other specific questions, and often does not provide a complete picture. Official data often does not cover the 'unofficial' faiths (including traditional and/or spirit-based belief systems), differences in numbers due to recent migration and religious conversion, and the extent to which people actually practice their faith. It can also be sensitive for people to express the religion

they practice (e.g., to government agencies in particular). While keeping that in mind, this data can still be useful to get a sense of the faith context in your landscape. For example, overlaying this basic data with locations of houses of worship and sacred natural sites can identify places to start researching in more detail.

The following questions can guide you in gathering sufficient understanding of the demographics of the specific faith(s) in your region:

- » Do local/national authorities publish data on religion that you could obtain or is there a local university that may have this information?
- » What faith groups are relevant in your areas of interest?
- » Which sites are visited for pilgrimage and/or during important days in the religious calendar?
- » Which houses of worship are present in your area of interest?



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## 3 Understanding faith communities

Now it's time to go a bit deeper: religious actors take many forms and play different roles as individuals, institutions and communities. These guiding questions can be considered:

- » **What does the living religion look like in the community?** For example, is the "official" religion actually a syncretic mix with Indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices?
- » **What assets** – land, buildings, investments, etc – does the faith group hold?
- » **What faith sub-communities may be of particular interest to your work?** E.g., women or youth in the Muslim community. What is their particular role and representation?
- » **Who do people go to for spiritual/religious advice?**

- » **Where do they pray, contemplate, meditate and worship?**
- » **What are the key events and celebrations of the faith community in the calendar year?** For example, planning large tree planting campaigns between September and October coincides with the Season of Creation for Christians.
- » **Which multi-faith / inter-faith coalitions are present in the area?** How are inter-faith practices/rituals regarded by local faith groups?
- » **What do I need to know about the history and politics of land and resource management and sovereignty in the faith community?**
- » **What are faith relationships like with the government?**

It will also help to search the local library, bookshops, transcripts of religious publications and teachings on environment days (e.g., Soil Day, Earth Hour, World Environment Day) to get an idea of which schools/denominations and interpretations are dominant, and which teacher/leader is passionate about the issue.



## 4 Identifying key faith representatives

**Religious groups are often part of highly organised communities. Faith leaders play a key role in influencing the attitudes and behaviours of individuals and are important in community mobilization. Some questions to reflect upon can include:**

- » Who are the influential religious and cultural leaders in your community of interest? These can be resident as well as remote leaders. Be aware that 'unofficial' faiths may be significantly less hierarchical or have less visible leadership.
- » From your research so far, which leaders may have a strong interest in nature conservation?
- » Are there hierarchical norms to follow to ensure you speak to the right person?
- » What are the protocols of Do's and Don'ts you should follow when meeting with faith leaders and communities?



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## 5 Exploring faith & nature relationships

Lastly, explore the faith group's specific spiritual understanding of and relationship to nature.

- » What species in the area are considered sacred and/or culturally important?
- » Where is the overlap between priority species habitats/range and sacred sites or locations of worship?
- » How does the community interact with nature?
- » Are there human-wildlife conflicts involving the religious community?