



**Missionary Activities and Human Rights:  
Recommended Ground Rules for Missionary Activities**

*(A basis for creating individual codes of conduct)*

*A document prepared by the project group on Missionary Activities and Human Rights,  
The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief  
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# Recommended Ground Rules for Missionary Activities

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

This document is the result of a project on missionary activities and human rights at the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief (the Oslo Coalition). With human rights as a basis, the project aims to contribute to preventing conflicts arising from missionary activities. To this end and through a long consultative process a project group and its advisory committee have created this document of Recommended Ground Rules. The consultative process started in 2005 and has included a number of national and international seminars under the auspices of the Oslo Coalition, with representatives from Norwegian and foreign academic bodies, faith communities and missionary organisations.

The Oslo Coalition acknowledges the limitations of this process and must emphasise that the Recommended Ground Rules are not intended as a list of rules to be followed by all. The intention of this document is to stimulate to internal debate and ethical reflection within networks and organisations that have the propagation of religion among their main objectives, or are affected by or subjected to missionary activities. It is the hope of the Oslo Coalition that organisations and individuals will use the Recommended Ground Rules as a basis for examining their own activities and producing their own Code of Conduct based on universally accepted interpretations of human rights.

Followers of different religions and world views differ in their doctrines and with regard to the content of their faiths and beliefs. To some, mission may seem morally objectionable, to others it may be perfectly justifiable, and to others again it may have the character of an ethical imperative. However, it is precisely because of different convictions that there is a need to stimulate ethical reflection on missionary activities. The challenge ahead is to connect the inter-religious and/or intra-religious initiatives in this area (which are still very few) to the Oslo-coalition project, so as to establish a broad network of concerned groups that may effectuate real changes in the thinking and practice of those who are involved in or affected by missionary activities.

## 1.2 Those who engage in missionary activities and those who are affected

This document is directed to organisations and individuals involved in missionary activities and to those who are affected by such activities. The term "organisations and individuals involved in missionary activities" apply to those who engage directly as well as those who engage indirectly through various forms of support. It also includes both those who engage in mission as a primary activity and those who promote a religion or world view as a secondary activity, such as some NGOs engaged in development or humanitarian activities.

The groups that are affected by or subjected to missionary activities vary greatly as to their level of formal religious organisation. Many groups have no formal organisation connecting them to a religious leadership beyond the local community. Many groups, especially those belonging to indigenous peoples, do not distinguish between secular and religious leadership. Thus, there is a need to focus on individuals as well as various local communities as partners in a dialogue on how to conduct and respond to missionary activities.

The Oslo Coalition is fully aware of the fact that governments themselves sometimes engage in missionary activities or act as the representative of religious communities to whom missionary activities are directed. The role of governments in missionary activities is a controversial one, and there are many issues left to be discussed here – for a later project. In this project the Oslo Coalition primarily encourages governments to make sure that their reactions to missionary activities are in accord with the Human Rights Conventions.

## 1.3 The Concept of Missionary activities

The concept of *Mission* arose in Christian environments, but is now also used as a religious science category. Other concepts like "proselytism" or "propagating a religion or belief" are also often used to describe this activity. In the context of this project it is important that the terminology used is understood as neutral – in the sense of not implying approval or disapproval of the phenomenon referred to – and that it is easily understood. By the term "missionary activities" this document

understands the *activity of communicating a religion or world view through verbal communication or through various related activities as an invitation to others to adopt the religion or world view.*

The range of activities that are referred to as “missionary activities” is broad. Some activities are specific to particular religions. Cultural differences also make it difficult to clearly delimit what falls within the framework of missionary activities. The ground rules presented in this document take this into consideration. The categories have been developed during the international consultative process.

#### 1.4 Human Rights and Ethics

The project and the Recommended Ground Rules are grounded on the idea that the human rights conventions should provide the framework for missionary activities. However, the conventions do not provide ready-made answers to all the kinds of conflicts and situations that may arise in connection with missionary activities. Thus, the Recommended Ground Rules seek to encourage reflection on the ethical dimension related to the legal framework of the human rights, addressing how ethical considerations may lead to commonly agreed norms for missionary activities. This will be an ongoing discussion. The Oslo Coalition is aware that in actual situations, political, institutional or practical obstacles can make it difficult to adhere to ethical guidelines for mission. Hopefully, these Recommended Ground Rules and the Codes of Conduct developing from it, will serve to keep the discussion and the awareness of the ethical dilemmas alive.

The organizations and individuals working in this field are continually challenged by ethical dilemmas and different interpretations of the “grey zones” of the human rights conventions. Article 18 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR ) affirms a person’s right “to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching”, and makes no distinction between the individual’s right to practice his/ her religion in private, and his/her right to approach others in various ways with a view to promoting his religion. The right to engage in faith persuasion is also grounded in article 19 of the CCPR regarding freedom of expression, which reads as follows: “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference” (art. 19.1) and; “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds...” (Art 19.2). There are limitations in the CCPR as to how far these rights extend, in terms of the means used to convey the message to the target group. On the basis of these human rights articles, people have a right to choose a religion, to hold religious opinions and to present these opinions to others. In order to discuss what constitutes an ethical or an unethical way of carrying out mission there is no need to agree completely on the extent to which missionary activities are covered by the human rights framework. The very fact that missionary activities take place is reason enough for this.

#### 1.5 Acknowledgments

The working group would like to thank all scholars and resource persons from faith communities and missionary organisations who have contributed to the long consultative process and to this document. A number of different contexts have been highlighted during the process thanks to the varied religious and national backgrounds of the participants in the discussions.

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## **2. Recommended ground rules for missionary activities**

### **2.1. For those who are involved in missionary activities**

#### **2.1.1. Communicating belief ethically**

- The missionary organisation should focus on its own religion and should not misrepresent or denigrate the faith of others for the purpose of turning followers away from their religion.
- In the interest of freedom of intellect, criticism of other religions cannot be prohibited, but should be limited to well-reasoned, persuasive critique and rational comparison between alternative faiths.
- Making truth claims is inherent in missionary activities, but the presentation of these should take into consideration the feelings of others. Hostility and ridicule are unacceptable, but well-reasoned, persuasive critique should never be so.
- If propagating a religion by potentially controversial means, such as door-to-door canvassing, the organisation doing so will ensure that this is done in ways that respect the right to privacy and are also acceptable according to local social norms.

#### **2.1.2. Communicating belief in cross-cultural situations**

- When coming from the outside to another society, the missionary organisation should be sensitive to cultural differences within that society and avoid actions that are considered disrespectful and objectionable there, including those defined as such for religious reasons. However, no-one needs to be bound by cultural and/or religious norms that are opposed to the freedom to promote and receive ideas or that promote inequality between groups.'
- The missionary organisation should be careful in adopting terminology, rituals and customs from other religions, so as not to create misunderstandings about its identity. It should not attempt to achieve acceptance through adopting the outward appearance of other religions.
- The newly converted may in some cases be aggressive towards the religion they have left. It is the responsibility of the missionary organisation to help those who have been converted to its faith to heal the wounds of parting and to come to terms with their religious past.
- Missionaries should be aware of the feelings of others and should avoid a confrontational language of conquest in relation to countries dominated by other religions.
- Coercion and manipulation should never play a part in missionary activities.
- Missionary organisations should be careful in promising worldly benefits as a result of joining their religion.
- The undertaking of undercover missionary activities is not recommended. The laws of a country should be respected. However, when freedom of religion or belief of the target group is seriously violated, such activities could be considered.
- Missionaries should not talk about other religions or their followers in terms that may be perceived as hate speech. They should avoid creating hostility between religious communities.

#### **2.1.3. Communicating belief through education and charity work**

Missionary activities not only communicate a religion or world view through verbal communication, they also include a wide range of related activities employed to promote the religion or world view as an option for others to accept. The following sections look at some of these activities.

### ***2.1.3.1 Missionary activities and educational services***

- When providing education for others, religious organisations should be transparent about their religious affiliation and/or objectives.
- Missionary organisations maintain the right of those who run schools to promote their own belief traditions. However, religious organisations should never use the offer of education merely as a tool to gain a foothold within another religious community.
- When running preschools and schools, religious organisations should respect the religious affiliation of the pupils and not involve them in religious activities or expose them to religious propagation without explicit and voluntary consent of their parents or legal guardians. The schools should not prevent or discourage such children from practising the religion of their family while attending the institution.
- Where such instruction is customary, organizations that run schools which provide religious instruction should allow access to alternative religious instruction for pupils with different religious affiliations.

### ***2.1.3.2 Missionary activities and charity work***

- Charity is an end in itself, and should not be regarded as a means to convert people.
- Missionary organisations that carry out charity and development work should be transparent with regard to their religious affiliation and their mission. It is appropriate and permissible to respond to genuine enquiries about the organization's affiliation.
- Missionary organizations should always be willing to respond to enquiries about its affiliation?
- Missionary organisations should not combine charity and preaching in ways that impair the freedom of the recipients to choose whether or not to listen.
- Charity should be given without any explicit or implicit religious obligations upon the part of the recipient, e.g. demands for participation in the religious activities of the donor community or for expressing acceptance of its religion.
- Religious charity organisations should acknowledge the difficulty felt by many of the destitute to assert their religious identity. The organisation's staff should assure themselves that expressions of acceptance and participation in religious activities are genuine.
- When helping people in vulnerable situations, religious organisations should give them time to consider carefully any new religious choice. The organisation's staff should assure themselves that any serious steps taken to adopt the religion of the organisation spring from a genuine and non-coerced conversion.

## **2.1.4. Communicating belief to vulnerable and/or disempowered groups**

### ***2.1.4.1. Children***

Missionary organisations should acknowledge that children belong to a vulnerable group, and it is essential that cultural differences in the status of children are understood so that conflicts due to these are avoided.

- In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art 14), missionary organisations should respect the rights of parents to give their children an upbringing in accordance with their beliefs in all relevant circumstances.
- As a general rule, missionary activities should not be directed at minors without informed, explicit and voluntary consent by the children themselves and their parents/guardians.
- Missionary organisations should be sensitive to the development of the child as a free adherent to any religion or none.

- Religious tuition should be directed at children with a similar religious background. In the case of children with other backgrounds, the class organisers should be particularly careful to obtain genuine consent to participation from the children's parents or legal guardians.
- In the case of a minor wanting to convert to the religion of a missionary/charity organisation, the organisation should establish a dialogue with its parents with the aim of maintaining a good relationship between the parents and their child.
- Missionary organisations should accept that the age of maturity varies from culture to culture and from legal system to legal system, and should respect the view of the target group in this matter.

#### *2.1.4.2. Gender perspectives*

- Missionary organisations should acknowledge that women may be disempowered in many cultures and religions.
- Missionary organisations should recognize that women "have the right to have or adopt a religion or belief of her choice" (CCPR, art 18), and the "freedom to change her religion or belief" (DHR, art.18) independent of decisions taken by her husband or family. This also includes the right to retain her own religion in cases where her husband or family converts.
- Missionary organizations should act with care in cases where they know that there is a danger that a woman will come into conflict with her family (husband/father) if she should choose to convert as a result of their activities. Organisations must do their utmost to ensure that such a conflict does not arise, and provide help if problems should occur.

#### *2.1.4.3. Refugees, Asylum Seekers*

- Missionary organisations should acknowledge that asylum seekers and refugees living in temporary camps are vulnerable groups
- Missionary organisations should be aware of the fact that if an asylum seeker converts to a different religion, this may create serious difficulties if the person has to return to his/her homeland, and/or to the rest of his/her family
- Missionary organisations and religious communities should reflect on how their message is interpreted by asylum seekers so that their message is not perceived as a promise of residence permission or other benefits. They should therefore be very careful if approaching asylum seekers so as to avoid any risk of manipulation.

## 2.2. For those to whom missionary activities are directed

- Target groups need to recognise that the most fundamental of all human rights connected with freedom of religion of the individual is "the right to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" (CCPR, art. 18) or "freedom to change his religion or belief" (DHR, art. 18).
- Target groups need to recognise that the right to manifest religion or belief in teaching (CCPR, art. 18) and the right to freedom of expression (CCPR, art. 19) also apply in the context of missionary activities.
- Target groups should recognize that women "have the right to have or adopt a religion or belief of her choice" (CCPR, art 18), and the "freedom to change her religion or belief" (DHR, art.18) independent of decisions taken by her husband or family. This also includes the right to change her religion when her husband or family chooses to retain their original religion.
- In a situation where another religion is disseminated in a community by means that community members consider unethical, the community members should first try to solve the issue by direct contact with those involved.

- If the problems persist, the community members should bring the problem to the attention of leaders of the missionary organisation.
- In order to encourage mediation or dialogue as a means of dealing with problems connected with missionary activities, broadly based inter-religious councils should be established.
- When mediation or dialogue do not lead to satisfactory protection of the rights of community members to maintain their religion or belief, or in other situations where they feel that their rights are being violated through the missionary activities of others, the community members should appeal to legal measures in accordance with international human rights standards.