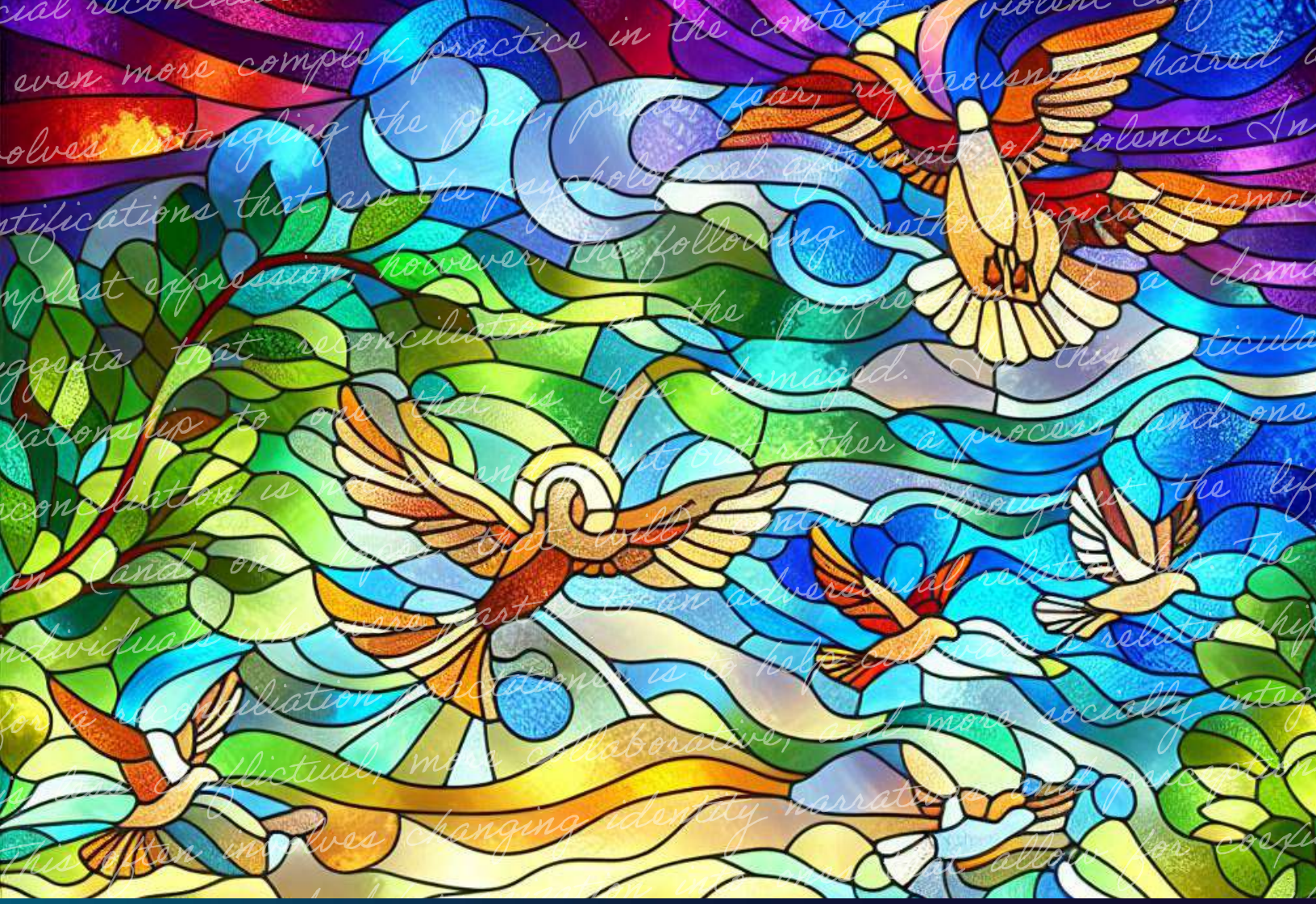

Basic Theory of Reconciliation:

A Practitioner Methodology

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Basic Theory of Reconciliation:

A Practitioner Methodology

James Patton, MDiv, MALD

Social reconciliation at the community level[1] is a complex and even more complex practice in violent conflict. It involves untangling the psychological aftermath of violence, such as pain, pride, fear, righteousness, hatred, and justifications. In its simplest form, reconciliation is the *progression of a damaged relationship to a less damaged one*.

It is not an end-point but a continuous process that ideally should persist throughout the life of individuals who were parties to an adversarial relationship. The goal of a reconciliation practitioner is to foster a less conflictual, more collaborative, and more socially integrated relationship. This often entails changing identity narratives and perceptions that have allowed dehumanization into ones that promote coexistence. This, in turn, involves helping those in conflict to see something of themselves in one another. These shifts in perspective are not easy when individuals and communities are immersed in the pain and hatred that follow violent conflict. However, it is the task of a reconciliation practitioner to facilitate this possibility.

It is important to note that reconciliation is not limited to a process between individuals but can be conducted between whole communities. Even if done at the individual level, results will intuitively be more sustainable if community members, family members, and others are constructively involved. Nor is it only in the climate of violence that reconciliation is a relevant practice. In this article, however, I will primarily be reflecting on violence. I will use the terms' perpetrator' and 'victim,' which may seem to oversimplify the reality of violent conflict to a binary. In truth, over the long arc of violence, many people are both victims and perpetrators. I also frequently use the generic term 'other' to indicate either party to this conflict.

[1] This contrasts formal government reconciliation processes, such as truth and reconciliation commissions.

My intention is not to ignore the nuances of violence or reconciliation but to generate a simplified structure that can absorb that nuance, described through an emblematic, discrete incident of violence in which one side was the perpetrator and the other the victim. This allows for a more streamlined presentation of ideas. However, in real reconciliation practice, the multiplicity of identities of the parties to the process, the role of the wider community, complexities of collective violence, etc., will demand careful layering of the process elements that I describe below.

“In truth, over the long arc of violence, many people are both *victims* and *perpetrators*.

Unpacking the history of violence, for example, may require that a victim admit her own destructive actions or that a perpetrator recognize himself as also suffering due to his actions. Additionally, while there is room for punishment in reconciliation (which will be addressed further on), reconciliation is fundamentally a restorative justice practice to recover social cohesion. This is a much deeper structural goal than simply identifying a legally or socially appropriate punishment for action and requires skillful reconcilers or facilitators.[2]

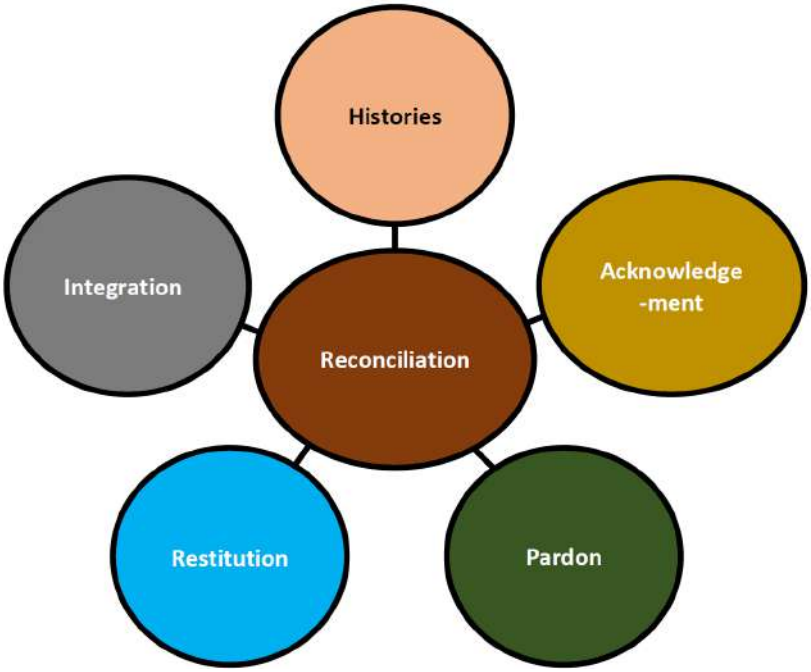
The facilitator of reconciliation must be focused singularly on the end goal of improved relationships and cannot fall into the inviting trap of being partisan. While this is challenging for anyone with a knowledge of the details of violence and unavoidable empathy for victims of violence, it is not the place of the reconciler to be committed to any particular understanding of reality, history, truth, or appropriate actions that constitute justice. Instead, the reconciler is committed to an improved, healed relationship. However, *the parties to the conflict define that*. This may mean that parties to the conflict arrive at a different conclusion to their adversarial relationship than the reconciler might have recommended or hoped to achieve. However, it is not the place of the reconciler to be an interested party in anything other than the transition of a relationship from broken to more healed and the attendant reduction in conflict and violence associated with that change.

“The *facilitator* of reconciliation must be focused singularly on the end goal of *improved relationships* and cannot fall into the inviting trap of being *partisan*.”

[2] In the context of this article, I use these terms interchangeably.

The skills of the reconciler should be brought to bear to produce a sustainable, expansive change that positively affects the other parties' relationships to the conflict. This may require that the reconciler challenge parties to question their own experiences, test their limits, or acknowledge brutal truths. However, these challenges should only be meant to facilitate the transformation of the damaged relationship. The fundamental theory is that a new relationship based on a changed image of the other will break cycles of retributive violence and begin healing processes.

Although each case will have nuances, just as each conflict and act of violence is distinct and each person and their psychology is distinct, the fundamentals of reconciliation can be described through five core elements.



It is essential to mention that these elements only sometimes proceed linearly, although progress in some may advance progress in others. In some cases, these elements are iterative, with advances in one area necessitating revisiting an element already "dealt with." For example, individuals might clearly understand their experience before engaging with their former adversaries. However, that understanding shifts when they hear an alternative viewpoint that gives them different insights. Additionally, not all of these elements are essential to successful reconciliation, although the more they are present, the more influential the reconciliation will likely be. However, reconciliation will ultimately take as many forms as those who are reconciled. The five core elements described below are *Histories*, *Acknowledgement*, *Pardon*, *Restitution*, and *Integration*.

Histories

Histories refer to the "story of what happened" and *the process by which an individual or group comes to articulate their experience of an event*. These histories do not necessarily reflect a universally accepted reality, and this part of the process should not be seen as an effort to establish an event's "objective" truth. Instead, it is meant to allow for the articulation of a personal or community narrative about the perception of the experience, including the impact of that experience on their well-being. The process by which parties understand their own stories is critical, as it will determine much of what they require from and may offer to a reconciliation process. These histories are not permanently fixed and can shift with time, particularly if parties become more sympathetic to the experience of former adversaries or as their recollection evolves.

Exploring these histories can be delicate and complex, and each party will likely need to conduct this part of the process with the support of the third-party reconciler, separate from their perceived adversary. This also requires a great deal of trust-building by the facilitator. The creation of a safe space, with expert facilitation by a trusted third party, is crucial so that those involved might feel secure enough to go through a complicated process of recall and interpretation without feeling that they are being scrutinized and judged. The facilitator can be critical in determining when adversaries can face and hear each other's accounts, grievances, and needs. This moment of "ripeness"[3] is very delicate, and if that engagement is rushed, it can do more harm than good, such as reinforcing destructive stereotypes of the other.

In order to best establish this sense of security, facilitators must be mindful of psychological barriers to remembering, exploring, and analyzing the traumatic past. Psycho-social or spiritual professionals, as well as innovative techniques, such as artistic representation of emotions related to the trauma, can likely provide significant support to this process.

"[*Histories*] is meant to allow for the articulation of a *personal or community narrative* about the *perception* of the experience, including the impact of that experience on their *well-being*."

[3] For more on *ripeness*, see the work of William Zartman, inter alios.

An essential aspect of this element is grounded in the concept of separating the perception of the other from the experience of violence, particularly for the victim. The reality of an act of historical violence will never change, nor will the role and agency of a perpetrator. However, if the act and the actor remain synonymous, a change in the perception of the other and an improved relationship is impossible. This element tries to *decouple the act from the actor* - while the person "did" what they did, they "are not" what they did. To achieve the possibility of reconciliation, they need to be untied from that act to be accessible to evolve into someone else in the victim's mind.

In the case of victims, this might mean dealing with fear, pain, resentment, and hatred, ultimately opening up to the possibility that, if the following elements fall into place, the perpetrator might be a different person in the world, no longer representing the threat of similar action. With a perpetrator, this could easily mean grappling with self-justification, dehumanization of the other, self-loathing, and selective amnesia. In this process, the facilitator can begin to assist with disentangling authentic grievances and fears from prejudicial generalizations about the other individual or group.

"In order to best establish this sense of *security*, facilitators must be mindful of psychological barriers to *remembering*, *exploring*, and *analyzing* the traumatic past."

Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment refers to the process by which one party hears and understands the other's historical views, experiences, and personal narratives. The truths shared in this element are not meant to be absolute or capital "T" truths. It is almost certain that the adversaries will hold different accounts of the same history, and undoubtedly, their subjective experience of those histories and their aftermath will be distinct. The goal of acknowledgment is not to agree on truth but to *recognize that the perception of the other is important because it is their perception* and, inasmuch, is meaningful in understanding the motives and sentiments that drive them. This delicate process requires all parties to recognize that their task is not to contest or debate those stories but to acknowledge that they represent the truth for the other and, as such, are critically important to reconciling.

Often, parties engaged in a reconciliation process begin to soften their attitude toward the other after they feel that their histories, with their attendant grievances and needs, have been authentically heard. This is an opportunity to seize on falling barriers and identify common ground to build a new understanding of the other and a new relationship.

While adversaries must be able to witness the truth of the other directly, an effective reconciliation practitioner must discern when parties are ready to share their history and hear another's history without debating it – at least not directly to the adversary. Here, a facilitator might return to a segregated engagement of the parties to the conflict to help them process what they have heard, including grappling with probable frustrations arising from the other's account of their shared history. Several techniques can be employed prior to that direct engagement.

"While adversaries must be able to *witness the truth* of the other directly, an effective reconciliation practitioner must discern when parties are *ready to share* their history and hear another's history *without debating* it..."

The first is a kind of "shuttle diplomacy" to prepare the ground. Bringing perceptions from one side into conversations with the other, if the facilitator is considered an impartial third party, is a way to gauge reactions, explain intentions, and work through resistance. In this way, ripeness can be achieved for an actual direct engagement. One technique that should be carefully explored before adversarial group meetings is "compassionate" or "active" listening. This technique teaches a listener to use inquiry to deepen understanding and clarification while avoiding judgment and combativeness over assertions of experience and perception without debating the accuracy of historical claims. For instance, instead of saying, "You are wrong!" a listener might say, "My understanding of that is not the same; would you please explain more about why you see it that way?"

Pardon

Pardon is a term I use consciously in this reconciliation methodology to avoid using the term forgiveness. I do so because forgiveness has become burdened with misunderstandings, creating controversy around its practice. One way in which forgiveness has been misapplied is the implication that a victim of an incident of violence is in some way obliged to forgive. It may undoubtedly be the conviction of the reconciler that spiritual and mental health will be significantly improved if a victim forgives. As a saying attributed to many people, not least of all the Buddha, goes, "Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."

However, to burden a victim with a sense that they are obliged to forgive can amount to revictimizing them. This can be particularly toxic if it is also mistakenly implied that forgiveness is a singular act in a discrete moment. The subtext of that framing is that one forgives and, from that moment, "moves on" into a future unburdened by the past. This is neither factually accurate nor practical. If the future does not ground itself in the past, it will be uninformed and suffer the kind of functional amnesia that invites repetition. A new future must be grounded in the truth of a broken past but not inexorably tethered.

"One way in which *forgiveness* has been misapplied is the implication that a victim of an incident of violence is in some way obliged to *forgive*."

On the other hand, pardon is understood in this methodology as a process that begins when the aggrieved person or the aggressor first *opens themselves to the idea that a perpetrator of an offense can be distinct from the act they committed.* Pardon is the initiation of a process that lasts as long as the relationship of an individual or group with their past lasts – which is to say, the life of the person in question. This bears repetition because it is crucial. When one begins to separate the actor from the action, one allows the actor to be understood as distinct from the act they committed. This means that history can be dealt with, remaining pertinent and relevant. However, the perpetrator's identity is not wholly equivalent to that history and is free to change, evolve, and have those changes recognized by the other.

"When one begins to separate the *actor* from the *action*, one allows the actor to be understood as distinct from the act they committed. This means that *history* can be dealt with, remaining *pertinent* and *relevant*."

Without this separation, there can be no pardon because the perpetrator will forever be equated with the act they committed – an act that will never be erased from history, no matter how much forgiveness is sought or offered. In this scenario, the person could never genuinely change in the eyes of the victim since the act can never be undone. The effect of an act of violence may never cease to have an impact upon a victim despite this process of pardon. Suppose the identity of the perpetrator is not inextricably linked with the action. However, that can be true simultaneously with a less broken, or even positive, relationship growing between the parties.

Pardon might require "giving up on the hope that the past will be different." However, pardon is not a discrete moment of transition. Instead, it is the initiation of a process. As such, it best flourishes when it includes a verifiable promise of "non-repetition." The cessation of further offenses is inextricably connected to the demonstration of a change in a person's attitudes and the authenticity of their desire for a changed relationship.

In a counterintuitive way, the perpetrator must recognize this distinction, also. If they cannot divorce their own identity from their committed act, they may also remain trapped in that history. In my experience, repentant perpetrators who have not grappled with how to transform their self-perception in this way feel like they have to fight against a negative "inherent nature" if they wish to avoid recidivism. Rather than seeing themselves as positively transformed, they see themselves as an inherent risk, a perception that leads to a sense of the need for constant vigilance against destructive actions rather than one of potential positive agency for change. If the former is the case, a perpetrator might be more resigned to the "fact" that they will probably commit such acts again, which lowers their resistance to those behaviors. Alternatively, the latter will encourage an intention to apply their experience and transformation as a readily available source of constructive influence on others who might face the same destructive behavioral risks.

"If [*perpetrator*] cannot divorce their own identity from their committed act, they may also remain trapped in that history."

Restitution

Restitution means more than just material support or other actions on behalf of a victim or victims of violence. Restitution fundamentally refers to a means by which a party demonstrates its *authentic willingness to pursue a restored relationship by making amends*. This often means relinquishing something precious. However, as with each constituent reconciliation element, this can take many forms. Restitution might be as simple as discarding justifications and admitting the wrongful nature of one's behaviors, or as complex as the person losing their freedom and being removed from society through jail time, or it may include a meaningful financial penalty.

The perspective of the victim is critical in determining how this manifests. Since the purpose of restitution is to authentically demonstrate remorse and a desire to heal a relationship on the part of a perpetrator, the aggrieved party must be involved in the decision-making process determining the nature of that restorative action. There is a severe risk for a reconciliation mediator to influence the process based on their visceral sense of justice at this stage. It is critically important, however, that one refrains from doing so. Only if the victim governs the restitution process will it authentically reflect their needs for healing.

One of the fundamental characteristics of violence is a loss of control and self-determination experienced by the victim. A perpetrator exerts power over a victim. Returning decision-making power to the victim returns some measure of control to them. This is a delicate element for the facilitator, as mere vengeance must not be the driving factor in deciding what restitution should be made. This does not mean that punishment is not a factor. However, restorative justice practices require that any punishment or sacrifice promotes the possibilities of generating an improved relationship and regenerating social cohesion, not just "getting even." It is beneficial if activities that advance some measure of rehumanizing and empathy have taken place in advance. As mentioned in the discussion of pardon, however, there must be some mechanism for holding people accountable for not only the restitution they agree to but also for a promise of non-repetition of their transgressions.

"*Restitution* might be as *simple* as discarding justifications and admitting the wrongful nature of one's behaviors, or as *complex* as the person losing their freedom and being removed from society through jail time, or it may include a meaningful financial penalty."

Integration

Integration represents the practical evidence of moving from a broken relationship to a more healed one. While integration fundamentally refers to an improved, more pro-social relationship between the parties, it also means greater social cohesion in the broader community. This relational change moves adversaries from attitudes and interactions grounded in acts of violation (of rights, safety, liberty, sovereignty, etc.) to those grounded in healthier, more empathetic, and more respectful attitudes. This progression might be reflected by something as simple as giving up the desire for retributive violence or as complex as working together for mutual social or financial benefit. The key here is not that a relationship must achieve a certain quality – such as regular collaboration – to "qualify" as reconciliation. Instead, success is measured by the relationship's progression from adversarial tendencies.

In some cases, adversaries must work through difficult hurdles before they might be willing to soften their attitudes. In other cases, however, some degree of integration might happen at the outset, laying the groundwork for the other elements. Sometimes, when adversaries connect over mutual interests and benefits, they break down barriers to sharing histories, for example.

One of the more powerful tools to advance integration is collaboration on something of mutual benefit. While this can often manifest as a joint economic project, for example, with the added benefit of enhancing personal and community economies destroyed by the conflict, there are many possibilities. In some cases, former adversaries will jointly implement a community improvement project, seek ways to dissuade others from committing violence, or establish a service project for others impacted by the violence.

It must be recognized, however, that a new relationship will always be grounded in the adversarial experience of the past. No amount of improved relationship will wash away the historical acts that took place. This is important for a reconciliation practitioner and the adversaries to recall. However, changing history is never the goal; establishing a better future is. This means that a certain quality of interaction must be reached between those striving to build this kind of integration.

“One of the more powerful tools to advance *integration* is *collaboration* on something of *mutual benefit*.

Critical among them are trust, authenticity, and empathy. Former adversaries will be most careful of one another and their transformed relationship, avoiding past errors leading to confrontation if they have developed genuine empathy for one another. The longer a relationship is positive, the more that trust will grow between the parties.

Conclusion

This methodological framework is presented as a means to take a complex concept and even more challenging practice and streamline its essential elements. It is not intended to refute or supplant other understandings of reconciliation, of which there are many, but rather to provide a possible tool for approaching reconciliation that may be useful in application or in informing other methodologies. Despite the effort to establish a practical distinction between these five elements, there are undoubtedly areas where the line between one and another is blurred, where it might be required to apply more than one at a time, or where there are gaps that other practices will fill. In the end, reconciliation is about improving relationships, and a practitioner must use all the techniques at her disposal to drive toward that goal.

It should be clearly stated that reconciliation is not an obligation but a tool that may be used to improve broken relationships when this is considered a meaningful goal. One of the primary purposes of reconciling adversaries is to prevent cycles of retributive violence or prejudice that continue to deteriorate social cohesion. This may mean that a practitioner must make compromises in terms of perceived justice, but only if the parties consciously encourage seeking a better-integrated relationship. After all, the quality of justice is best determined by those who have suffered injustice.

About CFIG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFIG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFIG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

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James Patton is a Partner at *Lead Integrity* and the former President and CEO of The *International Center for Religion & Diplomacy* (ICRD). He has conducted international development, conflict transformation, and social reconciliation in complex environments for 25 years, building collaborative networks and programs with the entire spectrum of social and political stakeholders. James' non-governmental experience includes coordinating citizen security and reconciliation efforts with Indigenous and Afro-descendent women in the Andean region, facilitating Cambodian Buddhists' role in post-conflict stability, supporting pedagogical reforms and educator training to emphasize tolerance and critical thinking with the Saudi Ministry of Education, and developing frameworks for training religious actors in preventing extremism in North Africa. His governmental experience includes leading stability operations for the *U.S. State Department* in South Sudan and enhancing the Latin America and Religion and Conflict portfolios for *USAID*'s Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation. James is a Lifetime Member of the *Council on Foreign Relations*, Senior Visiting Fellow at *Brigham Young University*'s *Wheatley Institution*, and co-author, with Rev. David Steele, of the *U.S. Institute of Peace* publication, *Religion and Conflict Guide Series: Religion and Reconciliation*. He holds a Master of Law and Diplomacy (MALD) from *The Fletcher School* at *Tufts University* and a Master of Divinity (MDiv) from *Harvard Divinity School*.

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