

“Do No Harm:” a brief for faith leaders in community action

by Michelle Garred PhD & Johonna McCants-Turner PhD, researchers & trainers

“Do No Harm” is a key planning tool for planning action initiatives in your community. All such initiatives - whether intended to reduce poverty, improve health or build bridges - have the **potential to either nurture or harm intergroup relationships**. Good intentions, even among people of faith, do not always lead to harmonious relationships between groups with different identities. At the same time, every initiative holds the potential to build better relationships.

“Your good intentions might actually translate into something that can ... disrupt the way the community works.” - Muslim Do No Harm user, Singapore

Practicing Do No Harm will help you and your faith-inspired community co-workers to:

- Understand the context of relationships within which you are working;
- Understand the interaction between your initiative and the context of relationships, and
- Act on that understanding to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.¹

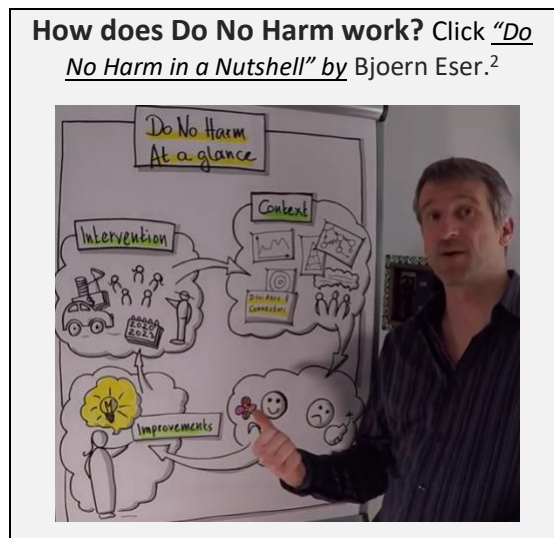
Do No Harm helps you to assess the impact of all your decisions, actions and behaviors - so that you can intentionally make those impacts as positive as possible.

Where did Do No Harm ideas come from? [CDA Collaborative Learning Projects](#) consulted with thousands of community workers around the world, leading to six universal lessons.

1. Your initiative will occur within – and become a part of – a context in which different groups have relationships with each other.
2. Every context has Dividers (factors or tensions that drive groups apart) and Connectors (factors that help bring groups together).
3. Your initiative will interact with Dividers and Connectors, making relationships better or worse.
4. The Actions and Behaviors of the people who plan and implement your initiative will affect the Dividers and Connectors.
5. The impact arises from details of the initiative such as what, why, where, when, who and how.
6. There will always be options for improving your impact on intergroup relationships.

Do No Harm did not originate as a faith-based tool - yet people of faith have made it their own. This has happened all over the world, and we hope that it will now take root in North America.

How does Do No Harm work? Click [“Do No Harm in a Nutshell”](#) by Bjoern Eser.²



How does Do No Harm relate to social justice? Do No Harm aims to mitigate destructive forms of conflict that bring unnecessary damage to people and relationships. At the same time, conflict can also be constructive and healthy, leading toward healing and justice. A robust Do No Harm practice can hold space for constructive forms of conflict, by recognizing discriminatory attitudes, actions, systems and symbols as Dividers that must be addressed within relationships between different groups.

Who uses Do No Harm, and why? Community workers are using Do No Harm at many levels:

- **Organization Leaders** – Do No Harm helps organizations to become more effective and accountable, ensuring that initiatives fit the context and are socially responsible.
- **Initiative Planners** – Do No Harm helps to develop a plan that strengthens relational Connectors and weakens Dividers, not just once but adaptively on an ongoing basis.
- **Initiative Implementers** – Do No Harm helps individuals and teams to avoid relational pitfalls and make unity-promoting choices in their everyday implementation work.

Do No Harm “transformed my mind ... and changed my perspective.” - Christian Do No Harm user, Philippines

Many of these community workers now see their context and work in surprising new ways. Once they become aware of Dividers and Connectors, they notice them everywhere.

What does this have to do with faith? The Do No Harm paradigm shift can be particularly profound for faith-inspired community workers. Do No Harm provides an accessible tool to help articulate and address what people of faith already know: religion has the power to help or hurt, depending on how you wield it. Do No Harm helps faith-inspired workers to (re)discover the peace and justice teachings within their own religious traditions, and become more attuned to inclusive and reconciled relationships. The applications are endless. Among them, we often see faith-inspired community workers restructuring their partnerships and policies to include ‘the other,’ and co-creating new overarching identities that connect, even as they affirm the unique particularities of all the different faith and identity groups that may be participating.

Where can I learn more? Suggestions for further reading:

- [Far Beyond a Tool: Do No Harm as Spiritual \(Trans\)Formation for Interfaith Cooperation and Action](#), by Johonna McCants-Turner and Michelle Garred, in *Development in Practice*, online 1Aug2022.
- [Evidence Brief: Do No Harm for Faith Groups Case Studies: El Salvador and Kenya](#), summarizing research by Johonna McCants-Turner *et al.*, for World Vision 2021.
- [Conflict-Sensitive Expressions of Faith in Mindanao: A Case Study](#), by Michelle Garred with Sr. Joan Castro, in *Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace*, 4:2, 2011.
- [Transformed Together](#), by the Davao Ministerial Interfaith with Michelle Garred, 2010. (Note: ‘Local Capacities for Peace’ is a synonym for ‘Do No Harm.’)



¹ Adapted from *International Alert et al.* 2004.

² For more insights from Bjoern Eser, see www.thepeacebuildingpractitioner.org.