Faith in Post-Conflict Rehabilitation; The Role and Impact of Religion in Post-war Liberia and the Church – NGO Relationship

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>Liberian Council of Churches</td>
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<td>FGMF</td>
<td>Full Gospel Ministries Fellowship</td>
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<td>PFUL</td>
<td>Pentecostal Fellowship Union of Liberia</td>
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<td>CCL</td>
<td>Christian Community of Liberia</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Ganta Christian Community</td>
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<td>AEL</td>
<td>Association of Evangelicals in Liberia</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>UNMIL</td>
<td>United Nations Mission in Liberia</td>
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<td>IRCL</td>
<td>Inter-Religious Council of Liberia</td>
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<tr>
<td>LURD</td>
<td>Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy</td>
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<td>MODEL</td>
<td>Movement for Democracy in Liberia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Accord)</td>
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<td>NEC</td>
<td>National Election Commission</td>
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<td>NPFL</td>
<td>National Patriotic Front of Liberia</td>
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<td>NOHA</td>
<td>Network of Humanitarian Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>FBO</td>
<td>Faith-Based Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
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Foreword

This thesis could not have been written without the support and advice of many individuals persons and organizations. First, I want to thank Jonathan Detweiler from Athletes in Action, for sharing his network, linking me with his contacts in Liberia and for his valuable advice. From Universidad de Deusto (Bilbao, Spain) I am grateful to Christina de la Cruz, for her support in focusing and narrowing down the general ideas I had at the initial phase of the research. From University of Groningen I want to thank Prof. Dr. Joost Herman for his preparatory consultation and his comments on the first draft version.

Regarding Liberia, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to George Festus Blamoh, who has been a great host, guide and friend to me during my time in Liberia. Thanks to his constant company and hospitality I have been able to work on the research questions and objectives effectively. The advice he gave was useful and the insights he gave were enlightening and directly applicable in my analyses. I could move around smoothly and I have enjoyed good care, also in times of physical illness and hospital visitation. Further, I would like to thank the following people for their help and participation during my field research: Joshua Milton Blahyi, Tsjeard Bouta, Nic Street, Dave and Audry Waines, Stephen Kai, Wondayehu Gedamu, Samuel Bier, Edwin Dunbar, Kabah M. Trawally, Jairus N. Jargba, Dwight Clugston, David Owen, Willie Sirleaf, Jemah Fololotea, Boimah Freeman and Alexander Gbondo. Without their involvement and input this thesis could not have been written.
1. Introduction

It is April 1996, in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Heavy fighting is breaking out again between the rebels of Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the remaining supporters of former president Samuel K. Doe, exacerbated by a variety of other extremely violent rebel groups. The violence means the breaking of the tenth peace treaty or ceasefire agreement that has been signed in the 1990-1996 period between the different warring factions. The armed groups were characterized by large numbers of child soldiers and sex slaves, and the fighting caused wide displacement, massive destruction and a dire humanitarian situation.

In the midst of this, churches around Liberia were trying to cope with the consequences of the conflict as much as possible. Although most of the churches were scattered and hit by the social crisis themselves, some could still provide help and functioned as a beacon of hope and (relative) safety. In August 1996, the intensity of the battles lowered, due to the ‘Abuja Accord’ signed in Nigeria, agreeing on disarming and demobilizing the various armed groups and organizing elections in 1997.

This – in retrospect temporal – time of relative stability and rest, was reason enough for the Monrovian church the ‘Calvary Temple’ to start with a rehabilitation program aimed at helping child soldiers and girls who were with the rebels as sex slaves. A home was opened, where, from a biblical perspective, children were offered accommodation, psychosocial counseling, life skills sessions and basic vocational training. In essence, the goal was to restore the hope of the children, by using tales from the bible to convey a message of forgiveness, reconciliation and the possibility of a second chance.

As months and years passed, the fighting increased again and the need for reintegration of child soldiers only increased. The Calvary Temple tried to expand the program, but lacked the financial means to accommodate and serve more children. At that time, UNICEF was looking for ways to get access to vulnerable populations, especially children. Partly because of the high international media attention to the Liberian war funds were well available. The reason for UNICEF to work with a church was, thus, primarily to get access to the population, while the reason for the Calvary Temple to work with an aid agency was to receive funding in order to expand the operational activities.

In the years after its initiation, the program grew dramatically in a short period of time. In 1999, the church did a funding proposal for the period of 1999-2002, which was granted by UNICEF (and also partly by USAID), which comprised of approximately 500.000 US dollars. The expenses of the home of rehabilitation could continue for the next three years, but, at the same time, the large amount of funding led to much donor dependency, control and influence. For example, UNICEF thought it would be good for the girls at the rehabilitation home to involve with traditional dances: to go back to their tribal roots, find back their identity and re-appreciate their cultural background again, in order to process the traumas of their recent past. The idea was to teach the girls the dance and led them perform during the Sunday morning worship services. However, this particular dance happened to be one with partial nudity and sensual movements. This was perceived as possibly offending the congregation and was against the moral and cultural beliefs of the church leaders. While UNICEF – because of their power as a donor – insisted on the importance of the dance, the church refused to carry it out, which led to a lack of mutual understanding and caused a more tensed relationship.
Besides this incident, there began to arise difficulties on a senior management level. The church lacked the capacity to properly account for the high expenses of the program. The receipts, for instance, were a problem, because due to illiteracy they were sometimes only a fingerprint. This did not meet the reporting standards and could therefore not be accepted by UNICEF. In addition, there was a lack of knowledge about financial management and a high need of capacity building. Moreover, the church itself realized the program had expanded too fast, where the congregation and its leadership had appeared not capable of coping with. Thereby, in the opinion of the church, UNICEF lacked cultural sensitivity, due to the cultural dance incident. On the other hand, UNICEF blamed the church for lacking good reporting skills and financial knowledge. After all, these elements led to an abrupt of the co-operation between the church and UNICEF and, more importantly, also led to the end of the child soldiers and sex slaves rehabilitation program, once flourishing and abundantly supported by aid agencies.

This story brings along important questions about the potential role and impact of religion. It is about raising questions about what the impact of religion is, especially in a post-war context like Liberia. How does religion influence post conflict rehabilitation and is there a fruitful co-operation possible between religious institutions and other actors? This leads to the following research question of this thesis:

What is the role and impact of religion in post conflict Liberia and to what extent have aid agencies - while dealing with religious institutions - embedded this in their post-conflict rehabilitation activities?

The research objective of this thesis is to expose the dynamics of religion in a post-war rehabilitation setting. It is about how religion affects the lives of people and the developments that begin to happen when a civil war ends. What role does it play, what impact does religion have? It particularly aims at exploring the ‘added value’ of the religious factor in peacebuilding, humanitarian action and conflict studies, applied at the last 9 years in Liberia. What role has religion played in this post-war context? What is its impact on post-conflict rehabilitation? And, more importantly, why should we pay attention to it? Can it fulfill a relevant role in humanitarian action? It is an attempt to look where the potential added value of religion stems from and how it has evolved. It endeavors to examine the co-operation between NGOs and religious institutions and how this relation can be better understood.

In order to achieve these research objectives, sub questions are formulated, and will be addressed in the forthcoming chapters. The particular sub questions of this thesis are as follows:

- How do religion, conflict and humanitarian action interrelate?
- Which methods have been used to examine the role and impact of religion in Liberia?
- What has been the role and impact of religion in post-conflict Liberia?
- What can be concluded from the role and impact of religion in Liberia?
- What recommendations for the future can be made?

Although further elaborated in Chapter 3, the methodology that has been used in this thesis can be differentiated between an extensive literature review and a field research period in Liberia, by using methods as conducting interviews and questionnaires. The literature review was done to better grasp the notions of religion, conflict and humanitarian action and to better understand the context.
of Liberia. The interviews and questionnaires have been aimed at specifically targeted respondents of mainly NGO or FBO representatives/employees, church leaders, pastors, church members and other relevant individuals. The interviews were generally aimed at enhancing the understanding of the role and impact of religion in post-conflict Liberia, while the questionnaires were specifically designed to deepen the relationship between aid agencies and religious institutions.

This thesis is built up as follows: In the Chapter 2 the concepts of religion, humanitarian action and conflict will be addressed. It is about topics like religion and conflict, religion and peace, religious violence, faith-based organizations, etc. In Chapter 3 the methodology will be addressed. Chapter 4 is about the role of religion and the church in post-war Liberia. It also addresses the church – NGO relationship. Then, in Chapter 5, conclusions will be made on the role of the church on the basis of the previous chapters and the answer to the research question will be formulated. It also addresses the church – NGO partnership. Chapter 6 gives some recommendations for a better understanding of religious actors in a post-conflict setting and provides recommendations about how to improve the church – NGO relationship for future post-conflict rehabilitation. It provides some guidelines for NGOs when working with religious institutions and lists a checklist of key questions before involving with a local church. Every chapters begins with a sub question and ends with a sub conclusion.

This research contributes to what you could call the ‘ambivalence of the sacred’ debate. In this debate religion is perceived as an ambivalent social phenomenon with a constructive and a deconstructive nature. It fights the idea of religion as an often deliberately overlooked phenomenon. Religion is deeply based in the Liberian society, culture and history. Religion is, therefore, essential to understand the culture of Liberia. Because it is part of a shared history and culture, it has the power and opportunity to hold the country together. With this in mind, this thesis examines the role and the impact of religion in post-conflict Liberia and how the relationship between religious institutions and aid agencies (NGOs or FBOs) in post-conflict rehabilitation can be better understood.
2. Theoretical Framework

How do religion, conflict and humanitarian action interrelate?

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an illustration of how religion and humanitarian action are related to each other. The section begins with touching upon ‘conflict’ and ‘post-conflict’ from an international perspective. Then, religion as a concept is defined by approaching it from a sociological-historical and a more pragmatic angle. In doing so, several definitions which are used in academic literature and are of significance in this thesis are discussed. Hereafter, likewise is done with terms as ‘religion and conflict’, ‘religious violence’, ‘religion and peace’, ‘humanitarian action’, ‘religious solidarity’, and ‘faith-based organizations’.

2.2 Conflict and post-conflict

The term ‘conflict’ can refer to a variety of connotations. There can be conflicts in the personal sphere or conflicts between an employer and his employee. In that sense, strictly speaking, conflict is not the opposite of peace, since conflicts can be socially or politically desirable to achieve change and progress – if the conflicting parties make sure to negotiate in confidence and stability (Webel & Galtung, 2007). However, in this thesis the term ‘conflict’ refers to an ‘armed conflict’. In international humanitarian law (IHL), two types of armed conflicts are distinguished: international armed conflicts (between two or more states) and non-international armed conflicts (between governmental groups and non-governmental groups or between these groups only), as stated in the 1949 Geneva Conventions. In Liberia, although at some stages international troops were involved, the conflict is commonly seen as an non-international armed conflict.

In 2000, a World Bank report highlighted the dominant features of a conflict, applied to the African context. The following elements were mentioned: migrating populations and displacement; acute level of malnutrition and food insecurity; deteriorating health systems; disrupted production and exchange systems; illegal economic activities; severely diminished institutional capacity due to destruction of national and local administrative and linkages; and destruction of social and physical infrastructure (Chidi Achodo, 2000). The same report also speaks about the “essential elements of transition from war to peace”: political commitment; a new security framework; an acceptable, inclusive and transparent system of post-conflict governance; and a wide range of post-conflict economic recovery measures. These elements together drive the transition and ultimately lead to a ‘post-conflict’ situation. More specifically, to recover as quickly as possible and make sure conflict does not happen again, the intervention measures in a post-conflict situation consist of: reinforcing involvement of civil society; improve educational and health services; repair social and physical infrastructure; reinforce food production methods; reintegration of war affected populations (IDPs, refugees, ex-combatants); promote skills development, vocational training and job creation (Chidi Achodo, 2000).

2.3 Religion

In the section above the term (post-)conflict and its features is discussed. In this and some of the following paragraph, the concept of religion will be discussed. To begin with, in the section below this concept will be discussed according to some scientific definitions, concluded by arguing for more
recognition and inclusion of religion object of study in social science. Likewise, the recent history of religion as a concept as well as the influence of religion on the social and political sphere are touched upon.

### 2.3.1 Defining religion

In the history of academic literature about religion there has been written numerous accounts about how to define this concept. It is hard to define, because it differs from time, location and, especially, perception. One of the first scholars who gave broadly attention to the topic of religion was the well-known French social scientist Emile Durkheim. In 1912, he wrote a book called ‘Elementary Forms of the Religious Life’, based on research about the impact of religion in the daily life of people, perceiving religion as a social phenomenon.

Durkheim, known for his ideas of functionalism, paid during his career a lot of attention to religious topics. He looked at religion at a comprehensive level, because in his views religion affected the entire society as well as the actions and thoughts of the particular members of that society. He derived this idea from the functionalist school of thought; people shaping their reality according to their beliefs and what they see as sacred and non-sacred as the function of religion. Concretely, this means people do separate their religious, sacred rituals, habits, symbols and objects from their daily routines, symbols and objects, which are perceived as profane (Durkheim, 1912).

According to Durkheim, sacred rituals, symbols and objects are not only a way of practicing the belief itself, but, by attaching a divine value to it, it increases the division with non-sacred aspects, which strengthens the power and influence of religion. Furthermore, also in line with functionalism, Durkheim stresses the importance of creating solidarity among a group of believers as one of the key functions of religion. Religious practices bind people together, which only increases the devotedness of members, and provide guidance to groups of people in occasions like birth, marriage and death. This binding function, also commonly referred to as social cohesion, together with the influence on people’s daily actions, is in the point of view of Durkheim the most important part in understanding religion and the consequences it has on society as a whole (Durkheim, 1912).

As definition of religion Emile Durkheim articulates it as follows:

- “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”.

In spite of the extent of academic authority Durkheim had in his time – and still has in modern day social sciences –, his theory about religion is not without flaws and limitations. In contrast to the well-known German sociologist Max Weber for example, Durkheim hardly pays attention to the role of religious leadership in shaping the conditions where religious individuals and groups are active. Religious leadership especially plays an important role in social conflict related to religion and power relations; another area which is neglected by Durkheim. This brings along the need for reviewing some other definitions. A more recent, concrete and pragmatic definition is needed. In an attempt to achieve this, Basedau and De Juan start in their article from 2008 by stating that “‘Religion’ is most probably a category too broad for meaningful analysis.” Therefore, in their article about the
ambivalent nature of religion in conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, they propose to focus on the factors of religion that have an impact on peace and conflict. They distinguish the following dimensions:

- Demographic religious structures and dynamics; the share and relative number of people affiliated with different religions or denominations in a given society as well as changes in these structures;
- The content and intensity of religious identities; whether it be a social identity or in relationship with other identity markers such as ethnicity and region;
- Religious and theological ideas; values, commandments, beliefs, as well as their interpretation;
- The characteristic of religious organizations and institutions;
- The (possibly idiosyncratic) traits of individual religious leaders.

These dimensions concretely describe the applicability and the appropriateness of religion in relation to peace and conflict and the impact religious factors have on this. However, apart from these religious factors, one should acknowledge that the absence or presence of peace and conflict is the outcome of a complex and dynamic process of all kinds of processes, not only religious. In the words of Basedau & De Juan:

“Religious factors are embedded in a complex and dynamic setting of (other) social, political, economic, and cultural conditions. The impact of religious factors [as listed above] depends principally on the context.”

Likewise the context, the impact of religion also varies with the stage, nature, intensity and duration of the conflict. Given this pragmatic approach and the attention for religion as embedded in other conditions, a deeper definition is possible, not only to describe religion but to also grasp and understand the core idea behind it. Therefore, I would like to use the definition given by Scott Appleby:

“Religion is by definition a yearning for transcendence, for moving and reaching beyond the mundane, the spatial and temporal, the physical and contingent. Furthermore, it implicitly or explicitly makes the claim that as human beings we are oriented toward a horizon beyond history.” (Appleby, 2000)

So, besides the ideas of early thinkers as Durkheim and Weber, there has been a recent movement towards more attention for religion in social studies in general, and in peace- and conflict studies in specific. However, the urge for recognition of religion in social studies does not only come from scholars or scientists. For instance, the Australian former president of the World Bank (1995-2005) James Wolfensohn is known for pleading in favor of inclusion of religion and co-operation with religious actors. He argued in an interview in 2005:

“The most broadly based access to the developing world is through religious people. There are more of them out there. They’ve been there longer. They know the countries. They’re installed locally. They don’t all sit in a big office in the headquarters. They’re out in the field. And so it is a tragedy if they are not embraced, in my opinion, in the overall development process” (Wolfensohn, 2011).
In his work for the World Bank, he often involved with religious leaders around the world. While engaging with them, he gained experience in inter-religious dialogue and the challenges connected to this, in terms of, for instance, inter-religious and inter-denominational differences, separations and tensions. In spite of inter-religious divisions and other non-constructive religious elements, he remained optimistic about the potential positive side of religion:

“[...] when you get to the question of humanity and the question of poverty, I found that the competitive element disappeared and we were able to talk about these fundamental humanitarian issues on a very even basis.”

Thus, the idea of Wolfensohn was to stress the common ethical values which many world religions share with each other. This dimension of religion should be endorsed more by academics, as well as by international actors. Religion is often an overlooked and underestimated phenomenon, while it influences the political, social, psychological and cultural sphere in many ways. The shared values and common interest in terms of humanity and development from the point of Wolfensohn are of great importance is this thesis. Another basis for more recognition and inclusion of religion stem from a study of Fox (2001), tellingly titled: ‘Religion as an overlooked phenomenon in international relations’. Three ways of religious influence in international politics are listed: religion influencing the worldview of decision-makers and shaping the context in which they act; religion as a source of legitimacy for political action; and religion that crosses borders in many ways, influencing domestic and international conflicts. So, both in terms of the potential equal grounds in developmental efforts and perception of humanity as well as the influence of religion on international politics, religion should be used and seen more as a relevant subject of study and analysis.

2.3.2 Religion in a recent historical perspective

Leading social thinkers of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud – all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society. During the last fifteen years, however, it has proved not to be the case. The idea of a slow and steady death of religion has been increasingly criticized and questioned. In the words of Ingelhart (2007):

“Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs. Prominent critics suggest it is time to bury the secularization thesis”.

Besides, even if the secularization theory is an important recent trend, further nuance is needed. Looking more closely at this phenomenon, it clearly is something that is most visible in Western societies and cultures, which consist only of a small part of the world population. In the words of Appleby (2000):

“Whatever becomes of the secularization debate, the privatization of religion has had as yet its strongest influence only in the West, which represents less than one-sixth of the world’s population.”
So, likewise Appleby and Wolfensohn, the global revival of religion must be better acknowledged internationally and deserves more attention in academic research and social science literature.

### 2.3.3 Impact of religion in political and social sphere

The relationship between religion and politics knows a long and dynamic history. Throughout the history of mankind and religion there have been endless debates about the link between religious and secular authority. For ages, religion was deeply rooted and incorporated into the political sphere and in most ancient societies there was no clear definition of and separation between religious and political orders. Religious leaders exercised great influence on public debates, the opinion of the general public, national communication and press, law and order, and decision-making processes. For centuries, emperors and popes have competed over power and authority. The idea of a separation between the state and the national church has been adopted over centuries by many countries, because of the principle of freedom of religion. Gradually, states accepted the idea not to impose regulations and laws on people adhering to other religions than the till then-called state religion.

### 2.4. Religion and Conflict

In the previous sections concepts as ‘conflict’ and ‘religion’ have been separately addressed. In this section the relationship between the two is dealt with, beginning with a brief look at the recent history and ending with clarifying the concept of ‘religious violence’.

#### 2.4.1 Recent history

Attention to the relationship between religion and conflict has increasingly emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union, starting in the early nineties. Needless to say, the link existed before as well, but it gained significant international attention after the collapse of communism. The so-called proxy-wars around the planet during the Cold War between the capitalistic United States and the communistic Soviet Union, increasingly lost their geopolitical significance, because the Cold War was over. At the same time, many conflicts around the world were thereafter growingly perceived in terms of its ethno-religious dimension rather than its geopolitical dimension. In the words of David Little (2005) – scholar at International Affairs department of Harvard University – :

“[…] many of the ethno-religious conflicts in other parts of the world that we have become familiar with – for example, in Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, Kashmir, Cyprus and so on – were all cast in a new light as a result of the changing international climate. So long as we looked at the conflicts through the lens of the Cold War, we saw them either as functions of east-west rivalry or as unimportant sideshows. […] It was not that these conflicts suddenly erupted when the Cold War ended; it was that we began to perceive them in a new way”.

This new way created increasingly openness for religion as a relevant factor in conflict and post-conflict settings. Theories about religion as a reason of the root causes of a conflict as well as religion as a way of tackling root causes of conflict. This two-sided nature needs further clarification.
2.4.2 Religious violence

As described above, the new way of looking at religion and conflict has led to more scholarly interest and deepened insights in the relationship between religion, conflict and violence. In this debate, religious violence and religious peacebuilding are mentioned as two opposing components, however, yet derived from the same religious dynamics. To begin with religious violence, Appleby (2000) discerns two types. Firstly, there is what he calls ‘ethno-religious’ or ‘ethno-nationalist violence’, meaning that the power of religion is used to gain support in the strive for the cause of a nation(-state) or ethnic group. For example, violence is portrayed as a sacred duty or obligation. Appleby warns that – strictly speaking – this violence is not of religious nature, because it is not primarily aimed at achieving religious goals. Rather, religion is claimed as a tool to accomplish ideological goals and to legitimize the struggle for militant action (Appleby, 2000).

Secondly, there is a form of religious violence that is often referred to as ‘religious extremism’ or ‘fundamentalism’. In this type of violence religion fulfills a core role, because it functions as a direct motivator of violent activities. The objectives, motives and purposes behind the violence are of religious nature, as opposed to the ethno-religious violence, where the main objectives were related to the cause of the nation or ethnic group. Fundamentalists or religious extremists base their violent actions on their religion and see it as solution or answer to the limitations or flaws of their society. It violently imposes religious rules, thoughts and behavior in a society, to take over control and overthrow or undermine any secular alternatives in shaping societal action (Appleby, 2000).

2.5 Religion and Peace

On the other hand, however, there has been a movement towards more room for the constructive side of religion and its potential to bring about peace, earlier referred to as religious peacebuilding. In academic literature appeared also more research on the concept of reconciliation. The development of more attention to religious peacebuilding occurred in the early nineties as well, alongside the trend of more attention for religion as a cause of conflicts. Reconciliation as a term carried a religious connotation and was therefore often regarded as spiritual process rather as a condition for durable peace (Rosoux, 2009). This development added a new dimension of complexity in thinking about religion in that era. The demise of the Cold War gave attention to religious peacebuilding because religious actors in for example East-Germany, Poland, South Africa, and the Philippines manifested “non-violent transformation from authoritarianism to democracy in the late ’80s and early ‘90s” (Little, 2005). The fact that many of the developments around peaceful transformation were religiously inspired – for example the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa – was, of course, not only because of religion, but contributed partly (in degree depending on time and geographical location) to the peaceful driving force behind religion. Little said about his:

“This development is extremely important, and while we cannot say it is only religion that is behind it, the religious aspect of these important political and legal developments is highly significant.”

Religious peacebuilding is commonly seen as a process, which is by nature community-oriented, participatory and relationship-centered, in order to build peaceful societies. Studying this concept means assessing the “added-value” of religion in the process of maintaining and building peace. More specifically, the term ‘religious peacebuilding’ can refer to two different components, which
together entail the concept. On the one hand, it simply is about peacebuilding activities carried out by religious actors. This can be a variety of activities with all different kinds of implications, but initiated by religious actors. On the other hand, theoretically, religious peacebuilding can refer to peacebuilding specifically aimed at a religious setting. In this sense, it is about working in a religious context while applying activities to achieve peace in this context. Mostly, this involves promoting inter-religious dialogue, co-existence and creating mutual respect and confidence (Appleby, 2000).

2.6 Religion, Conflict and Peace

Regarding the above, there emerged an increasing scholarly interest in the so-called “Ambivalence of the Sacred”. This idea was introduced by Scott Appleby, an American scholar of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, when he published a book called “The Ambivalence of the Sacred; Religion, Violence and Reconciliation” in 2000. In the book, among others, two main questions are addressed. First, why is by some religious actors their belief expressed in violent ways, while others claim their religion to be promoting nonviolent means of seeking justice and peace? And secondly, what can be gained by paying sufficient attention to this, at first sight, complex and controversial idea in research on religious peacebuilding? (Appleby, 2000)

The book by Appleby led to increased support for the notion of the ambivalent character of religion and a new debate around the interpretation and understanding of religious developments. However, particularly since the 9/11 attacks on the US and the following War on Terror, again, religion is increasingly viewed and portrayed as a potential threat to global stability and security. Despite of the broad acknowledgement of the ambivalent nature of religion, religion has been perceived from one and mostly negative side. The attacks on 9/11 made the debate now even more complex, since the negative attention was narrowed down at one of the world religions in specific, namely Islam.

2.7.1 Humanitarian Action and Religion

The term ‘Humanitarian Action’ is broad and can refer to: emergency aid or relief; rehabilitation or reconstruction; and Disaster Risk Reduction. In this thesis, it is primarily used as in rehabilitation/reconstruction, and is some limited cases as relief or emergency aid. Humanitarianism and religion share a long history. There is a long history of the notion of religious solidarity and caring for the poor from religious motives. Humanitarianism basically started out of religiously motivated action, for instance by a Christian ethic like compassion, but due to the trend of secularization it lost much of its once religious connotation. However as also said in previous paragraphs, there has been a recent change going on. In the words of de Cordier ():

“Although for now, the debate and research about the religious factor in development and humanitarianism is still rather situated in the margin of development studies, it is increasingly being recognized that the religious factor has been underestimated.”

As shown in the figure below, there are several elements which determine the level of ambivalence of religion. Conflict and the humanitarian landscape are examples of these determines. The figure shows, that next to religion influencing humanitarian action, the nature and position of religion itself is also influenced by humanitarian action.
16

Figure 1. The determinants of the ambivalence of religion (de Cordier, 2008)

As shown in previous paragraphs, there is a religious basis for peacebuilding activities. This means, religious institutions are inspired and motivated to engage with activities around creating the conditions where peace, stability and development are as likely as possible. When talking about a post-conflict context, this touches upon humanitarian action, because then one is referring to reconstruction and rehabilitation activities.

As stated by de Cordier, religious factors are increasingly recognized within the humanitarian landscape. The reason for this renewed attention is in the words of Wolfensohn simple:

“...A very substantial part of aid to people in poverty goes through religious organizations. And secondly, the people that are in the field significantly, in addition to aid workers, are religious workers. And so it occurred to me that if we could get a dialogue between the people that were interested in development and religious leaders, we might have the basis for far greater cooperation and far greater understanding of the learning of each group."’

The substantial presence of religious people and religious organizations in the landscape of humanitarian action deserves more recognition. It means that humanitarianism and religion are inseparably be linked with each other. This provides basis for more research on issues like faith-based organizations, other religious institutions or NGOs providing humanitarian aid or post-conflict rehabilitation activities.

2.7.2 Faith Based Organizations:

Important players in present-day religion are the so-called Faith Based Organizations. In this thesis, they are commonly shared under NGOs, but there is a difference. These organizations, whether acting on a local, national, regional or global level, are an clear outcome in political or social action of religious views many people have. A typology by Gerard Clarke (2006) of faith-based organizations (FBO’s) helps to be able to understand the nature of the organizations, to differentiate between their
identities and make comparisons. Clarke differs between the following five different types of faith-based organizations in an international developmental context:

1. Faith-based representative organizations; organizations which represent believers when dealing with political or governmental issues in engagement with the state and other actors and dealing with doctrinal matters.
2. Faith-based charitable or development organizations; organizations which try to connect believers with the poor and other social groups, supporting them and mobilizing funds and programs in order to tackle poverty, injustice and social exclusion.
3. Faith-based socio-political organizations; organizations which use faith as a political construct, to organize and mobilize social groups on the basis of common identities to promote faith as a socio-cultural means of constructing and uniting disparate social groups. Also used to achieve or promote broader political objectives.
4. Faith-based missionary organizations; organizations which have spreading their religious key message as core activity, mostly beyond the believers of their own religion. These organizations seek actively potential new believers and converts. They might also support other faith communities in reaching out to communities, on the basis of the principles of their faith.
5. Faith-based radical, illegal or terrorist organizations; organizations which mobilize believers to actively engage in radical or militant forms of faith and illegal practices in the name of faith, used to justify violent or armed acts.

This classification provides a solid basis for further study and can be easily used for application in case studies. The boundaries between the five different categories are, however, not that strict as they might seem, because faith based organizations may easily fall under two or three classifications at the same time. In this thesis, there is mostly referred to ‘religious institutions’ or nongovernmental organizations when faith-based organizations could have been applicable as well. However, it is still good to keep this classification in mind when trying to understand the role and impact of their presence and activities.

2.8 Conclusion

The term ‘conflict’ is in this thesis understood as armed conflict, and according to IHL definition non-international by nature. ‘Post-conflict’ is the gradual condition during and after the transition from war to peace. Religion is perceived as creating social cohesion, providing guidance in daily life, and common ethical values, which is embedded in a wider context, with an ambivalent nature towards conflict. This ambivalence proves to consist of religious violence – violence from either the ‘ethno-religious’ or ‘religious extremism’ perspective – and religious peacebuilding, which entails basically peacebuilding activities carried out by religious actors. Humanitarianism and religion are historically linked, but due to secularization the religious influence in humanitarian action has often been underestimated. This gap is recently recognized and there is need for more research on religious actors like faith-based organizations or religious institutions involved in humanitarian action.
3. **Methodology**

*Which methods have been used to examine the role and impact of religion in Liberia?*

### 3.1 Introduction

The underlying sociological theory of this thesis is the ‘conflict theory’ paradigm, which originated out of Karl Marx’s sociological work on struggles between classes or other groups. Conflict theorist note that the basis for conflict stems from an unequal distribution of resources and power or incompatible values or agendas, causing competition among the members of a society. This everlasting competition induces societal change and progress. In this sociological perspective people continuously compete for social and economic resources, which causes further inequality, because those in control of the resources actively defend their advantaged position. This inequality may lead to tensions between different groups (based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion) and, ultimately, to outbreaks of violence and ‘armed conflict’, as discussed in Chapter 2.2.

### 3.2 Background

As put forth in Chapter 1 the general theme is at the interface of the academic fields of religion, conflict and humanitarian action. These three components relate to each other in various ways, so in order to prevent it for becoming too broad, I had to narrow it down to a more specified subject. To narrow the subject of religion and conflict down, I was advised by Cristina de la Cruz from Universidad de Deusto (Bilbao, Spain) to focus on one country and take this country as a case-study. As a suggestion Liberia was raised, since this would meet the criteria in terms of language, security, applicability and accessibility.

The main idea of this thesis has been to conduct first-hand research to have enough basis to be able to say something about the role of religion in the post-conflict phase in Liberia. This is expanded by a focus on the relationship between international aid organizations and local religious institutions, and how to improve this relationship in future operations. This was done because, in general, there is a lack of adequate data in empirical research on religious factors in conflict situations, as concluded by Basedau/DeJuan (2008). “The main problem in empirical research on religious factors in (African) conflicts is probably the lack of adequate data about such factors”.

In order to fill this gap much more is needed than in the form of this thesis can be fulfilled or carried out. One must understand that in order to ensure more adequate data, comprehensive investigation has to be done on a pan-African level. That clearly goes beyond the scope of this project. Furthermore, one must understand that every (African) conflict has its own unique, peculiar nature and that it is often hard to compare different conflicts with each other. The impact and role of religion differs in every society and theories in conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies are sometimes not compatible or comparable and demand a unique, case-to-case approach. Nevertheless, this research is a contribution to the academic work that has been done around the ‘Ambivalence of the Sacred’, applied on post-war Liberia as a case study and focused on the relation between religion and humanitarian action.

The literature review was carried out in the lapse of approximately three months prior to the field research. All the first-hand investigation has taken place in Liberia in the period from the 30th of September until the 5th of November 2012. Selecting the adequate information from the total
number of interviews and questionnaires proved to take less time than expected; most of it was done during the final week of the field research period and the first week after the return. Extensive literature research was done partly before the field research period in Liberia and partly afterwards. The processing of the information from the interviews and questionnaires was carried out in November and December 2012.

3.3 Methodological focus

The methodological focus of this thesis is twofold; extensive literature has been reviewed and qualitative research by the means of interviews and questionnaires has been conducted. The goal of the literature review was to obtain knowledge about the prevailing and current scientific knowledge available in the academic fields of conflict, religion and humanitarian action. Another goal was to be prepared well for the field research period. In the literature review numerous academic sources have been accessed through scientific journals and digital search platforms. Besides, many non-fiction books about the past and present of Liberia have been consulted, to increase the understanding of this particular case and prepare well for a fruitful time in Liberia. To give an example, ‘This Child Will be Great’ (2009), the autobiography of the current President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is a good albeit one-sided account of the history and developments of Liberia. Furthermore, the book of the female activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee – called ‘Mighty Be Our Powers’ (2011) has been of great value. Both the academic literature as well as the non-fiction information have shaped my understanding of the scientific and Liberian context.

The goal of the interviews was to gather information by creating a moment to have a conversation and ask questions about the role and position of religion in post-war Liberia. The participants were given the opportunity to answer the questions and had the liberty to address new issues. In some cases, group-interviews have taken place, since it was interesting to see how participants answered to questions when they had the company of others and could interact with them.

An important factor in interviewing is the level of structuring. The structuring of an interview depends on four elements: the content of the questions, the way of asking the questions, the order of asking the questions and the possible answers to the questions. There are roughly three types of interviews depending on their level of structuring (’t Hart, 2005):

- Unstructured or open-interview
- Semi-structured interview
- Structured or standardized interview

Another way of classifying interviews is to their content. Depending on the position and qualifications of the participant the questions can be adapted. In this thesis this is incorporated as much as possible automatically, by approaching the interviews with enough liberty and openness. The interview methods that have been used are primarily unstructured interviews as well as semi-structured interviews. Apart from the more general oriented interviews, I have also conducted specifically targeted questionnaires among religious leaders and NGO representatives about how to improve the co-operation between these two actors.
3.4 Interviews

During period of research in Liberia I have conducted various interviews about my research questions. In my first interview, with a former rebel leader called ‘General Butt Naked’ and now known as a evangelist and preacher, I started with a semi-structured interview. The way he talked and how he reacted to my questions proved, however, that the structure of the interview that I had compiled before, was not relevant anymore. I soon found out that this was not only the case with this former rebel leader, but a more general Liberian characteristic. The Liberians I talked with, who were frequently religious leaders or pastors, were very well trained in speaking to different people and turned out to quickly move to other subjects and topics which were less linked to my research. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were not suitable as a research method in the context that I was dealing with. I changed the strategy of interviewing and most of the interviews became open-interviews, as this provided me with more space for unexpected directions and side information in the conservations that took place. In the end, this proved to even be a better method, since the unexpected stories learned me a lot about the history and dynamics of religion and gave me new insights for new directions and views.

The focus of the interviews was more general and open by nature than it was in the questionnaires. The goal of the interviews was to get a good idea of the role religion played during, but most of all after the civil crisis in Liberia. It was about the position of religious organizations and institutions in the process of peacebuilding and reconciliation and about the potential added value of working via religious groups.

The main problem in the interviews was the volatile nature of the Liberian civil war. In fact, one cannot talk about ‘the’ Liberian war. Although it is relatively easy to discern two different civil wars – commonly referred to as the First Liberian Civil War and the Second Liberian Civil War – within those two periods the intensity and severity differed tremendously. The situation in Liberia used to change very rapidly and the lines between peace and conflict were often blurred. Respondents were therefore sometimes seemingly contradictory or inconsistent. Besides, the outcome of the interviews also depended on their tribal, cultural, political and religious background.

This complex reality made the interviews sometimes hard to follow and it frequently was not clear about which period and location one was talking. Also, the exact conditions under which a certain occasion had taken place was sometimes multi-interpretable. To deal with this dilemma, I opted a pro-active approach. By continuously asking for clarifications on the time, location and circumstances I tried to get as much as possible a comprehensive view, to be able to place the right information in the right perspective.

Schedule of conducted interviews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Interview with:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Council of Churches Liberia</td>
<td>Reverend G. Boimah Freeman, director of the Governmental Affairs and Good Governance Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-religious Council of Liberia</td>
<td>Secretary General Kabah M. Trawally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Milton Blayhi (General Butt Naked)</td>
<td>Former rebel leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZOA Refugee Care</td>
<td>Country Director Nic Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvary Temple Paynesville</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Square Church</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.5 Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Religious leaders/pastors</th>
<th>Representative from organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Association of Evangelicals of Liberia (AEL)</td>
<td>Tearfund, ECHO</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Commission Movement (GCM)</td>
<td>Private (Liberian)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganta Christian Community (GCC)</td>
<td>Private (Liberian), SP</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaritan’s Purse (SP)</td>
<td>International and private</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equip Liberia (EL)</td>
<td>USAID, ECHO, private</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Aid Ministries (CAD)</td>
<td>International and private</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit Liberia</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaires were specifically aimed at the NGO-local church relationship. It focuses on the advantages, disadvantages, challenges, pitfalls, added value, benefits and difficulties of this relation. The initial target group of potential participants was composed of religious leaders, pastors, imams, priests, etc. who had worked and collaborated with an NGO, as well as NGO representatives, leaders, employees, etc. who have experience in working with local religious institutions. In this regard, I wanted to ensure a multi-religious perspective. However, I soon found out that this was not feasible due to several factors. In the first place, arriving in Monrovia, there are notably not many Muslim organizations involved in peacebuilding and humanitarian action. The vast majority of the organizations are secular or Christian.

Second, Muslim organizations and mosques were hard to get access to, because they were sometimes prejudiced or unconfident towards the goals of the research. There was not much to do
against this biased position. Third, it is estimated that Liberian people are predominantly Christian, so by focusing on churches and church leaders the vast majority would be covered. Moreover, it became clear that, talking about the relationship between aid organizations and religious institutions, this much more applies to Christian than to Muslim organizations and institutions. In the Liberian context it is much more common as a church to work along with NGOs than mosques would work with outside agencies. This led to the conclusion of shifting the scope of the questionnaires to a primarily local church – NGO based relationship.

To ensure the obtainment of the right information, two different questionnaires were designed. One with questionnaires aimed at the representatives or employees of the non-governmental organization and one aimed at religious leaders and pastors of the local church. As represented in the figure above, the questionnaires have been filled out by a diverse group of NGO and Faith-based organizations, as well as a large group of respondents from local churches and congregations. All the participating NGO respondents have experience in working with churches in a variety of aid programmes, and all the participating pastors have experience in collaborating and receiving support from bigger NGOs. The questionnaires that have been conducted are aimed at exploring and revealing this relationship. In addition, they serve as the basis on which recommendations can be made to improve this relationship in future operations.

3.6 Limitations

Although this research has been carried out carefully, I am aware of its shortcomings and limitations. First of all, the research that has been conducted in Liberia lasted for a period of five weeks. Five weeks is – when used effectively and efficiently – a reasonable amount of time, but also has its shortcomings due to a limited timeframe. More time would have enabled more comprehensive and in-depth research methods, like for instance participatory observation or life/event story analysis. It also would have been valuable to involve with more church leaders, and for a longer time to zoom in their daily activities in working together with NGOs and vice versa. Besides, there were more potential participants of the questionnaires and interviews, so the final amount of respondents is restricted due to a limited timeframe.

Second, as outlined before, the scope of this work has been aimed towards Christian churches – causing a lack in inter-religiousness. In the Liberian context this lack is of non essential significance, but it may affect the comparability and compatibility of other (African) conflicts in relation to the role and impact of religion. Third, a limitation and a potential weakness of the quality of the research is that some of the respondents to the questionnaires handed their response in via the representative of the NGO. This may have influenced the answers of the particular church leader or pastor, because the respondent might wanted to please the NGO representative. This risk was inevitable since many of the pastors or church leaders were not accessible directly due to remote locations and only accessible through the network and contacts of the NGO. This risk has been minimized by contacting pastors and church leaders directly by phone after receiving their response, or if possible, visiting them personally, in order to build a personal relationship and further discuss the answers of the respondent.

Two strategies have been undertaken in order not to limit the research only to the geographical area of the Liberian capital Monrovia. First, when interviewing NGO representatives I have aimed explicitly at religious institutions also outside of Monrovia. Most of the NGOs have worked inside the capital,
but often, depending on the size and identity of the organization, they have also worked in one or more of the remote areas or counties in Liberia. A pitfall of too much emphasis on the inclusion of religious institutions from the hinterland is that these actors are mostly hard to get access to and it usually took considerably more time to receive their response. Therefore, a well-spread mix of religious institutions as responders was needed to ensure good spatial dispersion together with as much as possible reaction from the respondents.

Second, to further avoid geographical biases, I travelled to the city of Ganta, located close to the Liberian-Guinean border in Nimba County, northern Liberia. This county is predominantly inhabited by the Gio and the Mano tribe; two tribes who played an essential role in the civil war, because they supported Charles Taylor in his battle against President Doe, a member of the rival Krahn tribe. Ganta is the economical centre of the region and is located in the area where Taylor entered Liberia. It was hard to get access to the area because of high precipitation due to the raining season and bad road conditions due to the civil war. In Ganta I conducted interviews and questionnaires with members of the Ganta Christian Community (GCC) about their role in the post-conflict period and their cooperation with NGOs.

Another factor that limited the duration and depth of this research is restricted financial means. In spite of the generally low price level in Liberia, travelling is rather expensive. Especially through the hinterland, which is remote and not accessible by public transport. The only option is renting a four-by-four vehicle, which is pricey concern. Needless to say, the budget was not unlimited, so decisions had to be made, which influenced the result of this research.

3.7 Conclusion

There is a gap in empirical field research on religious factors in African countries. This thesis endeavors to partially fill this gap, by conducting field research about the role and impact of religion in post-war Liberia. In doing so, it contributes to the Ambivalence of the Sacred debate. The field research methods that have been used are primarily unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, specifically targeted to pastors, church leaders and NGO representatives. This thesis is limited by restricted financial means, a limited timeframe and primarily church-oriented approach.
4. Results

What has been the role of religion in post-conflict Liberia?

4.1 Introduction

To answer the above question, this chapter is comprised of different sections concerning the role churches played in post-conflict Liberia. It begins with a brief section about the role of the church during the conflict (4.2), and the role of the church on a national level after the conflict (4.3), because this is relevant to know to understand the broader context of the situation. Then, in section 4.4, the role, impact and five different types of activities of the local church after the war are described. In section 4.5 the church – NGO relationship is discussed. Section 4.6 is dealt with the limitations of the church in the post-conflict Liberian setting. The information that is given is first and foremost based on the results from the interviews with a variety of pastors, priests and church leaders from all different kind of denominations. The chapter concludes with a brief numeration of the given information.

4.2 The role of the church during the civil war of Liberia

Although the scope of the field research that has been conducted was on the post-conflict era and the role of the church in that period, it is also important to pay some extra attention to the position of the church during the war and in the midst of the fighting. First of all, it is important to note that, according to the theory about religious violence from Chapter 2.4.2, in the case of the Liberian civil war, one can speak of ‘ethno-religious violence’. The power of religion was strongly used to gain support for the cause of a particular political or armed group. Strictly speaking, the violence was not of religious nature, because the goals were not religious but political. During the war in Liberia, religion was used as a tool to legitimize violent action and mobilize armed forces. The other type of religious violence discerned in Chapter 2.4.2 was ‘religious extremism’, where religion is seen and used as the ultimate goal of the violence. This was not the case – generally speaking – in most of the warfare during the Liberian civil crisis.

Secondly, an important point should be made that virtually all respondents underscored: during the civil war there was no substantial respect towards the leaders nor the members of religious institutions. All pastors stressed their experience of a great lack of respect towards their position. The large scaled availability of weapons gave combatants great power, which overthrew the position of pastors and other religious leaders. In times of peace and stability religious leaders got used to enjoy great respect and authority from the churchgoers as well as from members in their communities. With the advent of the war and the arrival of extremely violent armed rebels this changed dramatically.

The point that many spiritual leaders made was that on a local level, when religious leaders were directly faced by violent action, force and death threats, religion could not play a role of preventing the violence from happening. It cannot be expected from churches to protect people from such heavy situations as armed conflict. In other words, religious institutions simply do not possess the means to overcome physical violence, which cannot be expected nor realized. It completely falls outside the scope of the church and, moreover, is also completely against the way of solving conflicts within the congregations, which is practically always characterized by non-violent means.
Thus, the role of the local church in facing direct violence and insecurity is minimized. On a national level, however, the role of the church can change rapidly and can become of much more importance. Pastors stressed that they highly valued the idea that they were part of a bigger movement that was represented nationally or internationally, by either their own denominational organization or the Liberia Council of Churches. This idea, of striving for a common cause and being represented on a national level, can improve the loyalty of both the members and leaders and can lead to more courage, strength and perseverance on a local level.

In spite of this possible support gained from a higher level, the unsafe situation on the ground remains. The lack of awe for religious institutions caused severe insecurity of church members and their leaders. Even worse were the cases where pastors were deliberately targeted by the rebel forces, to serve as a tool to demonstrate and prove their newly obtained power and control over a village or population. Church leaders became in some cases a suitable target of the military forces to destabilize a region and take over control. The widespread availability of guns among the soldiers and rebels gave them the power to easily overthrow the cultural, social and religious role and the traditionally powerful position of the religious leader or pastor.

One important moment in the history of the Liberian civil crisis that illustrates the vulnerability of religion amidst violence and insecurity, is the massacre in the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church. The church is located in Monrovia, at the main thoroughfare Tubman Boulevard, in the Sinkor neighborhood, where the Liberian UN mission (UNMIL), many NGOs, embassies, hospitals, banks and airlines have their headquarters. The church also fulfills an important educational role, since a large primary and secondary school is located on the same premises. On the 29th of 1990, armed forces of the national army of President Samuel K. Doe arrived at the church compound and entered the church building. Inside, hundreds of Liberians had sought refuge in the church for the increasingly unstable situation in the capital and the many violent acts throughout the country. The story is expressively described by Leymah Gbowee, Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, in her book *Mighty be our Powers*:

“[…The street was full of people, passing fragments of information. Massacre… butchered… the church… . Soon we saw. When President Doe’s army had begun going after members of the Gio and Mano tribes, the Liberian Council of Churches made a conscious decision to offer asylum to people in danger. They believed that although the soldiers were brutal, they would fear to commit violence in a house of God. Close to a thousand men, women and children had ultimately taken refuge in St. Peter’s chapel and the adjoining high school. But on that night, the ones “coming next who were even more evil than us,” a different government battalion that carried machetes and machine guns, had pushed their way inside. Among the pews where we sang and prayed, where on Women’s Day husbands and children pinned flowers on their mothers’ clothes, they raped, slashed, shot and hacked. The Gio and Mano inside had pushed open the doors and run out into gunfire, and there were bodies on every street corner. Men, women, babies.” (Gbowee, 2011)

In total, an estimated number of 700 people were brutally murdered that day. Looking back at the Liberian conflict, this event is often seen as a important milestone in the history of the civil crisis. It changed the situation dramatically, because it rapidly incited the already existing ethnic and political tensions. Moreover, the Liberian population suddenly realized on a large scale at once the situation was serious and bad. Although, in retrospect, no such an event has happened again in the civil war,
it greatly influenced the position of the government of Doe, the role of the Liberian Council of Churches and the perception on the church.

This occasion also clearly reveals the explicit vulnerability of religious institutions in times of conflict in general, and the critical position of churches in specific. The soldiers of the national army of President Doe knew exactly where to go and could not be thwarted in any possible way by the people in charge of the church. The president made use of the rumors that there were rebels hiding in the church and people from the Mano and Gio tribe. He also abused the good intentions of the Liberian Council of Churches, whose idea was to offer mere accommodation, of no political sort whatsoever. Looking back at what happened this now can be seen as a rather naïve attitude of the LCC, because of the prevalent reports about the increasingly deteriorating situation. But, first and foremost, it reveals the weak and vulnerable position of the church in the midst of brutal violence and murder.

The St. Peter’s Lutheran Church nowadays still serves as a lively school and congregation. The building has been restored completely, except for some bullet holes in the colorful windows, which are, according to Reverend Jemah M. Fololatea, deliberately still there to remember that particular fatal day in July, 1990. The massacre is every year commemorated on July 29th as a memorial day with a special service and activities.

One thing that the 1990 massacre made clear for the years to come, was that the situation was seriously dangerous. The incident exacerbated the already ongoing displacement and provoked greater panic and anxiety among the population. People had nowhere to go and many times, in spite of the disturbing reports of the fatal happenings in the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, sought refuge in the church. Pastors resonated that because of the central location of the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church that church was more at risk than their own church in more remote areas. The least local churches could do during the war was opening its doors and sharing the assets it has with displaced people.

It must also be said that the severity highly depended on the region and the moment of the conflict. Some pastors declared they were capable of offering shelter to vulnerable and displaced populations for a considerable amount of time. The members of the congregation helped by offering their time, some financial means and carrying out assisting jobs. It also happened that displaced people were
first staying in the building of the church, but were adopted in the community by churchgoers in
times of danger and insecurity. However, in the end, these were no permanent or lasting solutions.
Eventually, pastors and church members often were coerced to flee themselves too, so the care and
shelter could not continue.

This forced displacement led to scattered congregations and faith communities. This caused a
particular side effect and change in the religious landscape in Liberia. Before the war, all the main
denominations were disproportionally prominent represented in Monrovia, but less in the Liberian
hinterland. In the counties the traditional religions were often of greater influence than Christianity
and Islam. An exception are people from the Mandingo tribe, who were predominantly Muslim, and
lived in Monrovia as well as in the counties. Nevertheless, generally speaking, prior to the war the
large churches of the main denominations were located in and around the capital and their influence
in the rest of Liberia was often limited.

With the outbreak of the fighting, this changed dramatically. Because of the rampant brutal violence,
Christians and pastors – just like anyone else – were forced to flee and leave their parishes and
congregations behind. In spite of the fact they had to leave their churches, they did not leave their
faith, habits, rituals and customs behind. They virtually had nothing left but their faith. The fact that
faith was the only thing many people had left, influenced the displacement in the Liberian civil crisis
to a great extent. As an unintended side effect of the forced displacement, the dispersion became a
way how Christianity was spread around the country. New churches were founded and because of
the little people possessed, people were attracted by the services and activities of the church. This
was not only limited to the countryside of Liberia, but also influenced neighboring countries like Ivory
Coast and Guinea.

Another side effect on the religious landscape of the outbreak of the civil war was the increased co-
operation between local churches in a region. Different pastors brought up that, because of the war,
they were encouraged to seek other pastors and believers to work together in responding to the
needs of the population as well as discussing possible activities that could mitigate future outbreaks
of violence in a locality or region. This proved to be a driving force in the community, because it
brought people together and linked the forces for a common cause. It must be said that the result of
the increased co-operation solely led to better mitigation of the effects of the war, since the overall
position of the church was still limited, when faced with the brutal violence of the civil conflict.

So, in conclusion, the experiences from the pastors and the incident in the St. Peter’s Lutheran
Church show the shortcomings of local churches during the conflict. The role of the local church on
the ground during the fighting was often reduced to watching helplessly or fleeing away from the
dire situations. Churches regularly fulfilled the role of a ‘beacon of hope’ where many displaced
people tried to seek refuge, but in the midst of the ongoing violence it could not provide the durable
physical security that was needed. This was primarily due to a great lack of respect by the warring
factions and the fact that the governmental army thought churches were hiding rival members of the
Gio or Mano tribe, like was the case at the massacre at the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia
in July 1990.

As positive side effects, the war led to the spreading of churches throughout the country and in
neighboring countries and it fostered co-operation among churches on a local or regional level.
Another positive element of the role of the church can be found in, as said earlier, the fact that the
Liberian civil was multi-dimensional, highly unpredictable and volatile by nature. Clashes could break out anytime and havoc or turmoil was always looming. But, at the same time, this largely depended on location and period. In the ‘first’ Liberian civil war (roughly in the period between December 1989 until July 1997) it was hard to determine whether there was some level of peace or still continued fighting. The situation changed rapidly and varied greatly per geographical area. So, the line between a situation of conflict and post-conflict was often blurred. Thus, there were periods when churches could carry out post-conflict related activities, but the fighting could start again any time.

This absence of violence in certain periods and regions, of course, affected the work of the local churches in several ways. This will be addressed later too, but is here also important. When the fighting reduced in intensity, churches could involve in meeting the needs of the population more effectively. Besides the physical protection that could be offered in the building or at the homes of church members, also more psychosocial activities could be carried out. The weekly services served as a moment of processing the atrocities. Encouraging words from the pulpit were of great value to grieving and depressed people. Collective prayer was immensely important in the processing of traumas and in dealing with the loss of lives and livelihoods. It is important to note that the church could fulfill this role also during the war. In times of relative lull, especially the church could fulfill this role because the affected populations had nowhere else to go and could not be reached by other actors due their remote location. Their only possession and the only place left to turn to was their religion. Thus, despite all the shortcomings of the church in the midst of violence and when the churches were not scattered by forced displacement, it could – in certain lapses of time – fulfill an important role of support and encouragement.
4.3 The role of religion – the national level

As pointed out before, for local churches it is important to be recognized and represented on a higher level. This gives encouragement and hope to church members and fosters the authority of the church leader. It is therefore important to look at the church from a national perspective. In Liberia there are two major national religious institutions: the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) and the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC). In this section, based on qualitative interviews, their role in the post-conflict era – so from October 2003 onwards – will be discussed.

In the previous section it was already mentioned briefly: in the beginning of the conflict the Council of Churches decided to publically offer asylum to people in danger, with the massacre in the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church as painful example of the consequences of that decision. At the end of the conflict – the Second Liberian Civil War (which roughly lasted from April 1999 until October 2003) to be precise – the LCC took part in the peace talks in the Ghanaian capital Accra.

Starting in early June 2003, Peace Talks took place in the Ghanaian capital Accra. Two major rebel factions – LURD and MODEL – and eventually also the government of President Charles Taylor were participating as well as different political parties and civil society groups. The peace talks were organized by the Western African body ‘ECOWAS’ and headed by former Nigerian president Abdulsalami Abubakar. Of the participating civil society groups, the LCC and IRCL were two key members.

According to Kabah M. Trawally, the current secretary general of the Inter-religious Council of Liberia, the end of the war led to a change in the position of religion in Liberia. During the war the religious factor was very important, mainly on a political and national level, but also on a personal and local level. On a national level religion was used to initiate and promote the peace process, whereas on a personal and local level religion was used as a beacon of hope and comfort. After the war, the perception of religion on the national and political level changed and its importance decreased, because the attention shifted to the need for democracy and free elections. According to Mr. Trawally, in Liberia religion proved to have more common ground in pleading to stop the violence and to convey the need for peace, than to be actively used in the democratization processes.

This, however, did not reduce the political and national importance of religion completely. Religion still played a huge role in the life of almost all Liberians and in the light of the upcoming elections politicians tried to make use of this important characteristic of the Liberian population. By openly coming out for adhering to a religion or being a member of a particular denomination within Christianity, politicians tried to gain support for their campaigns and win votes in their strife for power and influence. Talking about the national level, according to Trawally, “religion reaches every geographical corner of the country; no matter how remote a village is, you will find a church or a mosque there”. With conversations with other pastors and travelling to remote areas where only traditional religion was prevalent in mind, I doubt the complete truth of this statement, but the argument that throughout the entire country religious populations can be found is unmistakably true.

After the war, the IRCL took up an active role in post-conflict peacebuilding and rehabilitation. Various peacebuilding programs were carried out in different counties throughout Liberia. One of its
programs in Lofa County – one of the heaviest affected areas by the war – was called ‘Cornerstone for Peacebuilding’, where local religious institutions were encouraged to take the lead in building peace. The religious leaders of these institutions, such as pastors and imams, were engaged and formed local or regional committees. These committees primarily served as early warning organizations, but also as early responders to sudden outbreaks of turmoil or violence. The committees were asked to make regular reports on the general atmosphere and report the areas which needed extra attention and care.

Religious institutions and its leaders as watchdogs of society and the peace process that is taking place, is often used as a method to reach the community, achieve participation of local actors and to use the capacity and cultural insight of religious institutions. The IRCL sees this as one of the greatest strengths of working with or via local religious actors in peacebuilding. Another advantage of working with or through local religious actors that is mentioned by the IRCL is the great coverage of the network of churches and mosques throughout Liberia. It claims to be able to reach every village in almost every region and county, because of the widespread presence of churches and mosques, and therefore it can reach a great audience throughout the whole country.

As argued before, because of the war and following great displacement of the Liberian people, religion had increasingly spread to small villages on the Liberian countryside. The spreading of religious institutions led to more connectedness of the rural people with the major religions and denominations. This was seen by the IRCL as an extra advantage of working with them; the war had increased their commitment with their religion, which now could be used to contribute to peacebuilding activities and the reconstruction of the country.

Moreover, the increased importance of the role and position of religion on a local or regional level created the opportunity to create renewed trust between the communities and the (religious) leaders. Many people had lost their overall trust and confidence in any kind of political leadership. In the words of Trawally: “People trusted their religious leaders more than they trusted politicians.” In the light of building trust and good relationships in the new leadership, and according the strategy of IRCL, religious leaders were key in the process of regaining confidence and trust, because they enjoyed full confidence of the people.

Another reason why religion should be used in the peacebuilding process in Liberia, is that it had the ability to overcome tribal differences. Except for the Mandingos – a tribe that is predominantly Muslim, and was represented in the war by the LURD rebel group – religion in Liberia is not divided by tribe. Tribal differences, however, did play a significant role during the civil war. Among the 16 different tribes that are present in present-day Liberia, three tribes were playing a key role in the fighting (the Krahn, Mano and Gio) but many other tribal groups were involved too.

To prevent the prevalence of tensions and differences between the religions, the IRCL always stressed the need for educational activities and the training of religious leaders. This was also part of the Cornerstone for Peacebuilding program mentioned earlier. In the aftermath of the civil war the IRCL provided education on three different topics:

1. Religious tolerance
2. Rule of law
3. Peace for co-existence
The goal of this educational program was to stress the common values of the different religious groups that were taking part. IRCL also ran HIV/AIDS programmes to reduce stigmatization and to emphasize the common religious duty to care for the weak and vulnerable. To give an example, the HIV/AIDS campaigns had an element of awareness raising where was stressed that HIV is not a punishment by God, but occurs because of concrete reasons. According to IRCL, the power of this program and its message is that it is given by religious leaders (pastors, priests, imams) and therefore taken more seriously due to their confidential position and status.

Besides the IRCL, the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC) also fulfilled a very important role during and after the war. The LCC was established in January 1982 and was founded by the following denominations:

- Presbyterian Church
- Methodist Church
- Lutheran Church
- Catholic Church
- Episcopal Church
- Aladura Church of the Lord
- Don Steward Pentecostal Church
- Baptist Church

In the past decades more and more other denominations joined and currently the council consists of 32 members. Nowadays also non-churches have become members, like church related organizations. Similar to the LCC – but smaller in size – are bodies like the Association of Evangelicals in Liberia (AEL), the Full Gospel Ministries Fellowship (FGMF), the Pentecostal Fellowship Union of Liberia (PFUL) and the Christian Community of Liberia (CCL). The latter is a grassroots organization of local churches. They were founded when the LCC decided to work together with other religious groups. The LCC works in the legislature, judicial and executive branches of government action, and is recognized, together with the other bodies, by the government as a partner in meetings about relevant national religious and political issues.

The involvement of the LCC on a political level started in 1990, when the war broke out. According to Reverend G. Boimah Freeman, director of the Governmental Affairs and Good Governance Commission of the LCC, the church developed a moral responsibility in 1990, when Charles Taylor had just entered Liberia and the violence started. The role of LCC in that stage was primarily to advocate for peace. First the LCC asked the government of President Doe to sit with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) forces of Taylor to discuss peace, but Doe refused at that time, because he said he did not want to talk with rebels.

The next step was to collaborate with the National Muslim Council of Liberia, under the umbrella of the Interfaith Mediation Committee, now known as the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia. Together an appeal was done to the regional group Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the international community, to urge for international action and advocate for peace. This resulted in the Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) forces in August 1990.
Second, in 2003, when the Second Liberian Civil War escalated, another appeal was jointly drafted. Again together via the IRCL an urge was done, this time more directly aimed at the UN, since the power of the ECOMOG had been controversial and disputed. The UN decided to intervene and the United Nations Mission In Liberia (UNMIL) was established by resolution 1509 on the 19th of September 2003, with a peacekeeping mandate, in order to support the implementation of the ceasefire agreement.

From the end of 2003 onwards, the LCC primarily focused on the organization of new democratic elections. According to Reverend Freeman, who was closely involved in this development that time, the LCC was used as an implementing partner by the National Election Commission (NEC). The reason was that the LCC had been a partner of the Comprehensive Peace Accord, so it was seen by the NEC as a reliable partner. The elections were held on 11 October 2005. Freeman: “In the period leading up to the elections the LCC trained 400 observers, who worked during the elections together with 18 international observers. In the 2011 elections even more than 1000 observers were trained”.

But the role of the LCC was not merely providing observers. The LCC also widely engaged in large campaigns to stimulate people to vote and make use of their rights. Many people did not know how to vote and were encouraged by flyers and pamphlets with simple language. The Sunday morning services were used to reach as many people as possible and in inaccessible remote areas religion was used as a tool to spread the campaign and raise awareness. Freeman also stressed that the LCC generally co-operated with Muslims and worked in mosques. “There was mutual respect and trust. First they prayed, then we as Christians prayed and then we would discuss national issues”.
4.4 The role of the church in post-war Liberia – the local level

In this section the role of local churches in post-conflict Liberia is elaborated, as much as possible illustrated with concrete examples. As described earlier, the role of the church during the war was often reduced to fleeing the situation and go into exile or, in the best case, provide shelter for the displaced and spiritual and psychosocial care for war-related victims. In spite of this limited role, the activities of local churches in the post-conflict era can be categorized in the following five different elements:

1. Early responding
2. Education
3. Psychosocial counseling
4. Preaching messages of hope, reconciliation, forgiveness, co-existence, etc.
5. Advocating on behalf of the people

These elements can be linked to the religious peacebuilding theory of Appleby as discussed in Chapter 2.5. It is both religious peacebuilding carried out by religious actors as well as activities aimed at affecting a religious context. It consists of activities that work within, rather than adjacent to or opposed to, spiritual elements of culture.

1. Early responding

The role of local churches in the direct aftermath of the conflict is two-sided. On the one hand, as outlined before, the members of churches were scattered due to forced displacement. In order to become fully operational, first members had to return from their temporary sites or refugee camps. Moreover, because of the brutal violence of the fighting, church buildings were sometimes severely damaged. It took time and effort to rebuild, while there were immediate needs in the communities. However, although church members were widely scattered and churches heavily damaged, several pastors stressed the idea that people, as soon as they thought it would be safe to come back, all returned to their original congregations and parishes and were highly committed to rebuild the church building as soon as possible. In the meantime, the congregation often assembled under a tree or at a central location outside in the village or neighborhood.

On the other hand, there are also stories of churches who were directly capable of responding the main needs created by the war. When in a certain region was already relatively stable for a while, churches had been able to recover and started assessing the most urgent needs. Directly after the war, for instance, many churches in Monrovia gathered to clean up the debris and start with the reconstruction of roads, homes and public buildings. Volunteers of the church could be quickly made available and deployed in the execution of all kinds of hands-on activities.

Besides the first hands-on activities, churches assumed also important roles based on their existing structure. Even if the majority of the church members were located elsewhere, the community knew about the structure of the church as a social institution. Also with a small number of people at the church, the church brought scattered people together, and functioned as an important player in the repatriation process. Besides, as a pastor of a small congregation in Ganta told, churches adopted the role of being the first point of entry for the community to find support. Especially the problems that
erupted when displaced people returned, like disputes over land rights or properties, were addressed.

**Box 1. A church as point of access to aid for the community**

For example, the ‘New Life Church’ in Ganta, Nimba County, functioned as an entry point for the community to find support. It operated as a collection center of relief items and people from the entire community were welcomed. Besides, the leaders of the congregation functioned as a mediating party in local disputes. For instance, deacons of the church were involved in settling disputes in the community, which arose between returned refugees who claimed pieces of land that they previously had possessed but now belonged to new owners. This was an important role of many churches in the early response to the consequences of the civil crisis. Also after the first months after the termination of the war these activities continued, but, looking at a greater lapse of time, this slowly moved more towards governmental institutions.

2. **Education**

In a report by Pruthi in September 2011 at the UNICEF website, the Minister of Education of Liberia, Othello Gongar, explained important consequences of the war:

“All the physical facilities at the institutions of learning - basic, secondary and tertiary - were destroyed (during the war), both in the private and public sector”.

Looking at the current landscape of church activities which are aimed at the wider community and are directly beneficial to the society, one thing clearly stands out: the provision of education. It is remarkable to see how many churches in Liberia have an adjacent building which functions as a primary and secondary school, not uncommonly with hundreds of pupils. Without churches taking care of educational services, the Liberian government would have to fill a huge gap. In the aftermath of the conflict, churches saw the need for education for new generations and massively started to found or rebuild schools. This development was accelerated by the high number of orphans who lost their parents in the fighting. There was no social safety net for them, so this was a reason for churches to start schools, sometimes combined with orphanages.

The combination of church and school can be of great influence in post-conflict rehabilitation activities. To give an example, the reverend of the earlier mentioned St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, emphasized the importance of their adjoining school. Besides the fact that children receive education according to the religious beliefs of the church, the school is also used as a means to convey a message of hope, peace, reconciliation and forgiveness to a new generation.

In spite of the church’ educational efforts – which according to a pastor of the Wesleyan Church consist of 75% of the total education provided in Liberia – there is still a great need for better qualified and accessible education. In the report from UNICEF (2011) it was stated that:

“Today, the government is working to rebuild the infrastructure that was completely destroyed – large parts of Liberia doesn’t have roads and millions are living without basic
access to water, healthcare or electricity. But ask any Liberian what they need most and the answer is the same – education. [Liberia is] a country where overcrowded public schools with inadequate staff and infrastructure are the norm. “

Providing education to children and youth on a large scale in a context like Liberia is a challenging job, but Liberian churches are one of the players – if not the player – facing this challenge.

3. **Psychosocial counseling**

In the first place, a church is a place of spiritualism. Attending a church service is, besides things like social cohesion, a network of likeminded people, possible new contacts, etc., in essence a spiritual activity. It means, among others, singing, talking about, praying to and hearing of a supernatural being, complemented with worshipping and honoring according to certain rules and rituals. This is one of the core activities of a church. Not surprisingly is it, then, to see that in the post-conflict era many churches engaged in providing spiritual and psychological programmes to war-related victims. Examples of these programs are:

- **Psychosocial counseling;** this could have been group or individual meetings where – with reference to Biblical verses and interpretations – problems that have occurred are recognized and people’s inner hurts and grief are acknowledged. It is method to create frank discussion about sensitive issues, so values as confidentiality, respect and honesty are extra important. The difference of psychosocial counseling from a church-based perspective as opposed to a secular approach is that it is done from a religious motivation and it involves faith oriented answers, explanations, attitudes and recommendations and pastoral care.
- **Trauma healing sessions;** this consisted for example of writing songs or poems, and singing about the war, in order to process the atrocities that people had heard of or had experienced by themselves. Churches were frequently involved in these sessions, as their congregation proved to be a relational basis for these kind of activities, while at the same time trying to engage other community members as well.
- **Psychological and spiritual consultation;** theological oriented sessions, where people were advised how to deal with loss of lives, stress, hardship and personal losses. Biblical stories were used to exemplify how to deal with grief and depression, attempting to give back a feeling of mutual understanding, courage and inspiration.
- **Prayer and fastening sessions;** people gathered together and fastened for a lapse of time (from some days to several weeks) to pray for Liberia as a nation. This happened throughout the country and it fostered unity and solidarity to a great extent.

All these activities were aimed at serving the community and providing psychological and spiritual protection, something that, in many occasions, only a religious institution as the church was capable of providing.

4. **Preaching a message**

Although a church could be engaged in all kind of activities to meet psychical, social, or psychological needs of the society, in the end, the vast majority of churches consider ‘preaching the gospel’ as their core activity. In fact, they do not only see it as an activity, but as a sacred calling, biblically based and a fulfillment of the will of God. Given the great value attached by church leaders to preaching the
gospel, it impacts to a large extent the thoughts and deeds of church members and other believers. The message the church conveys is important because of the respected position of the church in the society. In many communities, churches enjoy authority and influence the public opinion of the people. People respect the pastor and obey the things he says. While interviewing pastors, several themes were frequently mentioned. According to this information churches in post-war Liberia preached a message of:

- Love, forgiveness, honesty, trustworthiness and reconciliation;
- The value of (still) being alive and to appreciate life as a gift;
- Discouraging revenge;
- Adhering to moral values as trust, integrity, respect, accountability and hospitality;
- Promoting transparency out of integrity, moral responsibility and from biblical examples;
- Renewed and restored hope and a transformation of the mindset;
- Renewing the own responsibility of people and empowering them to sustain on their own.

There are different tools and ways for a church to transmit these messages. The traditional way is the Sunday morning service. Especially the sermon is a good moment to convey a message to the congregation. Besides this weekly moment, churches also often organize seminars, workshops, festivals and crusades to proclaim and preach their message. These activities are frequently aimed at non-believers or at a specific group within the congregation, for instance youth or women. Additionally, churches in Liberia do also regularly have many activities during the week, like bible study, prayer or choir practice, which also can be used to spread the message. Sometimes churches make use of bulletins or radio stations. Together, these ways of sending out a message is one of the most significant roles of the church in religious peacebuilding in post-conflict Liberia.

**Box 2. A church about the good effects of the war and the ‘holistic gospel’**

In an interview with senior pastor Alexander Gbondo of ‘Salvation in Christ Ministries’ in Monrovia, the notion of the *holistic gospel* was discussed. He started by giving a theological explanation about why the war had come and gave his opinion about the role of the church. Interestingly, he argued that the war was both ‘good’ and ‘bad’: ‘‘Because of sin, God allowed the war to happen. The main sins in Liberia were devilish worship and ritualistic killing.’’ Therefore, the war was a punishment, and in his opinion, the role of the church should be to preach and teach about the consequences of sin. Besides, he noted that: ‘‘Before the war a lot of people were pretending they were Christians, but were not really sincere believers. People were believers with their lips, not with their hearts. The war tested the faith of people, made people more committed to the work of the church and brought it back to the holistic gospel.’’

The holistic gospel can be best described as a concept where equal attention is paid to both the physical and the spiritual side of human life. It is a gospel – meaning ‘good news’ – not solely about salvation, sanctification and the afterlife, but rather about balancing the attention to all the needs of human beings: social, emotional, mental, psychological, spiritual and physical needs. Pastor Gbondo: ‘‘Before the war the focus was primarily on the spiritual side of the religion, focusing on having a relationship with a divine body, a healthy spiritual life, evangelizing, and converting potential new believers. During and especially after the war the physical, emotional and social needs of people in need were much more visible to the church and led to more attention and activities. The notion of a holistic gospel has quickly emerged after the war, as churches throughout Liberia saw that addressing the spiritual needs only was far from satisfactory’’. This holistic gospel created more space for churches to start helping the people in the community, – in a theological correct and acceptable manner.
5. **Advocating on behalf of the people**

As illustrated in the previous box, the war caused a change in the attitude of the church towards the community. Prior to the war, the activities of the church were first and foremost spiritually. In and especially after the conflict, churches started to reach to their communities, in a more holistic way. This led to a role of the church as advocating on behalf of the people (either their own congregation or the wider community). In many communities, after the war, pastors, priests and other religious leaders regained their degree of respect, power and trustworthiness. This gave weight to their opinion and advocating work. Moreover, church leaders could use the wider network of the church to find suitable solutions for people from their congregation or community. In this way, advocacy could be carried out on various levels, providing people new ways of pleading for their cause.

One of these new levels could be the possible connection with foreign (or sometimes national) NGOs. This is an important feature of advocating on behalf of the community. Besides the national or local government and local civil society groups, many churches turned to international aid agencies. Many churches had contacts with an NGO or FBO, so it could serve as mediating party between the community and the aid organization. The church could do a proposal, based on needs of the people, and organization could assess the available support. When the church was also actually working together with an aid organization, it could further expand its advocacy activities. Many churches made fruitfully use of the shared interest of the aid organization and their own institution; both wanted to address the most urgent war-related needs. Although the work of NGOs was always limited and rarely able to meet all the needs, for both sides – in most of the cases – it was worth it and led to better post-conflict rehabilitation activities.

To better grasp this relationship, it will be addressed in depth in the next paragraph, illustrated with concrete examples, about how churches and NGOs co-operated with each other in post-war Liberia.

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**Box 3. A church involved in rehabilitating former child soldiers**

In Ganta, Nimba County, the ‘CBC church’ started a rehabilitation program for ex-combatants, who were predominantly youth and recruited as child soldiers in different rebel groups. A lot of these former fighters were living in the area where the pastor of the church lived. Initially, there was a huge lack of confidence and acceptance towards them from the community. Likewise, there was mistrust towards the community (and the pastor) from the former fighters. The pastor tried to gain confidence and trust by inviting the ex-combatants to join soccer tournaments he was organizing. They formed a team and the pastor became their coach. Once he had earned enough confidence, he started to encourage them to stop smoking marihuana and the thinking of raping and killing. After a period of sport activities, the ex-combatants were getting more attracted by the church. Some found in the church a place of repentance and a way of building a new life with restored hope. There were also combatants who could not identify their relatives after they returned from the war, so the church became everything they had left. Other activities that the church employed in the post-war period were re-opening a school in 2004 and a counseling program for girls and women who were forced to work in prostitution because of blatant unemployment. According to the pastor and his wife, the most difficult part was to encourage the church members to accept the former combatants in the congregation. Stressing the religion they had in common was used as a strategy to harmonize the churchgoers with the newcomers, who sometimes personally had harmed their new brothers and sisters. This took a lot of time and effort, in terms of mediation, counseling, teaching and preaching, praying and consultation. At the moment, four of the initial participants of the program have attended secondary school and are now going to university.
4.5 The church – NGO relationship

In this section, results are presented of the field research done on the church – NGO relationship. The results are based on the information gathered from the questionnaires and interviews with several pastors, church leaders and NGO (or FBO) representatives, as presented in Chapter 3. The relationship between churches and NGOs is based on a mutual interest; addressing the needs by serving the community. In a good relationship (and partnership) two players need each other, because one does have something which the other needs or could use and vice versa. This is also the case in a flourishing church – NGO partnership, which is supposed to be complementary and based on reciprocity.

Based on this reciprocity, the complementary nature and mutual interest in the partnership, one of the first questions of the questionnaire was: what physical assets of the church or its members were used in the post-war period? The following answers were given to this question:

- The building (both church and school)
- Homes of church members
- Accommodation of and food for trainers of the NGO
- Human resources
- Warehouses
- Motorcycles
- Agricultural supplies
- Relief items (rice, oil, medicines)
- Playground
- Hand pumps
- Toilettess

So, there can be concluded that churches possess a lot of physical assets, which can be of great use for the NGO. The assets and resources are already there, locally available, and do not need to be brought in by any foreign aid agency. This is a great strength of a church as institution and a big advantage for an NGO when working together with a church. Especially the church building and the available human resources were mentioned frequently as valuable assets. The church (or school) building can be used as shelter for the displaced, as a distribution center of relief items, as a warehouse, or as a room for meetings and psychosocial sessions, etc. The human resources, mostly in terms of the abundant availability of volunteers, were also used for a variety of activities, including needs assessments, consultations, organization of social activities, meetings, workshops, distributional activities, coordination, etc. However, not only the benevolence of the volunteers was highlighted, but also their skills. This was addressed by the question on what useful skills were found among church members that was of use in the relief activities. The following list of available skills was found among church members:

- Carpentry
- Electricity
- Health & medicines
- Teachers (and people who could read and write)
- Administration
• Coordination & leadership
• Agricultural knowledge
• Preaching
• Driving
• Water and sanitation
• Trauma counseling
• Disaster management
• Building contractors and construction workers
• Training
• Accountancy
• Business and entrepreneurship
• Child protection
• Journalists

Again, the conclusion is that there are many skills to be found among the members of a church, which can be very useful in the execution of multiple post-conflict rehabilitation programs. These skills are already locally located and – in most of the cases – directly available. Recruiting people with the adequate skills is very important for the effectiveness of a program. Mapping the pre-existing and available skills among the people that are already inside the network of the institution is an efficient manner of recruitment. This opportunity is, again, a great strength of working with a local church and a direct reason for an NGO to maintain the partnership. However, mostly the more technical skills listed above were sometimes qualified as insufficient by the NGO. It is true that in many occasions the resources, assets and skills of the church are limited. To minimize this limitation, the NGO can come in by giving training and capacity building. On the question about what additional training NGOs had provided, the following was answered:

• Training in a ‘Community Health Ambassadors’ program
• Training in digging wells and using water (WASH)
• Training to upgrade health workers to nurses
• Social service training
• Financial reporting training
• Logistical training (stock, procurement & distribution management)
• Management training
• Church leadership and supervision training
• Trauma healing training
• Biblical counseling
• Discipleship training
• Life skills training
• Administration training
• Training in monitoring and evaluation
• Business training
• Disaster management
• Training in international standards (Red Cross Code of Conduct, etc.)
• Training in project cycle management
• Training in data collection and needs assessment
• Training in proposal writing

Likewise the list of physical assets of the church and useful skills of church members, also this list is a long one. It shows a substantial part of the added value of the NGO in the church – NGO partnership. All the additional training services are aimed at strengthening the capacity of the church and increasing the effectiveness of the program. However, besides the key role of the training, the provision of funding is another key factor in the church – NGO relationship. The financial means of a local church in Liberia are usually restricted, while the needs are high. In the end, the benefits for the church and the benefits for the NGO cause interesting interactions and a dynamical interplay.

In this interaction, it is interesting to look at the greatest benefits, weaknesses and difficulties of the church – NGO relationship. In the following paragraphs and numerations these are mentioned. When asked for the greatest benefits for a church to work with an NGO the following answers were given:

• Building the capacity of the church
• Receiving funding for war-related church activities
• Widening the scope of the church
• Improvement of relationship with wider community
• Employment of church members at the NGO
• Agricultural tools and equipment to establish a farm
• Training of human resources (benefits in future careers)

When asked for the greatest benefits for an NGO to work together with a church, the following was responded:

• Through the church, access to populations was possible, to organize activities and training
• Church was open for the holistic approach of the gospel – important for FBO’s.
• Increasing the impact by reaching more people
• Church was open to the Scripture, which helped to add power and authority to the actions
• Gender: through the church large groups of compassionate women were accessed
• Skilled manpower
• Committed and honest people

Besides the benefits, the ‘greatest difficulties, frustrations or challenges’ of the partnership were also asked. The following has been replied from a church perspective:

• Meet the (sometimes) high and quick expectations of the NGO
• The enlistment and administration of beneficiaries
• Get the funds and materials at the right time at the right place (logistics)
• Compromising and the need to be flexible towards doctrinal truths and practices
• Meeting the standards of reporting and financial accounting
• Carrying out a critical needs assessment and identify the real beneficiaries
• Tensions between the religious church leaders and the secular NGO employees, like in the
introduction story (Chapter 1). This especially arises during religious practices at a joint working place.

Regarding the challenges, difficulties or frustrations, the following has been replied from an NGO perspective:

- Ensuring an equal distribution of supplies
- Lack of documentation, record keeping and administration of beneficiaries
- Highly motivated and well willing voluntary people, but lack of professionalism
- Influence of 'secret society'; traditional types of religion which in some remote areas still has a lot of power and distracts people from the work of the church.
- Different expectations – some churches expected the NGO to finally do the job, whereas the NGO expected the church to take more own leadership and initiatives
- Conservative attitude – the church sometimes did not see the point of changes and wanted to keep being the church they always had been
- Pastors who thought mainly about their own position and benefits
- Church leaders who were afraid that the NGO would take over their church
- Heavy rainfall and bad roads (external challenges)

There are some more conclusions to be made based on the questionnaires. First, virtually all churches witnessed a positive change in their relationship with the wider community, due to their involvement with the relief project and NGO co-operation. According to the pastors, the active and helpful attitude made the church gain credibility as a valuable actor in society. Prior to the war, the pastors recognized a distanced relationship between the church and much of the wider community. After the war, because of the church involvement in relief activities, this relationship intensified and improved considerably. Second, apart from the improvement of the church – community relationship, it also ameliorated the inter-church relationship. Many churches accounted that, because of the engagement in relief activities, contacts with other churches were reinforced and new partnerships and networks were established. Third, it was remarkable to see that all the church leaders were keen to work with NGOs in possible future humanitarian response again, without any exception. Some stated that it should be a similar NGO, with enough freedom and ownership. From the NGO perspective, a similar statement can be done, although many NGOs stated that new co-operation will only start after careful training and consultation and only in the case of such a dire humanitarian situation as in 2003 after the civil crisis.

**Box 4. Helped Liberian churches now help in Ivory Coast refugee crisis**

In Ganta, Nimba County, directly after the war in 2003, the Ganta Christian Community (GCC) was founded. Nimba County was one of the worst hit areas, which led to massive displacement to Guinea and Ivory Coast. The GCC was a network of 28 churches in the region involved in advocacy, train leaders and empower member churches to reach out to the community. In the years after the war the GCC obtained a lot of experience and expertise in rehabilitation programs and meeting post-conflict needs. This expertise was fully used during the refugee crisis in Ivory Coast, when thousands of displaced persons entered Nimba County. The GCC could quickly respond to the needs and started raising food, clothes and made proposals for agricultural and counseling programs, which were granted by the international FBO Samaritan’s Purse (SP). SP provided transportation, funded the agricultural seeds and tools and paid the salary of the project staff. In terms of ownership, GCC was fully in charge of the decision-making processes and providing human resources, coordination, supervision and financial reporting. Because of its experience from the past it was able to carry out the activities satisfactorily.
4.6 Limitations

In this section the limitations of the impact of the church are described. Despite of the important cultural and social position and the many activities that have been carried out, the church also has its shortcomings and limitations. One of the significant shortcomings lies in the participation of church activities in terms of gender. Proportionally, the number of female churchgoers is many times bigger than male ones. Although to some NGOs this might be an advantage, in for instance specifically female targeted programs, this observation greatly affects the influence and impact of the range of church activities and the messages the church proclaims. It is an important nuance when proponents argue that the church has such a large countrywide coverage. This is unmistakably true, and given the fact that relatively more women than men go to church does not necessarily mean that men are not reached by the message and activities, but it certainly does imply that the coverage is limited and the direct impact asks for nuance.

Looking further at this argument, it should influence the strategies of the church in achieving social change. If predominantly women are attending the weekly services and other activities, it should be tailored towards women, to empower and stimulate them to bring about change – especially to their husbands, sons and fathers. Interestingly enough would be to further look at why women are more attracted to the church than men. An often heard explanation is that men deliberately send women to church to pacify them, whereupon men at home can continue with their dominant attitude. It is also interesting to investigate how to optimally make use of the female majority in churches in striving for social change and development. Both the reason why and the way how to benefit from this should be subject for further research.

A second limitation of the work of the church in post-conflict rehabilitation is the simple fact that many churches were hit themselves too. This could happen in many ways: first and most commonly, the church building could have been destroyed, damaged or snaffled by someone else. This substantially restricts the capacity of the church. Secondly, the pastor, his family, or other church leaders and their families could have been killed, missing or displaced for a longer term elsewhere. This could have dramatic consequences since churches are often depended on the leadership. Churches are to a great extent brought and bound together by the personality, qualities and efforts of its leaders. In the absence of leadership it is not likely for new initiatives to start up or for new plans to be created, thus, missing leaders heavily hampers the work of the church. Thirdly, the church members may be missing and therewith their assets. In the end, churchgoers compose the congregation and if they cannot give their offerings in terms of time, money and spiritual support the church lacks the capacity to implement. These three points all reflect the weak side of the position and composition of a church in a (post-)conflict setting.

A third limitation is found in the lack of professionalism, as stated as one of the difficulties when working with churches in the above section. The church may be able to provide a lot of human resources, but, being usually on voluntary basis, this creates a lack of professional skills and expertise. For instance, in psychosocial counseling or trauma healing volunteers can be useful, but in some cases professional care and conversation skills are needed to deal with a certain situation. In line with argument, there is usually also a lack of financial knowledge and skills in monitoring, evaluation, reporting and accounting. Especially when involving with international aid agencies and donors, these skills are required. Lacking these skills can be a great limitation of the church.
4.7 Conclusion

This section provides a brief conclusion of the information given in this chapter. The concluding notes on the role of the church in post-conflict Liberia are to be found in Chapter 5.

The role of local churches during the war was severely limited due to insecurity and violent attacks by rebels on the communities, including the churches. No level of extra respect was shown towards the church leaders or members, so during the war churches were often scattered. This, as a side effect, led to the spreading of churches and the Christian message around the country and neighboring countries. On a national level, however, the role of church was more significant, because national religious bodies, like the Liberian Council of Churches and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia, actively involved in peace negotiations. After the war, these national bodies involved in nationwide peacebuilding programs and awareness raising. In addition, the LCC promoted democracy and training for observers of free elections.

The role and impact of the local church after the conflict can be best reviewed by five different roles, which were assumed by local churches; early responding, providing education, providing psychosocial counseling, preaching a certain message and advocating on behalf of the community. Each of these five activities reflect the extra advantage or ‘added value’ of a church-based perspective. For instance, the church is locally based and is equipped with resources and assets, and therefore suitable for early responding. Or, providing psychosocial care can be organized through the church, because of the spiritual nature of its mandate and activities. The five elements reveal the role that many churches in post-conflict Liberia have adopted.

As part of the fifth role – advocating on behalf of the community – local churches sought for support from NGOs. Simultaneously, NGOs were seeking ways to get access to vulnerable populations. This resulted in many church – NGO partnerships, where on a basis of common interest (serving the war-affected community) post-conflict rehabilitation activities were deployed to meet the needs of the targeted population. For a fruitful co-operation, it is of utmost importance to create clarity about the expectations and possible contributions of both the church and the NGO, on an even basis. In the case of the church it is important to recognize the physical assets and resources of a church and the useful skills of its members. For the NGO it about assessing the ability to build the capacity of the church, provide training and the availability of funding.

When from both sides the contributions are recognized and judged positively there is a possible basis for collaboration. For both sides this collaboration will be accompanied by different benefits, like an increased accessibility to populations, availability of committed and honest people, capacity building, training and funding. There are also difficulties, frustrations and challenges in the relationship: unrealistic expectations, inadequate beneficiary administration and problems in meeting the high financial reporting standards by the church, and dealing with the lack of professionalism, financial knowledge, strict hierarchy and conservative church structures and misuse of power by church leadership.

These difficulties relate to several limitations of the role and impact of the church. Firstly, proportionally, women are better represented in church activities than men, which creates a restricted coverage and limitations in terms of gender. Secondly, the capacity of the church has been limited because the church was sometimes hit by the war itself. When their own building and social
or organizational structure was damaged, this negatively influenced the capacity of the church in supporting the community. Thirdly, there is in some churches a great lack of professionalism, because the human resources of the church are mainly composed of volunteers. Likewise, there is a lack of financial knowledge about how to properly account for large funding, report expenditures and presenting clear financial data like annual reports and project plans.
5. Conclusions

What can be concluded from the role and impact of religion in Liberia?

In this conclusion, the role of the church during the war and the limitations of the church as listed in
the previous section, will be kept outside of consideration. The following can be concluded when
answering the research question about the role and impact of the church in post-conflict Liberia. The
church has fulfilled the following roles:

On a national level:

- **A promoter of democracy and free elections** – on a national level, after the conflict, the
  Liberian Council of Churches (LCC) immediately focused on organizing free elections. It has
  been an implementing partner of the National Election Commission (NEC), and was in charge
  of providing and training local observers – approximately 400 in the 2005 and 1000 in the
  2011 elections. Besides, voter educational activities were carried out at the countryside to
  make people willing to vote, which was done in close co-operation with Muslims and
  mosques.

- **An influencer of political decisions** – the LCC as well as the IRCL (where the LCC was also part
  of) was (and is) seen as a reliable partner of the Liberian government. They are called in for
  governmental meetings and involved in decision-making processes. As mentioned above,
  during the elections the LCC has been a partner of the NEC, during and prior to democratic
  elections.

- **A provider of education** – although this characteristic is in fact locally initiated, I would like
  to perceive it in the light of its national impact. On a very large scale, churches around Liberia
  are providing educational services to the children and youth from their communities.
  Although the quality and reliability are sometimes subject to critique, without the church
  fulfilling this role Liberia would have a great gap to fill.

- **A facilitator of peacebuilding programs** – both the LCC and the IRCL have carried various
  peacebuilding programs across the country. The IRCL promoted with the ‘Cornerstone for
  Peacebuilding’ program the leading role of religious institutions, while giving training and
  education on religious tolerance, rule of law, and co-existence. The LCC organized campaigns
  to raise awareness about the importance of peace and democracy, stimulating people to
  vote and make use of their rights.

- **A connector with other actors** – both the LCC and the IRCL are networks of various religious
  actors, distinguished by denomination or other faith groups. Besides these two, there are
  more networks and associations of Liberian religious institutions. This creates, on a national
  level, a platform for interaction on political, social and economic issues, intra- and inter-
  religious dialogue and the possibility of sharing ideas and mutual encouragement.

On a local level:
• An early-responder – churches started to motivate and mobilize community members to clean up the debris and reconstruct wells, roads, buildings, land plots, etc. They quickly deployed volunteers to the most severely hit areas and the church (building) was used as a point of entry for returning refugees and internally displaced persons.

• A watchdog of the peace process – because many churches were part of a co-operation with other churches and were nationally or internationally linked with other organizations or governments, in times of turmoil it could immediately warn the authorities and communicate with others what to do. A church is locally based and possesses knowledge about the local situation, culture and structures, which is a great strength when carrying out rehabilitation and peacebuilding programs.

• An advocate on behalf of the war-affected people – while fulfilling the role of an early responder and watchdog of society, the next step was to advocate for the community when specific needs were encountered. This means pleading for the cause of the needy at, for instance, the government or aid agencies. It also means using the network and structure of a church as a way for people to connect with other actors and to enable them to access governmental services or aid provided by NGOs or other civil society groups. Since the church fulfilled this role in the post-war period, church – NGO partnerships widely emerged, where churches and NGO worked together to reach out and meet the needs of the community.

• A facilitator of community based action – the church called the people together to activate and mobilize them for community based activities. It could make them discuss post-war related issues, such as land disputes, or stimulate preparatory or responsive activities, such as new agricultural or entrepreneurial initiatives. The local church used its network and regained after the war respect and credibility, so could fulfill this role out of its unique position in the community.

• A provider of psychosocial care – as a place of spiritual activity, one of the major roles the church fulfilled was the provision of psychosocial counseling, trauma healing sessions, psychological consultation, spiritual consultation, and prayer and fastening sessions. This could be individual conversations, group meetings, writing and singing songs, writing poems, making drawings, pastoral care, relational support, and theological sessions from a biblical perspective, aimed at dealing with psychosocial problems. In many occasions, only churches were capable of providing these services to the community.

• A provider of resources – a church, being a place where people from the community regularly gather together, possesses several assets and resources. This can be a group of motivated volunteers, a building to be used as shelter for displaced people or to stock relief items, or other resources such as a vehicle, equipment, kitchen utensils, teaching materials, available land, etc. Providing these resources in times of shortage is key to the humanitarian situation. This role can be multiple and the list of possible resources and assets of the church is endless.
• **A shaper of norms and values** – one of the most important events of the church is its weekly Sunday morning service. Besides worship and prayer, many Liberian churches also used it as an opportunity to ‘preach the gospel’ and convey a message of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, trust, hope, integrity, honesty, respect, hospitality. This encouraged people and gave them back the value of being alive, the appreciation of life, discouraging revenge and restoring hope for the future. This role of the church might seem less important from a distance, but, when taking a closer look at the lives and thoughts of people, the great value of conveying a message of renewed hope and meaningfulness is of great importance.

Concerning the church – NGO partnership, the following can be concluded. When there is enough mutual interest and reciprocity, there may be a basis for collaboration. In conclusion, local churches and NGOs can complement each other in many ways. Churches can use their buildings as place of refuge, meeting center, training accommodation, field office for the NGO, to store relief items, etc. In addition, churches can deploy their members and volunteers, who frequently possess useful skills, like in carpentry, electricity, health, administration, education, driving, and construction work. At the same time, churches need training from the NGO to increase their capacity in, among others, financial reporting, administration, project cycle management, leadership, trauma healing, business, WASH, etc.

Overall, the interaction between churches and NGOs lead to interesting benefits, weaknesses and challenges. The weaknesses and challenges – for both sides – are often portrayed in terms of unrealistic expectations, lack of cultural sensitivity, high standards in financial reporting and accounting, lack of professionalism, conservative attitudes, and a lack of efficiency in logistics. On the benefits side, the following should be concluded. From the church perspective: possibility to build the capacity, received funding for war-related activities, an improved relationship with the wider community, employment possibilities at the NGO, widened scope, and trained church workers and members. For the NGO the main benefits of the partnership are: access to vulnerable populations, skilled manpower, knowledge about local structures and, in terms of gender, large groups of women were accessed.

The church as a way to increase the access of NGOs to vulnerable populations has definitely been an important factor in role and impact of the church in post-war Liberia. It also affects the decision of an NGO on whether to work or not to work with religious institutions in a humanitarian response. It would be interesting to examine whether a religious approach is more successful than a secular perspective. This idea – the church as a facilitator of *humanitarian space* – falls outside the scope of this thesis and is interesting food for future research.
6. Recommendations

What recommendations for the future can be made?

In this section recommendations will be listed, based on the information from the previous chapters. These chapters provide information which can form a basis for NGOs whether or not to work together with local churches (or other religious institutions) in their programs. Therefore, recommendations are made about the strengths, benefits, weaknesses, challenges and pitfalls of this partnership. It is about how to better grasp the role and impact of religion in a post-conflict setting like Liberia and how to improve the relationship between NGOs and local churches in their co-operation during post-conflict rehabilitation activities. I would NGOs recommend to:

- **Focus on building strong relationships** – when working with churches it is key to take enough time to build strong relationships. Each pastor and congregation is different, so each time a new approach and new dedication is needed. Short or impulsive action can hamper the long term ministry of the church and its relation with the wider community. Therefore, it is important to choose commitment over an extended period of time. This might be problematic if the nature of the NGO is strict humanitarian or relief based. However, when working with churches, a long partnership is highly recommendable, in terms of sustainability and effectiveness.

- **Recognize the wider context** – the church has a position in the community based on the past and its future position will be based on the current activities. The involvement of the NGO should not undermine this position and the long term strategy of the church; it should not lead to negative perceptions or opinions of the church by the community.

- **Stimulate regional partnerships with other churches** – this will increase the network and capacity of the church and will also increase the access to the population for the NGO. Once churches start to connect with and learn from other churches, the awareness and willingness to work in the community will increase. Churches encourage and inspire each other, as well as telling each other their achievements, challenges, difficulties and needs.

- **Establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) beforehand** – if drafted properly and at the right moment, this can prevent a lot of harm when going from the preparatory into the implementing phase. Because the relationship with the church is primarily based on trust, it is good to have a document about the common line of action that has been accepted.

- **Promote holistic and integral mission** – encourage churches to think beyond their spiritual activities and promote addressing the material needs of the community as the church physical mandate. There are programs available like ‘Umoja’ (Tearfund, 2009) to strengthen the ‘Church and Community Mobilization Process’ (CCMP). This program is an approach to envision local churches, to actively engage them in their communities, by addressing local needs through their own resources.
• **Communicate clear expectations** – stimulate transparency by being clear about what is expected from the church, what can be expected from the NGO and encourage openness about hopes and fears of the relationship. If necessary, create an open complaint mechanism.

• **Involve church leaders and pastors in decision-making processes** – this is key in terms of ownership and sustainability. Once the leadership of church perceives the implanted actions as *theirs*, it will lead to genuine change, also when the NGO has pulled out. By involving church leaders in decision-making this development will speed up. Take into consideration that churches may be hierarchical and slow in their decision-making.

• **Build the capacity of the church and organize leadership training** – by providing training and guidance, the capacity of the church can quickly be increased. By establishing special committees on war-related issues, high pressure on one pastor is avoided and the ownership is spread. This also ensures that the resources are not channeled through one person only. Church leaders should attend training on coordination, management, project cycle management, logistics, finance, etc.

• **Provide training in financial reporting** – special attention needs to be given to the availability of financial knowledge, since this is often a problem that emerges in a church-NGO partnership. This may be one of the first issues to address, because it will influence the entire process if carried out incompetently. In these trainings, special attention should be paid to supervision, the qualities of the participants and benefits based on results and progress, for instance in terms of more performance-based contracts.

• **Make churches aware of international standards** – if your NGO or aid agency claims to adhere to international standards like the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross, the Sphere standards or the HAP standards, this should also be adopted by the partnering church. In the case of the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross, for instance, this means that aid must be given regardless of creed or any other distinction, so, when implemented by a church, also to people from other religions and outside of the own congregation. If necessary, training should be given on how to incorporate these standards in the daily operations of the aid efforts of the church.

**Checklist of key questions**

NGOs who are taking a partnership with a church into consideration may find it hard to determine when or when not to involve with local churches. Many different factors play a role in this decision, like the identity of the organization, e.g. the vision, mission statement, principles and values, the background and expertise, or the availability of funding. These issues can be considered as internal matters, focusing on the situation within the organization, and are outside of the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, there are also internal matters relevant to this decision. Is, for example, the NGO willing to involve church leaders in decision-making processes? And, is the NGO willing and capable of providing the necessary training? Also, does the NGO recognize the limitations and constrains of the church?
Still, the decision whether to choose for a church-based partnership involves more questions. Below, one finds a list of questions about this choice, regarding external matters (Tear, 2012).

- Will the effectiveness of the relief response increase because of the participation of the local church?
- Is the knowledge and expertise possessed by the church not available via other sources?
- Will the involvement of the church in the response improve the relationship with the wider community and the government?
- Is it safe enough for the church to take part in the partnership?
- Does the church have a well rooted vision to carry out a relief program?
- How long does the particular church exist and has the church worked with other NGOs before?
- Is the church able to adhere to international standards (e.g. neutrality, impartiality, and good practices in transparency and accountability)
- Is the church capable of managing the amount of financial means that the co-operation will bring along?

These questions give guidance in deciding whether or not to start a collaboration with a local church. Some questions weigh more than others, so please be aware that one or few negative answers can be enough for a negative judgment.
7. References


