

# “Harmony in Diversity: Promoting Religious Unity at the Grassroots in Kambaata, Tembaro and Halaba Zones of Ethiopia.”

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to examine the extent to which the ecumenism or religious dialogue is addressed at the grassroots in the Kambaata, Tembaro and Halaba zones of Ethiopia. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach. The research's target group consisted of religious leaders and followers from the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba. Of the 1,313,162 targeted population, 384 respondents were involved in the study. Of this sample, 72 were religious leaders, and 312 were religious adherents. The sample was selected using the cluster technique within the probability sampling and the non-probability sampling procedures. The study used structured and unstructured questionnaires, individual interview guides, and focus group discussion guides as data collection instruments. The results of the responses on attending ecumenical or religious dialogue show that a significant number of respondents have not engaged in any form of ecumenical or religious dialogue. Despite limited participation, there is a strong belief among respondents that ecumenical or religious dialogue can promote justice and peace. The researcher made several recommendations that, if implemented, will improve positive interfaith and interdenominational relations in the Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba zones of Ethiopia.

**Keywords:** Ecumenism, Religious dialogue, Grassroots, Justice and Peace

## INTRODUCTION

Promoting religious unity at the grassroots level is crucial for fostering harmony and cooperation among diverse religious communities. Ecumenical or religious dialogues provide opportunities for individuals from different denominational or religious backgrounds to come together, interact, and build meaningful relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. By listening to and empathizing with the experiences and perspectives of others, participants can develop greater compassion and empathy towards individuals from different denominational or religious backgrounds, leading to increased tolerance and acceptance. Dialogues can also serve as platforms for discussing and addressing social issues and challenges that affect communities collectively, such as poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation, fostering collaboration and collective action.

### Study objectives

The objectives that guided this study were as follows.

1. To investigate the expectations and willingness of community members to engage in interfaith and interdenominational activities in the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba.
2. To explore and develop effective strategies for promoting religious unity at the grassroots level in the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro and Halaba by engaging local communities, religious leaders,

civil authorities and other stakeholders.

3. To Assess Community attitudes towards religious diversity in the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba.

## Study Questions

In the study, the following research questions were addressed.

1. What are the expectations and willingness of community members regarding participation in interfaith or interdenominational activities in the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba?
2. How can religious unity be promoted at the grassroots level in the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba?
3. What are the current perceptions and attitudes towards religious diversity among the communities in the Ethiopian zones of Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Structural Functionalism Theory

As stated by Roberta (2019), Structural Functional Theory is an approach that aims to explain role patterns, institutional forms, and the overall expression of social systems by elucidating their functions and contributions to the stability and continuity of societies. Structural functionalism holds that society is a complex system whose parts work together to maintain solidarity and stability. One way to think of society is as an organism, with all of its parts (social structures, institutions, etc.) working together as an organ to keep the body as a whole healthy. This approach looks at society from a macro-level perspective, with a broad focus on the social structures that shape society overall. Functionalism views society in terms of the functions played by its constituent parts, including institutions, norms, practices, and traditions. For example, functionalists highlight a number of roles that families play, including emotional support, socialization, care, protection, and reproduction.

Ibekwe (2019) argues that Structural Functionalism views society as an interconnected system or an ordered network of cooperating groups, in which each group has a certain job to play and every activity or function contributes to the overall health of the system. The idea illustrates how a community lives in structures that have interrelated and interdependent roles for the survival of the entire community, using the analogy of an organism. Based on the features of structures, social patterns, social systems, and institutions including media, politics, education, religion, and freedom, it is a macro-sociological theory. According to functionalists, if all of these social institutions are ordered and cooperate around a common set of basic principles, the entire social system will operate correctly and efficiently. According to them, society is a well-organized system of interconnected pieces kept together by established social structures and common values.

## EMPIRICAL REVIEW

### Promotion of Religious Unity at the Grassroots

According to Coward and Smith (2004), religious actors and institutions engage in peacebuilding activities to resolve and change fatal conflicts in order to create social interactions and political structures that foster tolerance and forbearance. In addition to conflict resolution, grassroots and individual efforts to promote human rights and intercultural and interreligious understanding are included in interfaith peacebuilding.

It is common for religious leaders to come under fire for not doing enough to stop acts of religious violence.

Since no public statement denounces every act of extremism, it is presumed that all religious communities are somehow involved. This viewpoint is unjust. In actuality, millions of people of faith are actively working to promote peace after the conflict and assist the underprivileged and disenfranchised. Many believers labor in international humanitarian agencies and overseas missions, while others conduct their religious activities in their churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. In the meantime, religious authorities are usually charged of inciting violence and failing to mediate peace deals (Muggah & Velshi, 2019)

During the 'Global Conference on Human Brotherhood' in the Middle East (Abu Dhabi) on February 4, 2019, a historic interfaith agreement was signed. Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, signed a declaration that could serve as a blueprint for some parts of international interreligious peacebuilding. Present at this historic event was Dr. Olav Faikse Tweet, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), who urged religious leaders and institutions to promote a practical agenda of collaboration in order to promote world peace. A great deal of thought went into the writing of these texts, which invite people of all religions to greet, embrace, kiss, and offer prayers for one another, according to the official Vatican website. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, and the Pope both signed the document, which the pope claimed was the result of much prayer and contemplation. The Pope stated that among the many threats facing Christians today are acts of devastation, hostility, and conflict. He asserted that faith will falter if believers are unable to shake hands. The document, according to the Pope, sprang from faith in God, the Father of Peace and the Source of All Things. He denounced all acts of fear and destruction, even the first horror in recorded history, that of Cain (Blogger, 2020).

Organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, Interfaith Initiative, and Religions for Peace have focused on reconciliation training. Some prioritize reconciliation between religious groups. Through a series of faith-based reconciliation seminars, the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy, a non-governmental organization with headquarters in Washington, DC, has helped leaders in the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist regions of Kashmir cooperate (Liora, 2007). Interfaith dialogue, according to Garfinkel and Zymelman (2004), is a means of bringing together individuals of many religions for conversation. These discussions can have a variety of shapes, objectives, and styles. They can also target various participant types, such as middle-class professionals, grassroots activists, and elites, and occur at various social levels. She acknowledges, nevertheless, that this idea is not universal: interfaith conversation is not intended for discussion. It aims for understanding between people rather than rivalry; it is about solving problems together, not converting to the religion.

Since 2014, the impact of ISIS and war has created divisions and severed communal ties in Iraq. In a region with diverse faiths and beliefs, extremist groups use propaganda to exacerbate divisions and advance their political agendas. To promote reconciliation and reduce conflict, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded Community Co-existence and Integration Programme brought together 100 religious and minority leaders to broker understanding amongst groups. Representatives from a wide range of religions, including Sunni and Shia Muslim, Christian, Yazidi, Sabian Mandawi, Zoroastrian and Judaism, participated in interactive online sessions on topics such as hate speech, interfaith dialogue, and combating religious discrimination (*Religious leaders promote peace*, 2022).

According to Blakemore (2019), governments can successfully employ interreligious dialogue to accomplish policy goals, even while some policies are counterproductive to these ends. The examples of Indonesia and the US support this claim. Interfaith conversation and faith-based diplomacy can be helpful approaches to solving today's world issues. Shafiq and Abu-Nimer (2011) state that the objectives of interfaith discourse are to counteract extremism and negativity while creating a space for respect, understanding, and listening. Interfaith discussion, according to Patel (2016), entails clinging to one's own beliefs while making an effort to comprehend those of others. According to Abu-Nimer, the objective is to

use cooperation to educate people so they may better understand, respect, and accept others who practice the same or different religions. Consistency and agreement are not the aims. According to Patel, the outcome is that constructive civil involvement with good intentions fosters an atmosphere that is favorable to informed knowledge as opposed to misperceptions, errors, unfavorable feelings, and biases.

In Africa, as elsewhere, religious conflict is one of the issues embedded in the fabric of society. Structural religious conflicts are allowed by some Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. It has become a vicious cycle manifested by political and cultural power. The consequences of this type of discrimination include unequal opportunities for all citizens, the dominance of both groups in the workplace and other forms of discrimination. Levi (2017) notes that in Nigeria, clerics in both churches and mosques stressed that their people should only vote for candidates who belong to their own religious groupings, drawing on their own personal experience in the 2015 national elections.

In a multicultural region such as Africa, the value systems of Islam and Christianity might facilitate effective interfaith discussion. The goal of dialogue is to cohabit with the best aspects of both faith traditions, not to eradicate religious particularism. This speaking pattern is not a theoretical idea. It needs to be firmly anchored in the cultural, political, social, and economic realities of those specific societies. The contextual element is therefore extremely pertinent to any discussion of Christian-Muslim relations. Only when the entire gamut of human experiences, perspectives, and circumstances are taken into account can dialogue be truly meaningful. The joint search and cooperation for a viable human society model that upholds religious liberty and honors diversity and particularities is one of the main objectives of dialogue (Akinade, 2014).

Levi (2017) notes that religious leaders are the ones who are closest to the common citizens. Since they have more sway, it is their responsibility to live in harmony with their families, communities, and hearts. They ought to inspire and guide people to live peaceful lives. Levi discusses how religions might act as conduits for implementing and disseminating such information among the faithful for successful peacebuilding in their local communities and even worldwide, drawing on his personal experience in Nigeria. The beliefs, faith, and convictions of people are greatly influenced by religion. As a result, religious leaders ought to work to improve interpersonal connections and harmonious cohabitation as well as constructive social change.

Religious communities, according to Hanna (2018), have social, moral, and spiritual resources that they might pool with local churches, women's groups, youth groups, and specialized agencies.

*“When religious communities recognize their shared values, mobilize their collective assets, and work together, they can have a decisive impact where it is most needed. Because of this understanding the establishment of Inter-religious councils over the world has become very important. Russia, Argentina, Cambodia, China, India, Puerto Rico, Suriname, South Carolina and Bosnia and Herzegovina, San Diego, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria are some of world countries who had organized inter-religious councils so that every religious institution and the social community stand together to promote peaceful coexistence common values.”*

Under the direction of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), area committees were formed in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Malawi. In numerous nations, PROCMURA has arranged numerous conferences and consultations. It established a platform for dialogue between Christians and Muslims on a variety of topics that advance Christian-Muslim understanding and cooperation in Africa. The life conversation tradition that is widely practiced in many African nations is something that this project is especially useful in encouraging Africans to embrace. Christians and Muslims relate to one another without doctrinal barriers in the discourse of life. The traditional African values of hospitality and tolerance are evident in this setting. PROCMURA promoted

Francophone awareness of other religions by drawing on Africa's post-independence legacy of hospitality and tolerance.

Robert and Ali (2019) assert that some of the most successful peace projects in history have benefited greatly from the informal contributions made by ecumenical organizations. Distinguished peace brokers, like the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, have contributed to the establishment of peace agreements by mediating conflicts between South African factions in the 1990s and preventing violence in Kenya in 2008. Since the 1970s, the All-African Conference and the World Council of Churches have discussed and mediated peace agreements. Italy's Sant-Egidio has backed ecumenical discussions and initiatives to avert and end hostilities and advance peace from Albania to Mozambique. For a long time, groups such as Islamic Relief have supported efforts at mediation and peace making in areas severely affected by violence.

There are around 23 million Christians living in Uganda, where the majority (85%) are Christians and the minority (11%) are Muslims. The remaining 4% adhere to various religions, which include traditional African faiths. Good relations between Christians and Muslims in Uganda have been made possible by familial ties. A single family made up of members of many religious traditions is not uncommon to encounter. The experiences of several West African nations are very similar to this one. Good ties between Christians and Muslims have been facilitated by this condition in Uganda, particularly in rural regions. Multireligious and secular, Uganda is a nation. The state still works to create a climate that is favorable to religious liberty. The relationship between Christians and Muslims in Uganda is extraordinarily friendly, notwithstanding the occasional open conflicts and skepticism of one another on a wide range of political topics. President Yoweri Museveni's resounding advice to the people of Uganda remains relevant: "the common enemy of Christians and Muslims is not Christianity or Islam, but a few corrupt Ugandans who are misusing public funds to improve the country's infrastructure" (Akinade, 2014).

In South Africa, Muslims and Christians have worked together politically. They are united fight against the abhorrent policies and pronouncements of apartheid. Nelson Mandela acknowledged the significant contribution made by South African Muslims to the fight against apartheid in a July 1998 speech at Oxford. He recognized the Islamic contribution to the development of a just and equal society. South Africa is an invaluable example of Christian-Muslim solidarity in the face of injustice and tyranny (Akinade, 2014)

Ethiopia abolished Orthodox Christianity as the state religion during the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974, separated religion and state in the 1984 socialist constitution, confiscated most of the property of the Orthodox Church, and replaced or co-opted its leaders. Muslims were given equal rights in principle and a representative body was formed. The Ethiopian constitution of 1995 continues secular law and recognized the absence of a state religion (Larebo, 1986).

According to Asma (2023), the seven major Ethiopian religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Muslim, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, Mekane-Yesus (Evangelical Church of Ethiopia), Kalehiwot (Word of Life Church), and Abyate Christianat Hibret (Association of Ethiopian Protestant Churches) formed the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE). However, government policy fully supports and empowers the independent IRCE. To guarantee that their shared ideals of justice, freedom, love, and peace are promoted, preserved, and respected by all citizens, regardless of religion or background, IRCE brought Ethiopia's religious organizations together in 2010. In order to function independently of the government and advance religious harmony across the nation, they also issued resolutions guaranteeing the protection of religious freedom and equitable treatment by the state.

In times when Ethiopia has had to deal with conflicts, scholars and activists have observed that religious leaders and organizations play a crucial role in brokering peace. Before the celebration of the Ethiopian new year on September 11, 2020, for example, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), the Cardinal of the Catholic Church, the Secretary-General of the Evangelical Churches of

Ethiopia (ECFE) and the President of the Supreme Council of Ethiopian Islamic Affairs (EIASC) all conveyed a message of unity and peace. On June 16, a 52-member delegation of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) headed to Tigray to seek to resolve the ongoing disputes and political crisis between the Tigray regional government and the federal government, although the efforts bore no success. In July 2020, the imams of the Oromia region worked closely with the communities affected by the killing of a popular national singer, Hachalu Hundessa, to restore stability and prevent incitement to violence (*Ethiopia 2020 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2020).

In Ethiopia, religious leaders continue to play an important role towards resolving recurrent conflicts. They have invited conflicting parties, politicians and elites to dialogue and reach consensus. They have advised communities to sidestep conflict and promote co-existence and peace. Religious institutions also continue to provide humanitarian assistance through their development units to alleviate the suffering of conflict victims. Religious institutions also participate in reconciliation between conflicting parties in different regions. They teach the value of reconciliation at the grassroots levels and how reconciliation can be achieved through dialogue. They constantly underscore the importance of tolerance and harmony between peoples, institutions and religions. They emphasize the prominence of institutional reforms and internal peace. For example, religious leaders have made great efforts to the regions of Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia and Southern Nations and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS). “Even before the war began, religious leaders travelled to Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, and begged the federal and regional governments to calm down and have rational, peaceful discussions, rather than create pressure and tensions in the country. Though some conflicts continue to escalate, religious organizations have intervened to prevent hundreds of conflicts from escalating and getting worse” (Asma, 2023).

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The researcher conducted this study in the Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba Zones. Initially, these zones had been under one zone, named Kambaata, Halaba, and Tembaro, until Halaba became a special woreda in 2002. In 2002, the zone was divided into two different administrations to form one zone and one special woreda, namely Kambaata-Tembaro zone and Halaba special woreda. In 2019, the Halaba Special Woreda was elevated to the Halaba Zone. In 2023, the Kambaata Tembaro zone was split into the Kambaata zone and the Tembaro special woreda. The administrative city of the Kambaata zone is situated at Durame, it is 315 km southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia; the administrative city of the Halaba zone is situated at Halaba-Kulito, located 290 km southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia; the administrative city of Tembaro special woreda is situated at Mudula, located 315 km southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba zones are located in the Central Ethiopia Regional State. The Central Ethiopia Regional State is one of the newly formed regions; it was formed in August 2023 from the northern part of the then Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR).

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design to investigate the extent to which religious unity is promoted at the grassroots level in Kambaata-Tembaro and Halaba Zones of Ethiopia. Descriptive research aims to provide a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the phenomenon being studied (Kane, 1997). In this study, a mixed methods research design was utilized. Utilizing mixed methods entails combining qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collecting and analysis. Qualitative data derives from open-ended questions typical in interviews while quantitative data is generated using closed-ended questions such as questionnaires or psychometric instruments (Creswell, 2014).

## Sampling and Data Analysis Procedure

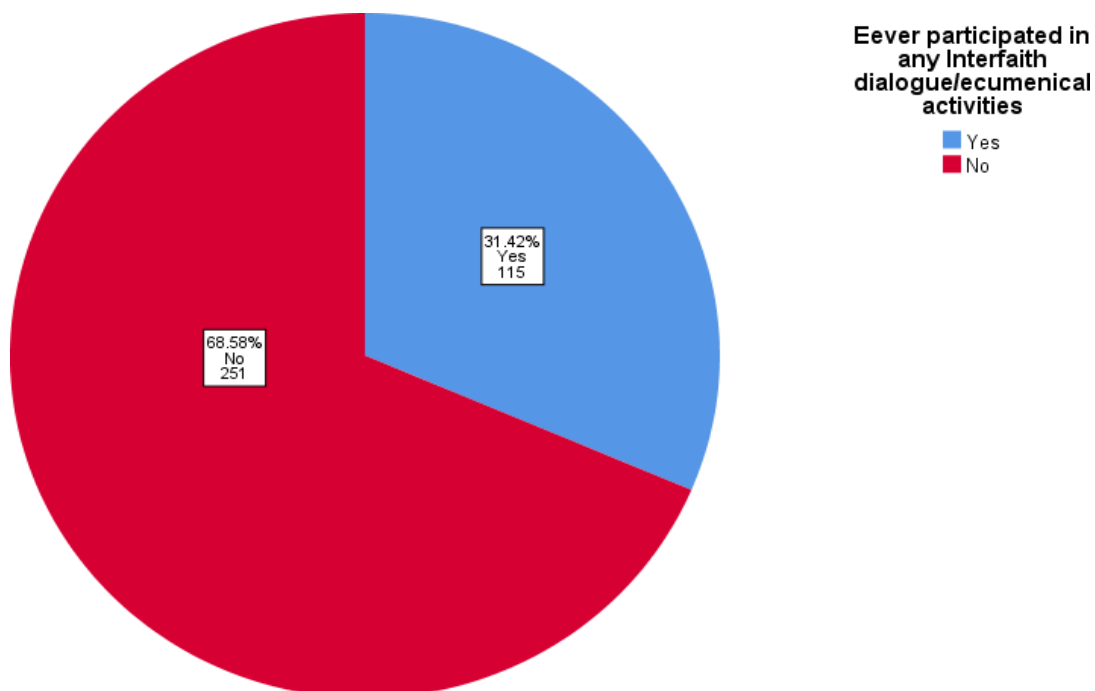
The sampling formula developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was utilized by the researcher in this study to calculate the necessary sample size from the target population (n). The sample size for the study was 384 respondents based on the calculating method used by Krejcie and Morgan. The study utilized cluster sampling and simple random sampling procedures. Both probability and non-probability sampling methods were used by the researcher in this study to select a sample of respondents. Individual interviews, focus group discussions, and structured and unstructured questionnaires were the main instruments for data collection employed in this study.

Due to the mixed-method approach chosen by the study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data analysis. Qualitative data was collected through open-ended questionnaires, interview guides, and focus group discussions and was thematically analyzed. Close-ended questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data, which was then analyzed using both inferential and descriptive statistics. The analysis of the data was done with SPSS version 26. In accordance with the study's research questions, a quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted. The results were coded, interpreted, and presented. The data was summarized using descriptive statistics, which included means, percentages, and frequencies. Graphs and tables were then utilized to illustrate the data.

## STUDY FINDINGS

The researcher sought detailed information about participants' engagement in religious/ecumenical dialogue through a yes-or-no question. The outcome of the responses indicates that the majority of the respondents had not attended any types of religious or ecumenical dialogue. The reaction depicted in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1 Participating in ecumenical or religious dialogue of any type



Source: Study Findings (2023)

In the above Figure 1, percentages provide insight into the distribution of respondents' participation in

religious or ecumenical dialogue. The fact that a large portion of respondents (68.58%; n =251) had not participated in religious/ecumenical dialogue activities within the surveyed group suggests that a large portion of the surveyed group did not engage in such discussions or events. Conversely, the data also highlights that there was a notable minority (31.42%; n = 115) who have engaged in religious or ecumenical dialogue. This emphasizes that despite the majority's non-participation, there exists a sizable group within the sample who have been involved in such discussions.

The majority of respondents, although not having had the opportunity to attend the religious dialogue, felt that conversations and interactions between people of various religious backgrounds can promote justice and peace in communities. The emphasis on performing ecumenical or interfaith dialogue in a committed manner suggests that participants' sincerity, dedication, and active participation may be key factors in its effectiveness. A wonderful endeavor that can support harmony, understanding, and collaboration in multicultural communities is the promotion of religious oneness. The study supports Hanna's (2018) observations that religious communities have social, moral, and spiritual resources that they can use in concert with local congregations, women's groups, youth groups, and specialized agencies. Religious groups can have a subtle but effective influence where it is most needed when they identify common values, combine resources, and collaborate. The respondents indicated that educational programs and charitable organizations have a significant value in creating opportunities for promoting religious unity. While there is a positive attitude toward ecumenical or religious dialogue and an awareness of its importance, the results also highlight challenges such as exclusive beliefs, a lack of mutual respect, and limited reach at the grassroots level. The findings suggest that a significant portion of the respondents did not prioritize or value the importance of respecting and understanding other religious beliefs and doctrines. There seems to be a prevalent perception among the respondents that other religions may not worship the true God or have the correct doctrines.

## CONCLUSION

The study underscores a complex landscape of ecumenical or religious dialogue, marked by both hopeful enthusiasm and notable skepticism. By addressing these challenges through targeted strategies, there is potential to significantly enhance interfaith and interdenominational understanding and collaboration, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and peaceful society. Continuing this dialogue and addressing the highlighted challenges can help build stronger, more cohesive communities anchored in mutual respect and shared values.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE EFFORTS

By focusing on these recommendations, stakeholders in the Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba zones can enhance the efficacy of ecumenical or interfaith dialogues. These efforts can lead to a more peaceful coexistence and a stronger communal bond, laying a foundation for future generations to build upon. Based on the study's findings, here are the recommendations for future efforts to improve interdenominational and interfaith relations in the Kambaata, Tembaro, and Halaba zones of Ethiopia:

**Increase Opportunities of Participation:** Develop more accessible and inviting programs that encourage people to engage in ecumenical or religious dialogues.

**Focus on Education:** Implement educational initiatives that focus on the teachings of respect, tolerance, and the value of diverse religious perspectives.

**Develop Community-Based Approaches:** Enhance efforts at the grassroots level to ensure broader community involvement and impact.



**Address Exclusive Beliefs:** Create safe spaces for challenging discussions that respectfully address exclusive beliefs and promote a more inclusive understanding of different faiths.

**Promote Common Value:** Encourage religious groups to find and emphasize shared moral and ethical values as a foundation for cooperation.

**Foster Government and Institutional Support:** Advocate for government support and funding for grassroots ecumenical or religious initiatives and programs. Collaborate with local authorities, schools, religious institutions, and community organizations to create a supportive environment for promoting religious unity and cooperation at the grassroots level.

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