



How a community can heal from conflict

Summary keywords

community, generosity, communities, something, kindness, conflict, hospitality, narrative, question, ethiopia, peaceful, resources, children, region, tigray, culture

Speakers

Jake Lloyd, Elias Omer

Episode 19: How a community can heal from conflict

Jake Lloyd 0:15

A quick warning before we start this episode: my interview today contains references to violence that some listeners may find upsetting.

Armed conflict and war can be overwhelming. It can mean destruction, loss, anger, grief, fear, and many other things that make it hard for a community to thrive. A civil war can pit neighbour against neighbour, colleague against colleague, and family against family. In doing so, it can threaten to undermine the very foundations of a community: by this, I mean the relationships between people who live in the same place.

So during a civil war, what can help protect and sustain these relationships within a community? And after a civil war, what can help that community to heal?

In this episode, I speak to a man who has seen first-hand answers to big questions like these.

Elias Omer 1:26

I have a lot of hope when it comes to that area. The capacity is there. People are resilient. The kindness and the ability to forgive and to let go is there. But it needs to be done in a way that is filled with wisdom.

Jake Lloyd 1:46

I'm Jake Lloyd. You're listening to the *How to build community* show. And that's the voice of Elias Omar from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. He is a counsellor, educator and psychotherapist. And over the last few years, he has worked in the Tigray region of Ethiopia as it emerges from a civil war that may have resulted in the deaths of as many as 600,000 people. His job is to support the mental health of humanitarian workers who live and serve in that region. And in doing so, he's heard stories that are profound, overwhelming and devastating, but also hopeful, life affirming and courageous.

In this episode, you'll hear how the hospitality and generosity, for which people in Tigray are famous, helps sustain life and relationships during the conflict. You'll hear how people found hope in one another, even in the midst of terrible suffering. And you'll hear how those communities worst affected can begin to heal. Finally, he'll explain what you can do to be what he calls an 'instrument of peace' in the place that you live.

But Elias began by introducing the Tigray region to me, and he told me how from a young age it had always been a place that he loved to visit.

Elias Omer 3:08

Well, I grew up in Addis, which is the capital of Ethiopia, but as any Ethiopian, especially the one who grew up in Addis, we always have a desire to travel to different parts of the country. And the Tigray region and the northern Ethiopia regions are rich with history and places and people and culture. Growing up, it was always my desire. So it became my favourite destination for holidays and, with my wife, we tend to go there after we got married and we tend to spend our holidays there. Even before that, whenever I had an opportunity, it became my favourite destination for a holiday, for visiting people, getting to know new community members there. It's always been a place where I feel home because of the people there, just the hospitality and really the kindness. And also looking at the history of the country itself, how it really influenced the culture throughout the country. I mean, especially for a Christian life, it was instrumental for my interest to travel to northern Ethiopia.

Jake Lloyd 4:24

You mentioned kindness and hospitality that you experienced among the people there. Can you tell me a bit about what that has looked like for you?

Elias Omer 4:44

Historically, because of the geography and the harshness of the land, sometimes people in that region did not have much, but the hospitality and the generosity is a big part of the culture. People want to share what they have and even at times they may feel offended if you don't accept the generosity. If they had, they may have like honey, a jar of honey to give you or a kilo of Shiro, which is a local chickpea powder or split pea powder, things like that. So people are just generous with what they have, but also the hospitality to make you feel at home is so part of the culture and they want to make you feel comfortable, safe, especially that happens once they know that you're not from that area. The whole community says 'Oh he's from Addis, so let's just welcome him in.' Everybody wanted me over for coffee, make coffee for me, and just learn about my life. That was my experience then. And it's also my experience when I travel during and after the war.

Jake Lloyd 5:39

So tell for people who don't know, would you just explain this war, what happened and when? Just a quick overview, if you would.

Elias Omer 5:48

Well, around fall of 2020, a war broke out between the federal government and the regional government army, the militia. That was purely, from my understanding, very politically motivated because the community has always lived together, you can tell the part between the Tigray and Amhara region and the people in the Afar region. But there was a political conflict that has been stirred up in the last decade. Suddenly a war broke out in 2020 - fall 2020 - that really affected not only the Tigray region but has spilled out of there into the Amhara region and the Afar region.

There's a saying in Amharic [*SPEAKS IN AMHARIC*], which is 'When your nose gets hit, your eyes start to water.' And the whole country felt it, the whole regions and not only the people affected in that region because people are intermarried and people from Tigray live in the south or the east and also people from the south live in the north and the Tigray region and Amhara region. That really shattered people's life, in the Tigray region primarily, but also in the other parts of the country and in a very, very visible way.

Jake Lloyd 7:07

So how did it shatter people's lives? Because I know you told me before about really, really terrible things people have lived through and are living through. Can you just give us a bit of a sense of that?

Elias Omer 7:22

I mean, as I started talking about the culture, the generosity and the hospitality that is there, and I think people were not able to practise their culture in a more free way. So in a way, the culture of the Tigray region and the Tigray people and Amhara people and Afar people always comes closer together, have coffee and tea together, celebrated holidays. It's just so ingrained. And then the culture when the war came: people are apart, people are isolated, haven't left their house for months, for days, and it's on and on and on. So you can see that's how the culture has been really traumatised in a way. There's a high level of isolation. With that also comes the very high risk for mental health. And when you add the noise of the guns and people dying, youth and children are being exposed to very traumatic material, including being on the front line of the war... that has really shattered the culture and also the people's hearts. And you can see that and, as I said, in young people, but also in older adults.

But also this war is a bit severe because there are new types of guns available, the new type of evil lurking around the neighbourhoods from the air, from the grounds and from all directions. And seeing people dying in front of the front of their houses, women and mothers being raped and abused... that has really shattered people's hearts, but also the community itself. In addition to that, there were a lot of problems around accessing food, medication, communication: there was no electricity or telephone or internet, or sometimes even water, for two years. The region has been really isolated from the rest of the world. When that is really happening, it happened over an extended period of time... Two years is too long to live in that life.

Jake Lloyd 9:34

Elias travelled there in the summer of 2021 to begin work as a counsellor and therapist. He was there to support the local staff of an international NGO that was providing aid to displaced people. So the staff were serving people in need, but they themselves were also experiencing their own trauma and loss at the same time. Elias told me that he heard terrible stories of what staff members were going through, but also stories of hope, love and resilience.

And you'll hear shortly how these NGO workers were some of the few people in the region that were still being paid a salary during the war due to the local economy crashing. And what they did with this salary reflects this generosity that Elias has already described. And he told me that time and again people would say it was their faith in God, and in each other, that led them to show this kind of generosity.

Elias Omer 10:38

So that is a common narrative that I hear now from the hundreds of people I spoke to in the last two and a half years. Their spirituality is this idea of instilled hope in themselves. So: 'God has a purpose in my life; God has a purpose in this region'. So they would have to hold that hope for themselves.

When I talk about faith in each other, it is very, very important to really recognise that. Especially the aid workers, they are the ones who receive salary during the war. Not in a consistent way, it hasn't been happening every month. But whenever they receive the salary, they will not just use all for themselves and for the family. With the next day they may have left just 100 Birr, which is an equivalent of \$2. What I'm seeing is people's generosity. So like: 'If I live and my community suffer, there is no benefits for me.' So they, they distribute that to their family members, neighbours, the community members; whoever come in contact with them in need of something. If they have extra cash, they would share it. They would share it to anyone who has a need. And that is actually a very common narrative. Whoever received salary would share it automatically to their community. So that really created a little bit of wonderful cohesion amongst them. That generosity, that hospitality, really was displayed in the midst of crisis.

Jake Lloyd 12:17

I then asked Elias what other ways he noticed people showing generosity and kindness during this time.

Elias Omer 12:24

I noticed that when I walked around the streets, the community people would come together and collect what they have food wise... they try to support the poorest of the poor. There were a lot of displaced peoples. They came to the major cities like Tumetamle and Dj-Sheri. There were hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. So this community member or the host community members were willing to share what they have and you see on the streets, you can see kids feeding other kids. So I see that generosity, even for the ones who are coming from the different parts of the region. So you see that generosity happening.

But also what I noticed is some local organisations - particularly one that comes to my mind is a church in Dj-Sheri - they have a feeding centre. They will collect money, food, whatever they can have from the church members or whoever is coming to visit them. They would have a lunch: daily lunch for about 150 children. Actually, recently they have increased it to 600. Now recently they provide food for 600 children. The money or resources not really coming from anywhere outside of the country or even from the part of the country -

the capital, the city. But amongst the community, what they have, they share in the church with the internally displaced people.

Jake Lloyd 13:59

The war officially ended in November 2022. So I asked Elias how the generosity and kindness he sees in the Tigray people can best be harnessed or amplified to heal the divides that the conflict opened up between opposing groups. And I apologised for asking such a difficult question.

Elias Omer 14:23

Yes, it is a very difficult question. It's a question that I probably wrestle with daily. I have a lot of hope when it comes to that area. The capacity is there. People are resilient. The kindness and the ability to forgive and to let go is there, but it needs to be done in a way that is filled with wisdom. I believe God heals people, heals people's hearts, but also heals communities' hearts. So I see the gap, there is hope in that.

What needs to be done is first, having for people a space to talk about what happened and in different ways. It can be through people like me, asking the question, through writings, through arts, through children going to school and finding a mechanism where they can release that pent-up energy, pent-up narrative they have and actually have people to hear them. Empowering local churches, communities, organisations are very key in that. I also see the need for a national dialogue, not just necessarily to sign the peace agreements, a national dialogue where, as a nation, we are moving forward. That requires positivity and peace, someone who has a mindset which is more progressive in terms of peace and reconciliation, without denying what's really happened.

So, churches and communities have the responsibility to take that role, to create that dialogue, so people need to be heard and also come to the table where everybody has a seat at the table where they can speak about their need and hurts. There's a lot of things we can do to support the community but it needs to be with carefulness, with humility. Cultural humility is really required to support our communities.

Jake Lloyd 16:34

Again, reflecting on this kindness and generosity, I asked Elias if he'd seen it being extended to people across the divides of this conflict.

Elias Omer 16:45

I think I'm glad you asked that question, because when I travel into Tigray region, that is there. It's not the dominant narrative you hear in the media, but because of travelling in the regions - in Amhara, Tigray and Afar regions - I come to work with people who are of that spirit and go out of their circle. They're not noisy, they don't talk about it in the media publicly, but amongst the family and the communities, amongst diaspora communities they say, 'We see this need', and they fundraise and they contribute to that.

So there's those lights that I see amongst the regions that needs to grow, that needs to become the dominant narrative in the country, rather than highlighting the differences the regions have.

Jake Lloyd 17:35

Just two more questions before we finish. So firstly, people listening to this who serve their communities in some way, wherever they are in the world, what would you like them to take from this? Because I guess we're all familiar with conflict on some level. It can be minor, you know, political disagreements within it, within a community or place, or it could be more major like you've been you've been talking with us about. But what one thing would you want people to take from having heard you talk about all this?

Elias Omer 18:08

I think I would say first, this idea of peace is the most valuable thing in the world. If you live in a peaceful region, part of the country, and I think it's really good to have a gratitude, a sense of like, thankfulness to God. Sometimes we take for granted because people who have gone through are in crisis. More than food, more than drink, more than anything they need is peace, to have the ability to sleep and wake up in the morning and say, 'I live in a peaceful region.' I think that's the first thing I would say: don't take for granted if you live in the peaceful regions.

And if you don't live in a peaceful region, desire it more. I think we need more of it than ever. Be an instrument to that, an instrument to bring peace or start conversation around peace. Our world does not have a lack of people with conflict, and we have enough of that. So we need more peaceful ambassadors. So I would encourage people to be that, to strive to be that, in whatever social location you're presented.

And the second, actually attached to that, is I really believe one of the reasons the crisis in Tigray got to that place is not because the people in those regions are evil: actually, they are very good people. However, when the media sensationalises things, when some group of people control the narrative - sensationalise things - that creates a lot of harm and makes things worse. So I would say if you are people with the media, people with voice or authority or anything, I would encourage people to be balanced in their presentation of things. Not denying the evil, not denying the things that are happening, but also not bringing to that. So I would say that don't sensationalise, speak the truth, speak the truth in love. And that really allows people to find a way out.

And the third thing I would say is, if you feel that you have been blessed with resources, resources in terms of money, resources in knowledge or things you have, sharing goes a long way. I would encourage people to contribute. It may not be in Ethiopia. There's other parts of the world that are hurting. I think it would be meaningful if you be part of that healing process of a nation.

Jake Lloyd 20:50

Final question. How has the last couple of years in your experience of this work, how has it changed you? What have you learned? What surprised you? Just any one thing.

Elias Omer 21:03

I think the last few years have changed me significantly. I think it's changed me as a person, as a dad, as a husband, as a man. It has just changed me; allowed me to have a little bit of patience with people, with myself, not to come to a conclusion. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, what faith, what religion, what background you have, you have a valid narrative and a story in your life. It changed me a little bit to have patience to listen to people more than I would have a little bit before, even if I hear a lot of difficult stories. But also the stories that I hear from people, are also the people that give me courage.

Because I see here there are also a lot of positive things happen in their life, their courage and their strength and the growth. My clients are my instructor sometimes, I draw a lot of lessons from them. So that humility is something that would be the biggest thing that has changed in me in the last three years.

Jake Lloyd 22:15

Wow. So no further questions from me, but is there anything you'd like to add? Is there any sort of missing ingredient of this story that you think you should have covered, that you want to bring up now?

Elias Omer 22:26

I think when I think of it... we all have a part in something constructive or destructive. We can do something good in life and in people's life by actively contributing. It doesn't matter what, or profession, you can contribute in a meaningful way into people's life, into one person or a community. You can also be silent and be a part of perpetuating the negative things that happen in our communities. So normally I am not a black or white thinking person, but when it comes to that, I think being silent is not really an answer. I think contribute in some way. It might be minor, maybe giving a dollar or maybe just calling a person, pick up a phone and say, 'Hey, I care about you'. Or just walk on the streets and do something kind to a neighbour. Just do something, be part of something meaningful in your community. That's something that I would leave, and would say to people.

Jake Lloyd 23:32

That was Elias Omar, counsellor, educator, psychotherapist. And that's almost it for this episode. Before we go, don't forget, you can help support this show by making a small monthly donation on our Patreon page by going to patreon.com/arukahnetwork. You can read and download every edition of Tearfund's *Footsteps* magazine: that's at learn.teafund.org. And you can catch up on previous episodes of *How to build community* online or in your podcast player. Just search, 'How to build community'.

And finally, if you have feedback on this show, or perhaps suggestions for future interviewees, then you can reach me via email jake@arukahnetwork.org.

But that's it for this episode. Until next time. Bye for now.

Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.
☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ publications@tearfund.org learn.tearfund.org

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