

## UPF International: Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations Holds First Webinar

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UPF International, New York -- The first program for the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations' Spirituality and Justice Initiative webinar series, on the topic "Faith-Based Organizations, Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice: Addressing the Urgent Challenges of Our Time," had over 120 participants from 24 countries.

Opening remarks, introducing the mission of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations, were given by Dr. Thomas Walsh and Dr. Michael Platzer (co-chairs, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations).

### Panelists

Amb. Alvaro Albacete (deputy secretary general, KAICIID) introduced the mission of his organization, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. Too often religious and cultural differences are reduced to simple conflict narratives. More than 80% of the world population self-identifies as religious, so, although underutilized, the potential for faith-based leaders to address these conflicts is great. KAICIID recognizes that the need for justice has many dimensions, including ethics, anti-corruption, and good governance, as well as gender, racial, and economic justice. Multi-stakeholder partnerships must respect differences between groups in order to have credibility. KAICIID has worked in many countries locally, as well as contributing by connecting political, academic, and religious groups. Faith-based organizations and leaders have shown undisputed commitment and motivation to go the extra mile with regard to crime prevention: Their day-to-day presence in communities gives them high credibility, making them a key resource for crime prevention and restorative justice. Ambassador Albacete concluded by calling for the voices of religious leaders and communities to be brought to the center of the global crime prevention conversation.

Mr. Jean-Luc Lemahieu (director of Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) observed that due to the current crisis, the world is under strain, businesses are struggling, and ordinary lives are on hold. Covid-19 has exposed the fragility of the globalized world order. However, if we want to defeat the virus, it requires global collaboration. The crisis has reduced the risk of crime in public spaces, but not everywhere. The risk of crime in domestic spaces has increased: for "intimate homicides" are taking place in domestic settings. Women and girls comprise 82% of victims. Furthermore, a sharp spike in unemployment may lead to a post-crisis crime rise in places where social safety nets are weak. The crisis has created opportunity for wildlife trafficking and the co-option of resources by corrupt actors. Excessive density in prisons puts those vulnerable people at risk. There is a risk that the emergency measures may lead to a loss of liberties in authoritarian systems. Governments and nonstate actors are fighting one-another for legitimacy and scarce resources. Mr. Lemahieu congratulated the Coalition on its new initiative, and stated his organization's willingness to further cooperate.

Dr. Azza Karam (secretary general, Religions for Peace) described her organization, Religions for Peace, as the "United Nations of Religions," with interreligious councils legally registered in 90 countries and six regions. The social contract and the very nature of religious worship are being challenged and renegotiated throughout this crisis. Normal worship is being disrupted by social distancing. Four of the top-ten humanitarian responders in the world are faith based, but they do not cooperate with one-another. Religions for Peace began the Multi-Religious Humanitarian Support Fund in order to foster collaboration among these institutions. We need not only interreligious dialogue but diapraxis -- sharing and working together. Religious extremism must be addressed. Some religious extremist groups are shoring up legitimacy by performing social services where governments are failing, while other extremist groups have taken advantage of the vulnerability of their communities to ramp up their violent activities. If faith-

based organizations can serve well now, they can later serve as legitimate agents of peace.

Ms. Saskia Schellekens (senior adviser, Culture, United Nations Population Fund / coordinator, Executive Secretariat, UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development) said both the UN Task Force and the UN Population Fund welcome opportunities for cooperation among faith-based organizations. The Task Force gathers various global entities to discuss the relationship between faith-based actors and their strategic objectives. The Population Fund seeks to create a world "where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person can achieve their full potential." It works towards women's equality, ending female genital mutilation and child marriage, and supporting governments in data collection. There is a growing awareness of the importance of engaging with faith-based organizations in order to move towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. She encouraged the coalition to focus particularly on young people. Ms. Schellekens wrapped up with a few thoughts on the current crisis. She reiterated that facing the pandemic has reinforced the need for UN engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organizations.



Bishop Munib Younan (Lutheran bishop, Jerusalem) spoke of intertwining justice with righteous acts. Justice is the central moral concept of the Bible -- it is religious, political, and concerns the individual human being. Theologians have spoken repeatedly of God's care for the oppressed and humbling of the lofty. Truth, justice, charity and liberty are the basis of human rights. Feminist theologians have drawn attention to the alienation of women. Lutheran churches have gender justice policies. He told the story of the Prophet Nathan's confrontation of King David, stating that religious leaders must not be complicit with their coreligionists in injustice. They must address domestic violence and structural discrimination, including and especially within their own church institutions: They must boldly speak on peace based on justice. He concluded: "I will never stop working for justice until I find that peace based on justice, reconciliation and forgiveness are realities in our world."

Dr. Platzer concluded the panel. He summarized the findings of the panel, noting that most panelists particularly addressed environmental stewardship, gender justice, and prisons, all of which could be future topics of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations webinars.

QandA followed: On the issue of economic justice, Mr. Lemahieu pointed out the link between vulnerability and opportunity. It's not that people who are poor are inclined to go on a criminal track; there is a greater complexity. But if poverty and criminal opportunity both exist, those who are vulnerable will be enticed to engage in criminal activities. Reverend Younan called for all countries, secular and religious, to respect international law and be ready to hear prophetic leadership that challenges and takes us into a new ethical understanding.

Ambassador Albacete noted that public interaction is necessary in order to bring about positive changes in the social contract. Reverend Younan expressed a hope that the crisis will spur nations to greater goodwill into the future, and that it will inspire European countries to critique some neocolonial viewpoints.