

Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations: Addressing the Challenges of Our Time

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United States -- On August 27, 2020, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations held a web conference titled "Faith-Based Organizations, Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice: How Can Faith Leaders Save Lives?" The conference had 159 attendees from 34 countries.

Dr. Thomas Walsh (Chairman, Universal Peace Federation) introduced the panel. World leaders are seeking to move towards a preventative approach to the problems of crime and violence. Recent protests in the United States are part of a decades-long global push to rethink law enforcement and criminal justice, he observed. The primary focus of this panel is the role that faith leaders can play in helping end violent crime and resolve problems in law enforcement and criminal justice.



Panelists

Dr. Irvin Waller (Professor Emeritus, University of Ottawa) spoke first. World leaders have committed, through the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to reduce homicides, sexual violence, and violence against children, he reminded the audience. Dr. Waller compared the cities of Chicago and Toronto, which have very similar populations and median household incomes but wildly different homicide rates. We have many academic and government resources that identify solutions that can reduce crime, but they have not made their way into policy. There are cities in the United States and worldwide that have achieved significant reductions in violent crime, halving it within a few years through policies that cost a

small fraction of what police departments cost. Faith leaders are in a position to increase awareness of these policies, reach out to their communities to recruit talent, and advocate for crime prevention rather than punishment.

Ms. Rachel Locke (Director, Impact: Peace at the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego) spoke on the "Peace in Our Cities" campaign, which seeks to bring attention, resources, and political support to violent crime reduction. Nine out of ten violent deaths worldwide take place outside of "conflict zones," in places without an ongoing war or upheaval, she reported. Violence is an extremely complex issue, but it concentrates in particular places and groups within cities; it is in these areas and demographics that humanitarian work must be focused. Faith leaders can help prevent crime in ways that are human centered, relationship centered, and solidarity centered, she concluded.

Dr. Veronica Martinez-Solares (Director of Research, Fundación para el Estudio de la Seguridad y Gobernanza, Mexico) followed. Latin America is one of the most unsafe regions on Earth: More than one third of the world's homicides occur in the region. It has the highest rate of gender-based violence in the world. Due to corruption and inefficiency, 98% of femicides in Latin America go unprosecuted. Faith-based organizations have been instrumental in reductions in violence in Latin American cities. There is an urgent need for social support in communities plagued by violence, she offered, and faith leaders can help advocate for these resources.



Mr. Juma Assiigo (Director, Safer Cities Program, UN Habitat, Nairobi) observed that crime and violence threaten the social cohesion and economic stability of cities. One in five people worldwide has been a victim of crime and violence. The Safer Cities Program looks at violent crime as an aspect of the broader issue of social cohesion. Public safety, social cohesion, and prosperity all feed into each other. Socialization processes shape our attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles; nobody is born a criminal. Mr. Assiigo called on faith leaders to join the Safe Cities Program in its goal of building a global network of communities for public safety.

Ven. Dr. Bhante Chao Chu (President, Los Angeles Buddhist Union) was next to speak. His organization provides social support for young people who have committed crimes, facilitating community service and counseling. Moral and spiritual education from faith leaders can be important for preventing crime, he said. Because violence is related to poverty and alienation; counseling and job training, especially for young people, can reduce the likelihood that criminals reoffend.

Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi (Imam, Islamic Center of Orange County, California) was the final panelist. Violence is happening in all sorts of places, on all levels. Therefore, violence prevention requires the mobilization of the whole society. He asserted that faith-based organizations must collaborate with one-another and resist manipulation by political and nationalistic forces that would pervert religion in order to promote violence. People of goodwill must stand together against hatred and violence because injustice anywhere is a threat against justice everywhere.

Due to technical difficulties, Dr. Michael Platzer (Co-Chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) was unable to speak. The next FBO webinar is scheduled for September 15 on Ethics / Corruption.