

Webinar of International Faith Leaders Looks to the Future of Prisons

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United States -- On August 12, 2020, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations held a web conference titled "Humane Treatment of Presently Incarcerated People." The conference had 41 attendees from 11 countries.

Dr. Michael Platzer (Co-Chair of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) moderated the panel and served as the emcee. In his opening remarks, he pointed out that many people who are incarcerated have not been convicted of a crime, he began. Unsensitized incarcerated persons comprise about half the prison population in the countries with the most severe overcrowding. Conditions in many places of detention are unhygienic and inhumane, and rarely do facilities provide opportunities for re-entry or even maintenance of family connections. As well, underlying issues of poverty, discrimination, unemployment, psychological stress, and substance abuse are rarely dealt with within prisons. Faith-based organizations, he told participants, can advocate for penal reforms and operate programs of introspection and restorative justice in addition to post-release support projects. It should be continually emphasized that a temporarily incarcerated person is a human being with inalienable rights.



Panelists

Bishop Franz Scharl (Auxiliary Bishop of Vienna, Vicar for prison pastoral care) was the first panelist. Rather than being centers of rehabilitation, prisons often become "factories of crime," doing little to help

prisoners reintegrate into society upon release and fostering recidivism. Interfaith work in prisons is often vital to helping prisoners rehabilitate. Grace is preferable to severity, he offered, and prevention is better than detention.

Dr. Karin Brukmüller (University Professor at the Sigmund Freud University Vienna) followed with remarks on preventing the spread of COVID-19 in prisons. Overcrowding and public indifference towards the well-being of prisoners puts them at significant risk during this crisis. Various approaches, from early release of some prisoners to quarantine of all prisoners, have been taken to address this problem. Of these, Dr. Brukmüller recommended the probationary release of minor offenders, treating incarceration as a last-resort measure for those being sentenced, and taking measures to protect those prisoners who remain inside.



Sister Alison McCrary (President of the Louisiana Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild) spoke next. She asked for attendees to imagine a world without prisons and jails, where people can rely on one-another rather than on police, courts, and cages. The modern prison system is about two centuries old; other options exist for dealing with crime. There is no way for prisoners to socially distance in many American prisons, she said. Conditions in these prisons are unacceptable, exacerbating existing mental health issues while accomplishing nothing to make the public safer. Sister McCrary called for social services that prevent crime and for a global movement to end the prison-industrial complex.

Dr. Yitzchak Ben Yair (Researcher and lecturer at the Zefat Academic College) followed with a presentation on "spiritual Jewish criminology." Dr. Ben Yair traced the discipline of criminology to ancient Jewish writings. Jewish thinking on the subject concerns the materialistic and egocentric tendencies of human beings, he said, and prescribes a social response that helps people overcome these tendencies and develop altruistic (other-centered) and spiritual tendencies. Imprisonment significantly restricts the freedom of will and therefore makes it difficult for people to alter their tendencies.

Imam Sheikh Mohammad Ismail (Muslim chaplain at Sheffield University; Sheffield Federation of Mosques) gave his response next. He emphasized the need to look out for the welfare of prisoners awaiting trial. In Lebanon, some detainees have been held without trial for 13 years. In Islamic law, prisoners who are ill are not allowed to be imprisoned; this precept is not being followed in many Islamic countries. Faith-based organizations must demand that governments respect the rights of prisoners and release all nonviolent detainees, especially those who are religious minorities.

Rev. P. George Harrison (Vatican Human Development) gave a presentation next, focusing on opportunity, mental health, and hygiene in prisons. It is necessary to provide opportunities to incarcerated people in order to ensure successful reintegration into society. Attention to mental health is also vital. Lack of socialization during quarantine can be quite deleterious to the mental health of prisoners, he commented. Video chat with families should be made available in order to maintain prisoners' connection to the outside world. Hygiene is also often neglected in prisons; when asked what they would want from the outside, many prisoners request soap. Faith-based organizations have taken responsibility for providing sanitation supplies in prisons. Humane treatment of prisoners is essential during this crisis.

Aung Naing Win [Mr. Shine] (Founder and President of the Interfaith Youth Coalition on Aid in Myanmar) followed. Myanmar is one of the major opium producers in the world, accounting for 14% of opium production and 20% of cultivation. Myanmar has expanded its drug enforcement efforts, but its

prisons are over capacity and in serious danger from COVID-19. This overcrowding is largely due to the imprisonment of drug users. HIV is rampant among drug users, which leads to stigma, and government policies are hampering the public health response. Imprisonment rather than treatment of drug users allows overcrowding of prisons, exacerbating the spread of both HIV and the coronavirus.



Rev. Father Brian Gowans (President of the International Commission of Prison Pastoral Care) was the last speaker. Societies lock people up because it is easier to suppress than to educate. He lamented that rehabilitation is not often the focus of prison systems. Prisoners are excluded from employment and participation in civil society. The same lack of opportunity that contributes to criminality in the first place is only exacerbated upon release from prison. Prisons must provide a non-discriminatory environment with education, hygiene, health care, access to family and friends in the outside world, and freedom to practice religion. Imprisonment, the disposal of human beings, is the ultimate expression of a "throwaway culture." A better approach to criminal justice is possible.

QandA Followed: Mr. Shine re-emphasized the need for educational and social support for areas where drug production is occurring and called for governments to review drug laws every five years to ensure that they are achieving what they intend. Sister McCrary spoke of the need for not only economic support but also mediation between prisoners and their families or social groups so that they can re-enter society successfully. These measures can bring stability to post-prison life and reduce recidivism. Imam Ismail is hoping for improvements to probation and counseling services, and for these services to integrate prisoners' spiritual advisors and communities.

Dr. Thomas Walsh (Co-Chair of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) announced the next FBO webinar will be on August 27 on the theme "Violence Prevention: How Can Faith Leaders Save Lives?"

