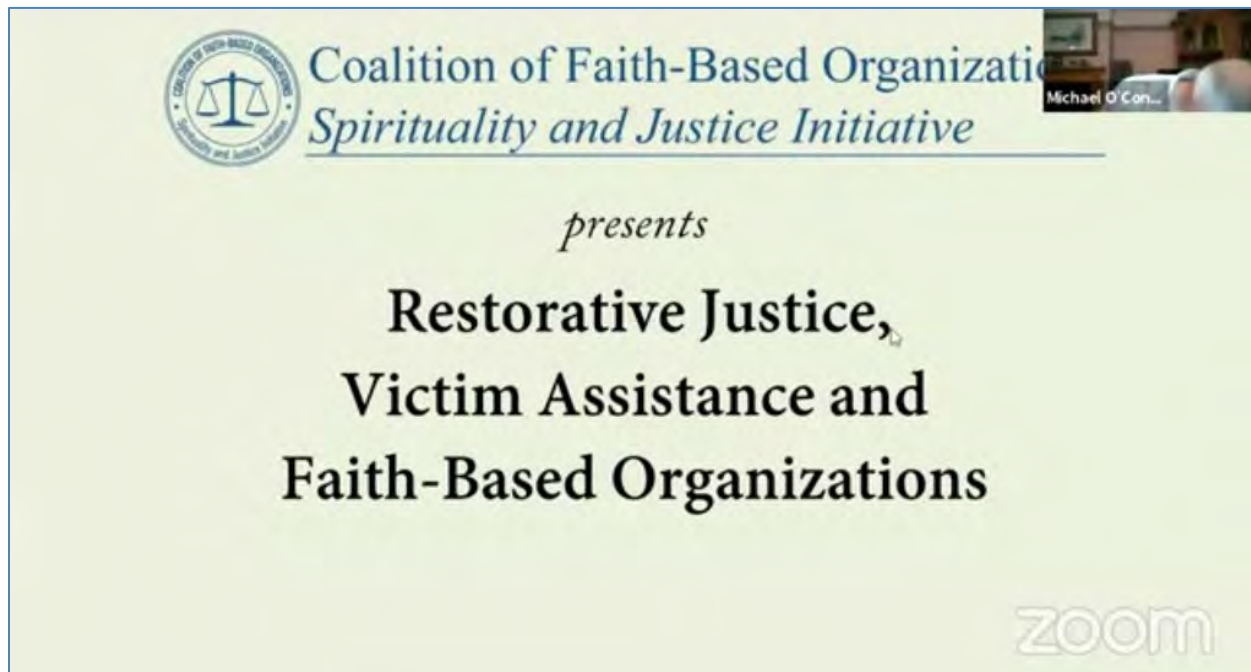


Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations webinar: Restorative Justice

Thomas G. Walsh
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United States -- On October 5, 2020, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations held a web conference titled "Restorative Justice, Victim Assistance and Faith-Based Organizations." The conference had almost 100 participants from more than 30 countries. UPF is a Founding Partner and Member of the Coalition.

Dr. Thomas G. Walsh (Co-Chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) opened the webinar and welcomed the speakers and the audience. He emphasized the value of restorative justice in the criminal justice system as an important means to facilitate healing in both the victims and the perpetrators.

Dr. Robert Peacock (Professor, University of Free State, South Africa; President, World Society of Victimology) moderated the panel and introduced the topic. In sharing with faith-based organizations the values of intense humanness, universal interconnectedness, compassion, respect and reconciliation, practices and programs grounded on the values and processes of restorative justice can be very appropriate for some perpetrators and some victims when healing wrongs. Such processes and programs, however, should seek to represent victims' interests as a priority. It is crucial to ensure that victims can choose, or not choose, to participate; if they do choose such, they must be afforded dignity, compassion and other rights and assistance. Consistent with victims' and perpetrators' rights, faith-based organizations should help forge approaches that bring victims and perpetrators together to facilitate healing.



Panelists

Dr. Daniela Bolivar Fernandez (Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Catholic University of Chile) spoke on the potential for restorative justice in response to child sex abuse in the Catholic church in Chile. Dr. Bolivar participated in an academic commission to better understand the scope and effect of the abuse: 66% of victims reported abuse to the Church and trusted the institution to handle the issue. There

was very little control of supervision of priests and a culture of silence and concealment in the Church hierarchy. Dr. Bolivar concluded from this work that restorative justice in this case is very far off. Before this can occur, there needs to be investigation, response, and reform that center on the victims of abuse.

Dr. Tali Gal (Senior Lecturer, Head, School of Criminology at the University of Haifa) spoke on the application of restorative justice to children and youth. There are risks and challenges to using this approach with children: Re-encountering the perpetrator can be traumatic to the child; the child can feel pressured, manipulated, and intimidated by being in a room full of adults; but these challenges can be addressed and overcome. Dr. Gal gave a brief outline of the framework of restorative justice and the complex relations between the rights and needs of the victim and the offender. A key point is that restorative justice procedures must give space to the child to be an active partner in the process.



Dr. Fernanda Fonseca Rosenblatt (Professor at the International Institute for Restorative Practices) spoke on restorative justice and the concept of victimhood through the lens of the "Global South." The victim-offender binary is problematic in many cases, especially in situations in economically challenged countries. Victims and offenders are not often "ideal," but if assuming this, restorative justice can fail to account for context and complexity. Moving forward, we need a framework that accounts for this complexity and can approach situations where the victim and offender are not clearly defined.



Dr. Michael O'Connell (Secretary General, World Society of Victimology) spoke on the role of faith-based organizations in restorative justice. Faith-based institutions share values of human rights, universal

interconnectedness, compassion, respect, and reconciliation, and these shared values are also key to the restorative justice framework. However, religious institutions have been involved in wrongdoing, and this complicates their role in restorative justice. Therefore, faith-based organizations can start small by applying restorative justice within their own organizations and advocating for the application of restorative justice in their communities. Faith-based organizations are also in a unique position to offer support to victims of crime. Now and beyond, faith-based organizations have much at stake and much to contribute to restorative justice.



QandA followed. In response to a question on encouraging victims to come forward, Dr. Gal pointed out that those who have come forward rarely regret doing so, although going through the criminal justice system can be miserable. On what faith leaders can do to encourage a shift to the restorative justice framework, Dr. Rosenblatt encouraged raising awareness of the framework, especially in universities. Dr. O'Connell clarified that restorative justice does not move forward unless the perpetrator makes a positive commitment to the process and admits culpability.

To close the webinar, Dr. Michael Platzer (Co-Chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) thanked everyone for their participation and announced that the CFBO series of 10 webinars had attracted over 1,000 viewers and featured 60 experts from around the world. He announced that the coalition's next program is scheduled for October 15 at 7pm - Central European Time. The high-level panel will be held at the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna, Austria, on the theme "Faith-Based Organizations Combatting Organized Crime and Corruption." Father Luigi Ciotti, a Catholic priest fighting the Mafia in Southern Italy and founder of the Libera association, will be one of the featured speakers. For further info, check the website at coalitionfbo.org or email coalitionfbo@gmail.com.

