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Peace and Security

UPF WEBINAR LINKED TO UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPECIAL SESSION (UNGASS 2021) TO COMBAT CORRUPTION

Written by UPF International staff

Thursday, June 3, 2021



New York, United States—UPF co-hosted an online conference titled “Combating Corruption: The Relevance and Capacities of Faith-Based Organizations.”

The webinar held on June 3, 2021, was hosted jointly with the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations and the non-profit organization Criminologists without Borders.

The virtual event was an official side meeting to a Special Session of the UN General Assembly against Corruption (UNGASS 2021). The webinar welcomed more than 100 participants from 21 countries.

Acting as moderator, **Dr. Thomas G. Walsh**, chairman, Universal Peace Federation; and co-chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations, USA, welcomed the panelists and participants to the webinar. He provided an overview of the event and spoke of the relevance of faith-based organizations as a resource in combating corruption.

The panelists included representatives of diverse faith traditions, along with UN officials with direct experience in combating and proposing solutions to corruption—trafficking, public corruption, organized crime. The speakers discussed the role of FBOs in corruption prevention and intervention efforts to improve ethics, justice, rule of law, good governance, and sustainable development.

Panelists:

Ambassador Thomas Stelzer, dean, International Anti-Corruption Academy, Vienna, reported on the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS 2021) against corruption taking place in New York (June 2-4). Ambassador Stelzer said he was pleased with the Special Session discussions and the adoption of a political declaration.

NGOs play an important role in keeping political leaders and decision-makers accountable, he said. While the approach of politicians is generally limited to the next election, NGOs have a broader, more long-term approach and can make sure leaders are transparent and effective; otherwise they should be voted out of office. Ambassador Stelzer announced that the next convention against corruption is scheduled to be held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, in December 2021.

Dr. Levi Bautista, president of the Conference of NGOs (CoNGO) in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, quoted the UN Office on Drugs and Crime: “Corruption attacks the foundation of democratic institutions by distorting electoral processes, perverting the rule of law and creating bureaucratic quagmires whose only reason for existing is the solicitation of bribes.”

Dr. Bautista said the United Methodist social teachings emphasize that the system of justice that God desires focuses on healing and restoration. Methodists have a long history of concern for social justice, he said. Early Methodists expressed opposition to the slave trade, smuggling, and cruel treatment of prisoners. Addressing corruption within the context of criminal justice entails a social agenda for restorative justice, protection of human dignity and prevention of human rights violations, he said. FBOs must rally behind the UN Convention Against Corruption and the achievement of the 17 SDGs.

Imam Sheikh Mohammad Ismail, the Muslim chaplain, the University of Sheffield, the Octagon Centre, Sheffield, UK, emphasized the role of the United Nations in working with religious leaders and FBOs and encouraging nations to tap into the spiritual community as a resource for crime prevention and criminal reform.

The imam, who is a member of the CFBO’s Steering Committee, cited the non-governmental organization Transparency International, which estimates that more than a trillion dollars are paid out each year for corruption and bribes around the world. Transparency International maintains an index of 180 countries. Its recent report confirms that corruption is widening, particularly during the time of COVID-19. Faith-based organizations can play an important role in combating corruption, including as mediators and educators and helping to change people’s behaviors and attitudes, the imam said.

Bishop Munib Younan, former president, Lutheran World Federation; and honorary president, Religions for Peace, State of Palestine, said that in the search for a world of justice, combating corruption is a relevant and noble topic.

We must recognize that the world is more interdependent now than ever before, he said. A relationship, whether at the individual, social or national level, is built on a moral foundation that respects the integrity of oneself and the dignity of the other. For this reason, FBOs are essential to identify the common values of the various faith traditions, he said.

The Lutheran World Federation takes social issues very seriously and is committed to fighting crime, injustice, corruption, violence, and human rights violations, Bishop Younan said. It is essential to be transparent and accountable not just to others, but to ourselves as well. In a just society, every citizen is recognized as a human being who has equal opportunity in dignity and rights.

Fielding the question-and-answer session, **Dr. Michael Platzer**, co-chair, Coalition of

Faith-Based Organizations, described the background of the organization and its two-year record of hosting forums for faith-based organizations, spiritual leaders, believers from the world's religions, scholars, and relevant experts in fields dedicated to crime prevention and criminal justice.

Responding to a question about whistleblowers, Dr. Bautista said he believes in the importance of protecting whistleblowers from retaliation by their institutions or members. Governments should enact laws for the protection of whistleblowers while the allegations of bribery and corruption are being investigated. Dr. Bautista likened a whistleblower to being a good steward. Citizens must take care of their organizations, and in return, there is a moral obligation to expect good governance, he said.

Dr. Jay Albanese, a professor at the Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University, provided a question for reflection: How can FBOs make a larger difference in the global concern about corruption and justice in the lives of their constituents, in their home countries, and globally?

Drs. Platzer and Walsh closed the webinar by thanking the panelists and attendees and encouraging further reflection and discussion on the theme "Combating Corruption: The Relevance and Capacities of Faith-Based Organizations."

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