

Strengthening ecumenical, inter-faith and cross-border cooperation

Introduction

Doing things together is a good way to add value to our efforts, as well as learning from one another's experience. This is a principle that can be applied to all tasks that involve peoples of different traditions and cultures. It is particularly relevant for those involved in activities to combat trafficking in persons (TIP).

Applying this principle the potential contribution of faith-based communities in anti-trafficking can be harnessed and strengthened through dialogue which could:

- bring about a deeper understanding of this modern form of slavery
- enable people from all faith backgrounds to fight TIP together
- help to counteract the global network of oppressive forces involved and
- rescue innocent people from fear and inhuman treatment.

FBOs and NGOs have taken the lead in relation to TIP. In many countries they have lobbied successfully to achieve implementation of policies and programs to combat the trafficking of persons. We know that throughout the world men, women and children are at risk of exploitation from numerous sources, whether from:

- Paedophiles
- Industries where they are underpaid and/or also sexually abused
- In family homes by relatives or adults trusted by family members
- In Commercial sex tourism (CST)

There are several reports on TIP available from Asia –e.g. Bali, Indonesia; Vietnam; Thai-Laos borders; from West African states; from Europe, including Ireland-UK as well as US-Mexico border on the need for international cross border cooperation to counter TIP.

Lessons from the HIV/AIDS pandemic

At a conference on HIV/AIDS of faith based organisations held in Bali, August 2009¹ the following pertinent questions were raised:

The first questions was – How can we de-construct our cultures for the well being of all?

The second was equally profound – How can we reform our laws and public policy?

The third question raised the topic of inter-religious cooperation asking – How can we interpret our religious teachings, which are clear about the unity of humanity, our interdependence and responsibility to each other so that we overcome destructive attitudes about ‘them and us’?

These questions are insightful, and need time to reflect on to work out a response.

Throughout the meeting participants held sustained discussions about human rights, injustice, violence related to gender and went on to list the steps they would take as follows:

- We are confident we can change ourselves
- We will listen to people from all walks of life and we will read and apply our sacred texts for the empowerment of communities
- We are determined that our beliefs about overcoming stigma and discrimination will be reflected in our lives as individuals and as communities of faith.

Surely they have put into words what we are about in counter trafficking when they said:

The value of sharing wisdom within an international, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious network is clear to us.

They then made the following commitment.

We will strive to include more people in our networking, both within our own national borders and throughout our regional context.²

These conclusions are based on several decades of experience with HIV/AIDS. Some of you know that for many years my work was in the context of this pandemic. I cannot but marvel at the profound and strategic links that exist between HIV/AIDS and our experience in the field of counter-trafficking. One of my personal concerns nowadays is the spread of HIV in the context of human trafficking. Another example directly linked to TIP comes from the Democrat Senator Sam Farr³

¹ This conference was attended by 160 people from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Shinto. from 20 countries. Their aim was to strengthen Faith-Based responses in meeting the challenges of HIV in Asia and the Pacific.

² Ibid

³ Farr in Freedom from Fear, 22 September 2005

Farr emphasising the critical situation on the U.S.-Mexico border said this border presents a distinctive set of challenges for combating human trafficking. The involuntary transport of human beings in order to exploit their labour or sexuality is nothing new. Yet conditions in the current era of globalization—growing economic inequalities within and among nations, increasing flows of labour and products across national borders, and the growth of informal economies and organized criminal networks, to name a few—are causing it to proliferate on a global scale.

Some other examples of inter-agency and Cross border cooperation.

Surprisingly the most disparate groups are responding each in their own way. On the one hand we have NGOs and on the other tourist industry professionals who have begun to address the topic of human trafficking. Multinational corporations are now becoming aware that they risk their reputation if seen responsible for, or complicit in the child sex tourist industry.

In 1996, the International Hotel & Restaurant Association (IH&RA) recognized that child sex abusers might attempt to use hotels as locales to commit crimes. They passed a resolution condemning Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) and recommending that members consider introducing measures to prevent use of their premises for CSEC.

In 2003 a Code of Conduct to Protect Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism⁴ was drawn up. Travel agencies, tourist companies, and the hospitality industry are invited to sign up to this Code, but it is voluntary, not mandatory.

The Potential of Interfaith Networking

To make a significant impact on the global crime of TIP, it will take a concerted effort by men and women from all faiths and none networking together. We can draw some strength from our awareness that our motivation for this uphill task is well rooted in our common history as believers and in our shared values.

There are strengths in the religious teachings of all the great faiths. These contain the potential to move the faithful to action that will bring about liberation for victims. Similarly, our beliefs lay upon us the task of responding to those who have been traumatized. Our religious teachings also give us hope that will encourage us in the difficulties of this journey.

Development of Inter-faith dialogue and cooperation:

The interfaith dialogue has deep roots in the best practice of more than a century of experience. Back in 1888, when Swami Vivekananda embarked upon a search for common values in diverse religions

⁴ An industry driven responsible tourism initiative in collaboration with ECPAT International, funded by UNICEF and supported by the UNWTO

in India, we find the first steps on this pilgrim journey. As some of you may know, this Hindu monk, born in Calcutta in 1863, addressed the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, which is often taken to be the beginning of interfaith dialogue in modern times.⁵

In the early 20th century interfaith dialogue started to take place between the Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Bahai. These faith-based groups hold in common that the love of God transcends all cultural and racial differences – despite what we all too often have seen in practice. A brief review of different faith traditions shows that there are plenty of shared values upon which to base a strong commitment to inter-faith networking for the liberation and alleviation of those who are at risk from the global crime of HT. We can strategically collaborate with selected agencies, even though in some cases we may not mutually hold all the same values.

Examples

In July this year -a team of church representatives from Portugal, Switzerland and Brazil paid a solidarity visit to churches, ecumenical organizations and civil society organizations in Angola and Mozambique (*CISA*)

The Global Interfaith Alliance Against Human Trafficking (GIFAAHT) was launched in Nairobi last June. When we speak of Christian –Ecumenical cooperation we often think of mainline Christian churches. But this Nairobi meeting saw the pragmatic value of bringing the topic of TIP to Pentecostal Churches. I am happy to say the experience was one of open doors. They also drew attention to the role of adherents of Traditional Religions who have significant traditional moral values.

Stop Child Trafficking Now (SCT) Walks: A significant and hopeful event was organised for September this year. Individuals, corporations, religious organizations, communities, and student groups from all over participated in an inaugural Walk to Stop Child Trafficking Now! Stop Child Trafficking Now targets the source of child trafficking, predators who drive the sex industry everywhere in the world, including in your own local community. Most other organizations address child trafficking by performing rescue operations. SCTNow greatly supports their efforts, but believes for every child rescued another takes his or her place. Not until we stop the predators will we rid the world of trafficking. SCTNow's goal is to put predators behind bars and end the demand.

Some Challenges of Interfaith Networking

Those of us who wish to cooperate in anti-trafficking activities need to be aware of the importance of:

⁵ Interfaith Co-operation: Achievements and Possibilities, Marcus Braybrooke, 1993

- Strengthening respect for all people and harmony between different faith communities, that means no competition
- Developing clear awareness of the potential risks to vulnerable persons and communicate these clearly to men, women and children
- Reaching vulnerable communities where poverty is endemic and raise awareness of the false promises that can be made by those who offer opportunities
- Finding ways of supporting survivors of TIP who may find their way back to their country of origin or their home place from another location within their country.
- Seeking to bring about a cultural change that does not condone the demand for purchased sex
- Addressing issues of human sexuality and relationships.

Many traffickers are themselves victims of the society that engages in HT, so there is a need to regard them with compassion and see them also as persons at risk.

At the level of legislation and policing there is much work to be done in lobbying. A lot of patience is needed as these are not easily changed. Some of the things that other groups have found important include:

- comprehensive anti-trafficking laws at national level in order to come in line with international conventions regarding the crime of HT
- special training in counteracting HT at all levels of government and society, for -
 - immigration officials and police
 - leadership of FBOs and NGOs
 - diplomats and peace-keeping forces posted overseas
 - the judiciary

Once legislation is in place, commitment to prosecute and convict HT offenders and provide rehabilitation for them before returning to society;

Conclusion

Finally, let me draw on two great thinkers in the field of inter-faith cooperation.

First, the world renowned theologian Hans Kung, Chairman of the Global Ethic Foundation, has repeatedly stated the importance of religious dialogue and cooperation.

In 2005 he presented his vision in three phases saying:

- There will be no survival of our globe without a global ethic
- There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions

- There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue and cooperation among the religions and civilizations. ⁶

Secondly, Swami Vivekananda is regarded as the founder of inter-faith dialogue in modern times. At the famous Chicago Parliament of Religions back in 1893 he said:

“A hundred thousand men and women fired with the zeal of holiness fortified with eternal faith in the Lord and nerved to Lion’s courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden will go over the length and breath of the land preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising up, the gospel of equality”.

Our attempts at inter-faith understanding can frequently become bogged down at the level of theology or theory. But experiences, both small and large scale of working together at a common social issue can quickly reveal that what we hold in common is far greater than that which separates us.

Maura O’Donohue

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⁶ Global Ethic and Human Responsibilities, Santa Clara University, Jesuit University, Silicon Valley 2005