CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION FORUM,
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Faith-Based Peacemaking:
The Role of Religious Actors in Preventing and Resolving Conflict Worldwide.

Speakers: Dr. David Smock & Dr. Barry Hart

Dr. Smock presented an overview of the field of peacemaking initiated and carried out by religious groups. He spoke of historic mediations carried out by religious organizations. These included the mediation performed by the Quakers and financed by the Ford Foundation in the case of the Nigerian Civil War (an important but eventually unsuccessful intervention), the work of the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches in mediating a halt to the Sudan conflict in 1972 in Addis Ababa, and he also mentioned the efforts of John Paul Lederach in Nicaragua and the work of the Imam of Timbuktu in mediating West African conflicts.

Dr. Smock suggested that the surge in the growth in interest and activity of faith-based peacemaking is largely a result of the increasing role of NGOs, civil society actors, and religious groups in taking on a peacemaking role. The Vatican-based group of Sant’ Egidio is a prominent example of a religious group active in faith-based peacemaking and has been particularly noted for its work in resolving the Mozambican civil war – although CSE has also done important work in Kosovo, Congo, Burundi, and Algeria. The Mennonite Central Committee is another example. It has defined its principal mission as peacemaking and reconciliation.

There has also been a rise in inter-faith activities. The World Conference on Religion and Peace has been active in setting up interreligious councils in Bosnia (in conjunction with USIP) and Sierra Leone. Dr. Smock recommended a book entitled The Imam & The Pastor about Muslim-Christian reconciliation in Nigeria.

He went on to say that different faith organizations tend to have different foci in their peacemaking efforts. For example, while the Mennonites and Catholics are both active in this field, Mennonites tend to be more conflict resolution-centered and work mostly on a grass roots and middle level. The Catholics, on the other hand, are more likely to work with the higher levels of society and government and participate in official mediations. They frequently focus on peacemaking in conjunction with justice efforts. He recommended two books on peacemaking styles of different faiths. From the Ground Up edited by John Paul Lederach and Cynthia Sampson deals with the Mennonite approach, while the Jewish approach is discussed in Between Eden and Armageddon by Rabbi Marc Gopin.
Dr. Smock said that a peacemaker acting under the auspices of a religious group has an aura of moral standing, credibility, and stature, and can be seen as apolitical or neutral in the conflict. (This is not universal, however, Dr. Smock noted.) But religious peacemaking also has shortcomings. He praised the Community of Sant’ Egidio for recognizing CSE’s shortcomings and calling upon other actors (notably the Italian and American governments) to help during the Mozambique mediation process.

**DR. HART** began his portion of the program by presenting the background information that the United States Institute for Peace was originally intended to be an academy - comparable to Annapolis or other military academies - for training in peace-making methods. He then spoke about the pioneering work of Dr. James (Jim) Laue; a Methodist who brought so much to the field of conflict resolution. It was Jim Laue who encouraged Mennonites to start both a domestic conciliation service and peacebuilding work at the international level.

In the Bible, Isaiah 32:17 refers to peacemaking as “an enterprise of justice”. Dr. Hart said that the focus on peacemaking should not only be on building peace, but also on restorative justice or establishing “right relationships” though acknowledgement and accountability. Faith-based organizations have a tendency to enter a situation and react by dealing with the immediate conflict while not looking closely enough at the structural problems underlying the conflict and doing something to address those background issues. Mennonites have historically refrained from addressing structural issues, since it at variance with the Mennonite culture of being the “quiet in the land.” This has changed in the last fifty years and more recently there has been a shift in thinking that is pushing Mennonites and others towards greater involvement in addressing the structural issues in a conflict. Dr. Hart said that much more work is needed at this level.

Faith-based peacemaking should have a focus on people in relationships. Dr. Hart referred to the word “umbuntu”, which means, “I am a person through you” and vice versa. He pointed out that, in situations where religion itself is a bone of contention, acknowledgement of the basics tenets of the religions involved is essential to relating to the people in conflict. He discovered during his time in the Balkans that the religious leaders in the region did not know well the theology and practice of other religions, and often did not know in depth what their own religions understood about justice and peace. Walking with them in this discovery process was critical and personally moving.

He also pointed out that the use of prayer both for and by the people in the conflict is a powerful force, which can foster personal involvement in creating and maintaining peace. He also pointed out that all religions had knowledge to contribute to the peacemaking process and the need to work together in a multi-religious approach to building peace.
DISCUSSION

A common theme raised in the discussion was that there is a great focus on Christian organizations, but not much identification of the peacemaking efforts of other religions, and that we would lose the unique benefits found in each religion if we ignored them. In response to this point, the Satya Gaha in Sri Lanka, the Dalai Lama, Rajmahan Gandhi on the India-Kashmir issue, and Mahagosa Nanda (a Buddhist monk working in Cambodia) were mentioned. It was pointed out that non-Christian faith-based peacemaking efforts are taking place, but that they are rarely publicized or covered by the Western media. All the best intentions and excellent contributions made by external actors can only last if local capacity is built. It was then argued that the interventions of the U.S. are too often part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. In response, the point was made that such a fact only underlines the need for the U.S. to build local capacity so that American actors will not need to be involved.

It was also pointed out that religion and religious groups can be a source of conflict. Since the 1960’s, religion has been prominent in Nigerian civil conflict where missionaries and religious partisans see themselves in a zero-sum game to win souls and thereby enter into deadly conflict. Conversely, too often conflict is portrayed as being “religious conflict” or having religious sources when religion may in fact only play a minor contributing role in the conflict. The Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an example of a conflict that is not predominantly religious although it is often portrayed as such. The religious label can often be a surrogate for other identities.

There was then some concern about international organizations coming in and suffocating local, grass-roots organizations. Outside groups can help make local peacemaking work better known internationally, provide networking support, build local capacity, and provide financial assistance, among other kinds of aid. Groups coming in might try to force local groups and populations into their own model of conflict resolution. Another concern was that being American might have its own stigma attached and the local population would be reluctant to work with American religious-based groups. Finally, it was pointed out that there were often several peacemaking groups in the area, and they could hamper each other if they were not careful. It was advised that an effort should be made to hear and observe the local population’s concerns and methods of conflict resolution before trying to introduce outside methods, especially since people were more likely to be comfortable with methods they were familiar with.

Finally, the question was raised regarding conflict prevention. It was stated that there are some organizations involved in conflict prevention, but not enough. One example is the UN’s early warning and prevention programme. Faith-based organizations often lag behind other types of organizations in conflict prevention, but this lack is being addressed. For example, the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University is studying ways to do better in pre-empting conflict before it erupts and to envision possibilities when going into an intervention.