



AUGUST 17–21, 2020

G20 INTERFAITH FORUM: NORTH AMERICA REGIONAL CONSULTATION

OVERVIEW

The G20 is a leading multilateral forum that addresses the world's most critical issues. Since 2014, an interfaith forum has brought together different networks focused on global agendas to work with the annual G20 host country's government and its religious communities. The G20 Interfaith Association, formally established in 2019, provides overall coordination through a diverse advisory network and successive partnerships shaped by each year's event. [G20 Interfaith Forums](#) are preceded by preparatory events and discussions, often focused on specific world regions. From August 17 to 21, Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs

and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) hosted the virtual "[North America Regional Consultation](#)" for this year's G20 Interfaith Forum. The co-organizers of the [2020 G20 Interfaith Forum](#) are the G20 Interfaith Forum Association, the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), and the National Committee for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (NCIID).

The week-long North America Regional Consultation was bookended by public opening and closing sessions; a full schedule and videos of these sessions are available on the [Berkley Center website](#). These sessions, along with private working

group meetings on the intervening days, focused on three primary topics: 1) refugees and forced migration; 2) religious responses to COVID-19; and 3) anti-racism and religious responsibilities. Leaders from religious communities and networks focused on global policies that framed each topic and highlighted relevant actions the G20 leaders and religious communities should consider at the G20 Interfaith Forum in October.

“This convening takes place against the background of a world in turmoil. The global COVID-19 pandemic, political upheaval in the United States, global religious communities and networks facing internal and external pressures, rising populist tides: these factors combine to threaten the global international order as we have come to know it.”

— Shaun Casey

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In a keynote address, General Roméo Dallaire (ret.) highlighted the ethical challenges that conflicts and brutal repression represent for contemporary societies, citing compelling images from the 1994 Rwanda genocide. He challenged rhetorical commitments to a common humanity and urged the G20 Interfaith Forum to focus on equality.

- Three topics from among the G20 agenda were selected because extensive analytic work and dialogue among scholars and practitioners in these fields will frame proposed recommendations for G20 action.
- Next steps involve preparation of specific proposals for the G20 Interfaith Forum that will take place (virtually) October 13 to 17, 2020.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVES

Lieutenant-General The Honorable Roméo A. Dallaire (ret.), the keynote speaker at the opening session, spoke to his experience during the slaughter and displacement of millions of people in Rwanda. His lingering question is “Are all humans actually human?” He gives a clear answer: “There is no human more human than the other.” This fundamental equality has practical and ethical implications for action today, nowhere more clearly than in the G20 deliberations which address central challenges for humanity. This motivating context echoed in the consultation’s explorations of policy opportunities and the moral and ethical imperatives facing religious actors in their important and multiple roles.

REFUGEES AND FORCED MIGRATION

Many aspects for the refugee crisis should be a central focus for both the G20 leaders and for the G20 Interfaith Forum. The challenges are practical, linked to security

and social cohesion, but they are still more ethical, demanding action on humanitarian grounds. The often-neglected plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and children needs to feature more centrally in policy and action.

Other challenges include the protracted nature of conflicts and complex emergencies, and unequal economic burdens of supporting refugees that fall on many of the world's poorest countries. Among anomalies that amount to evil are prosecution of people who, motivated by humanitarian objectives, serve refugees. Many faith organizations in different regions support refugees and forced migrants, and advocate for lasting solutions to their situation. Appreciating links between the conflicts that force people to flee and religious persecution is vital to finding solutions.

The North American context involves cooperation but also significant fault lines. The Canadian government no longer deems the United States to be a safe place to return refugees. Participants from the United States lamented the sharp drop in the numbers of refugees resettled in the United States in recent years and the lost opportunities, the lost mercy, the lost care that that represents, in a country with a long record of faith communities welcoming refugees and supporting them. Turning south, problems in Central America and at the southern border between the United States and Mexico represent, it was said, a dangerous time bomb. Among needed actions are investments in Central America and Mexico to reduce pressures on citizens there to migrate north.

Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J., senior fellow at the Berkley Center and Pedro Arrupe

“We are equal and just as human, you and I, and therefore I have no other option but to respect you... We need something to bring us to a stronger position of what we are in our humanity, and ultimately prove to ourselves through our spiritual guidance that we are all equal and that it is this fundamental quality of respect that will establish peace in humanity.”

— *General Roméo A. Dallaire (ret.)*

Distinguished Research Professor at Georgetown University, spoke to vital religious commitments to a common humanity. A central concept with deep theological roots is hospitality. As one participant put it, “I think we have a significant problem of who is giving hospitality to a humanity that is finding herself lost in a time of turbulence; my gut feeling is that religions have an immense role to play in offering this hospitality.”

Adan Batar, director of migration and refugee services at Catholic Community Services, offered his witness to resettlement as a durable solution to the refugee crisis, and he pointed to the fact that seven out of the nine national voluntary agencies that resettle refugees in the United States are faith-based organizations. He encouraged continuing and increased advocacy efforts by faith communities to pressure political leaders of countries that are forcing people to flee their homes to work towards

solutions, more support to countries that provide a safe haven for forced migrants and refugees, and more openness to third country resettlement.

“The refugee crisis is not only the crisis facing the people who are suffering, but it’s a crisis facing our humanity as a human community.”

— *Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J.*

Feedback loops between citizens and leaders in democracies can stand in the way of meaningful solutions, as many citizens lack a full understanding of the problem. One avenue is to bring back stories so that people see a human face to this issue. Faith leaders can play vital roles in lifting those stories up. The COVID-19 crisis—which is making the refugee situation worse in many parts of the world due to physical restraints, restrictions on funding, and new impediments to efforts to address the underlying problem—adds urgency to the issue.

Fundamental to the search for better approaches to advocacy and agenda-setting are basic moral issues. At times the case to G20 political leaders needs to be made in terms of economic or security interests, as those often drive decisions. The compelling human needs of refugees and IDPs, however, need to be front and center.

Security issues, for example, can arise if refugee issues are neglected, and allowing refugee situations to fester involves significant economic losses. Can or should one highlight these issues or interests, or

is it wiser to focus on the basic issues of humanity and responsibility that we see as so vital? Might approaches grounded in basic ethical principles prove even more effective? Balancing these deeply felt, deeply studied, deeply articulated principles that underlie a faith-motivated focus on refugee issues with the very pragmatic issues that lie behind funding decisions and other allocations is a difficult but necessary task.

The convening offered the opportunity to address longer-term as well as urgent challenges and opportunities for action. The refugee crisis calls for a response to specific human conditions, so the responsibility of human communities is to understand the conditions and the response that refugees take upon themselves in moving away from their homes and countries. Proposals should be addressed not only to the states that will gather at the G20 Summit, but also to the religious communities that are important actors in all of the G20 states.

The call was clear through the week’s meetings: The G20 should engage religious actors on refugee and forced migration issues, and they must look together to longer-term solutions. The ability to integrate ethical and humanitarian ideals and principles with pragmatic experience from daily contacts with the human beings involved, and the organizational means to deliver care, gives religious actors both a responsibility and a capacity to contribute to solutions in the immediate future and the longer term.

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Dr. Olivia Wilkinson framed the conversation about how the G20 might engage with faith

experience on COVID-19. She highlighted the unusual plethora of early reporting on religion and COVID-19, which has informed the [“Religious Responses to COVID-19”](#) project—a collaboration of the Berkley Center, WFDD, and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities—and the development of a [resource repository](#) containing over 110 pages of news reports, journal articles, and other types of resources related to religious dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis.

The religious response to COVID-19 is not homogeneous in any way. A recurring and prominent theme in discussions was the complex and sometimes new interactions between governments and religious communities. At issue are varying levels of trust and distrust but also questions raised by public health restrictions and their application in both human rights frameworks (religious freedom) and practical impact, for example on finance but above all the capacity to meet spiritual needs.

Fears about possible further shrinking of civil society space are growing, with religious communities affected alongside other communities. Experiences from Canada and New Zealand were cited to highlight their vastly different experiences from the United States and some East and South Asian societies. The degree of polarization and tension linked to COVID-19 responses in the United States stands out in comparison to other countries, and, worse, appears to be increasing. A participant observed: “It is impossible to separate the COVID-19 response from the way we understand the basic needs for a healthy democracy.”

Even in countries where there are relationships of trust with the government and robust service delivery and social protection mechanisms, faith communities are often the first and last responders covering social needs that governments cannot or do not meet. “Faith communities are stepping into a gap that the government has left around provision of social services,” reported one participant to much agreement among the group. While outliers may not follow public health rules and restrictions, there was a clear recognition that most faith communities are going along with recommendations of scientist and public health authorities and are, well beyond basic activities of their communities, providing meals, giving pastoral support, making and disseminating masks, and conducting a wide range of other activities that serve their communities and the communities around them.

“Faith communities are to be found in every aspect of the COVID-19 response. They are a part of and interrelated to a whole host of civil society actors. So if they’re not included in policy decisions and at the decision-making tables, a critical actor will be missed.”

—Dr. Olivia Wilkinson

Questions about the COVID-19 impact on religious freedom were raised. Some tensions turn around regulating religious gatherings, but the primary concern highlighted is restrictions on the rights of clergy to visit people in hospitals, conduct funeral services, and provide the spiritual and pastoral services that surround the essential work of religious community. There

have been many technological challenges, but also many technological innovations among religious communities to help the flow of communication with congregations and with communities. Young people within religious communities have stepped up to help overcome some of these digital divides. Looking ahead, many are reflecting on how this pandemic might affect longer-term religious trends and demographic trends within and among religious communities and what actions and responses might be advanced in that light.

Mental health concerns overall, and the spiritual and physical health burdens placed on people in religious leadership roles, need more focus. Many have rapidly reoriented their work to provide these services at great personal cost. How, it must be asked, are caregivers cared for? What more can be done to highlight the importance of mental health for this group, but more broadly for religious communities?

Discrimination and misinformation, different but related issues, are central concerns. In North America, available evidence points squarely toward the fact that Hispanic Christian, Black Christian,

Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish communities have been affected more severely by the COVID-19 pandemic than white Christian communities, mirroring long-standing patterns of discrimination and also employment patterns where these groups are more likely to be essential workers exposed to COVID-19 infection. Their plight has been aggravated by fears and tensions and brought to the fore by the pandemic.

A major issue that lies ahead is the efficient and ethical handling of vaccine testing, approval, and distribution. Once a vaccine is ready for public dissemination there will be work to be done to ensure it is safely and fairly distributed. Religious leaders can provide meaningful services in various ways, including clear public health messaging but also in a watchdog capacity to ensure that ethical imperatives are fully in view. Among sources of misinformation that aggravate tensions, false information about vaccines are a central concern. Trusted individuals within their religious communities are and will be crucial in raising awareness around vaccination in the coming months. Consistent and meaningful government collaboration with faith actors can be especially helpful.

Ruth Messinger on COVID-19 Impact

BOX

“Our faith-based organizations and grassroots organizations on the ground understand, better right now than many world leaders, that the effects of this pandemic are devastatingly economic, and that where the pandemic spreads, people are unable to grow their food... Spiraling out from that, there are also devastating social and political ramifications... If people are all equally made in the image of whatever force you believe in, then using the COVID pandemic and various ‘public health and safety’ measures to make lives particularly difficult for one ethnic group or another, which is certainly happening in some countries around the world, is an extraordinary and problematic consequence.”

The focus on COVID-19 heightens risks that other health measures are derailed, with severe economic and social impacts, most especially in poorer communities. Ruth Messinger, the global ambassador for American Jewish World Service, stressed that citizens of North America need to be keenly aware of the challenges facing poorer countries. Religious communities have particular responsibilities but also knowledge and communication capacities here:

“Things that we’re learning here in North America that are necessary to combat COVID are things that simply don’t exist in the Global South. The lack of sophisticated medical equipment, the lack of access to soap and water, the impossibility of social distancing, the limit on mechanisms for massive public health education: all make the problems infinitely more complicated. They suggest areas in which local grassroots and faith-based organizations can step in, particularly around the issue of public health education.”

Clear and consistent messages from many participants urged that their respective governments bring faith actors into the mix, ensuring that they are at the table when public health decisions are made. They represent a crucial segment of society, and there are large unutilized capacities to draw on their experience and influence during this time of crisis. And, alongside this, faith communities have responsibilities to engage with and support the actions of governments to ensure effective responses to the crisis and to support those most in need and those who are marginalized or unrecognized by governments.

ANTI-RACISM AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES

Ganoune Diop, who leads the recently established G20 Interfaith Forum task force on anti-racism, opened the conversation with a reminder that we are witnessing a historical moment during which the world is searching for its soul in the revolution against racism. This is, he said, an inflection point in the course of human history, another opportunity to reflect on the question of what it means to be human and what kind of humanity the world will embrace.

“We each have a personal responsibility to develop our inner spiritual lives, character, and codes of conduct that are in alignment with honoring and respecting others. It is about changing mindsets, attitudes, and stopping participation in hierarchical systems that can render someone less than we are.”

— Audrey Kitagawa

The challenge was presented clearly and starkly: the stubborn belief in the inferiority of people of color in general and in Black people in particular. This alleged inferiority has given rise to personal stigmatization of Black people along with institutional, structural, and systemic racism, which pervades all sectors of human relations and experiences for Black people. Discussion centered on the racism that has been nurtured by major religious traditions, such as the “curse of Ham” [Noah’s son] applied by many Christians to all Africans as a basis

for the racist assumption that Black people are inferior.

The working group discussion highlighted the complex intersections of racism with many other challenges, including COVID-19 and public health, conflict and peace, justice and religious liberty, education, the environment, and humanitarian aid. How even to talk about race is a concern, and it was discussed whether simply to reject the categorization of different races in favor of an emphasis on caring for common humanity, particularly given that race has no basis in biological reality. At the same time, it was acknowledged that race is such a fundamentally powerful social category that any claims to the effect of “the only way to get beyond race is not to talk about ‘race’” will leave unjust power relationships intact.

“This pandemic has changed our world in a few short months, but at the same time, it has exposed fault lines and inequalities that were also parts of our world: racism, xenophobia, and disinformation, making it harder for us to combat crises such as COVID-19, climate change, and conflicts.”

— *Faisal bin Muaammar*

What is called for instead is a repudiation of the legacy and traces of colonial, constitutional, institutional, and structural racism; active deconstruction of the myth of the inferiority of Black people; and a dismantling and reconfiguration of systems

of domination and economic control that are rooted in racist inequities.

At systemic and structural levels, it was clear that laws in place that perpetuate racism must be changed and that new laws should be enacted that tackle Afrophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Asian sentiments, and homophobia. Institutional structures geared towards maintaining the injustices of discrimination, restricting access to goods, jobs, housing, and more, need reform and reconstruction. Consequences of trauma also must be addressed. This long agenda will necessitate further mobilization that must include review mechanisms and commissions, mandated to identify racial injustices and propose plans of action toward more justice.

Religious leaders and communities, at their best, embody transcendental principles and values, and can be partners in reviewing policies to align them with principles and values consistent with equality, freedom, and human solidarity. A participant observed: “The prophetic call for change needs to be applied internally within religious institutions and externally as religious voices.” The G20 Interfaith Forum Association is preparing a “Statement of Principles” to guide this work.

COMMON THEMES

Several themes linked the three focal topics. General Dallaire in his keynote address told the story of a child he happened upon in a no man’s land during the Rwanda genocide. The child suffered every imaginable affliction. But when Dallaire looked into that child’s eyes, he saw the same spirit, the

same potential, that he saw in his own son. This theme, the essential unity and equality of humanity, echoed time and time again through the week: What does it mean to be human, and, still more, what does that imply for our responsibilities and action?

Stemming from that, another clear theme was the central importance of inequality and inequity. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly highlighted these realities, including the unfairness of different access to health systems, challenges that lie ahead to assure equity in vaccinations, and debates around what we are learning about the vital but vulnerable roles of essential workers. If indeed all lives or livelihoods are truly essential, what does that imply for action? And what does it suggest or demand for action to address the racial inequalities that are central concerns today in North America, as well as other parts of the world?

Religious freedom, human rights, and education strategies have tight linkages to the challenges of serving refugees and addressing the COVID-19 emergency. An essential priority, where religious communities and governments need to work together, is to reach those who are left behind, to assist minorities that are persecuted, and to deal with the dangers of scapegoating and discrimination. The overarching goal, country by country, is to build stronger and positive relationships between religious bodies and governments. The COVID-19 emergency highlights both demands and opportunities for such action.

The potential for such synergy and collective action is what inspires the G20 Interfaith Forum. The effort draws together a network of networks, each of which has wisdom and experience to offer. We were reminded that

“if you’re not at the table, you end up on the menu.”

A primary objective of the Interfaith Forum, apart from responding in pragmatic and often incremental ways, is to highlight the prophetic voice of religious bodies and actors, looking to the future and to bold and truly equitable long-term solutions. The regional meetings demonstrate that the G20 Interfaith Forum can reach and communicate with a far larger number of people by using online mechanisms than was previously the case.

“We are witnessing and experiencing a historical movement during which the world is searching for its soul... This means the development of a global consciousness of what it means to be human.”

— *Ganoune Diop*

LOOKING AHEAD

In the coming weeks and months, working groups will continue ongoing efforts to sharpen analysis and proposal development for priority topics, including those highlighted during the North American consultation. The 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum partners will, taking into account the ideas coming from the regional consultations and working group efforts, explore the issues further at the forum that will take place (virtually) from Tuesday, October 13 to Saturday, October 17. There will be plenary sessions each day followed by simultaneous working sessions on a wide range of topics. Details will be made available at g20interfaith.org.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS



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Aden Batar is the director of migration and refugee services for Catholic Community Services.



Lieutenant-General Roméo A. Dallaire (ret.) is a celebrated advocate for human rights, as well as a respected author, government and UN advisor, and former Canadian senator.



Faisal bin Muaammar is founder and secretary general of the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) and the King Abdulaziz Public Library in Saudi Arabia.



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Ruth W. Messinger is the global ambassador of American Jewish World Service, the world's leading Jewish organization working to end poverty and realize human rights in the developing world.



Audrey Kitagawa, J.D., is the chair of the board of trustees of the Parliament of the World's Religions and chair of the Parliament's United Nations Task Force.



Olivia Wilkinson, Ph.D., is director of research at the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities.

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The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University is

dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center's work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.



The G20 Interfaith Forum has convened annually since 2014 in the G20 host country. There have thus been meetings in Australia, Turkey, China, Germany, Argentina, and Japan. The 2020 host is Saudi Arabia, and the forum will take place on October 13 to 15. The G20 Interfaith Forum offers a platform where networks of religiously linked institutions and initiatives engage on global agendas. Since 2017, Berkley Center Senior Fellow Katherine Marshall has served on the G20 Interfaith Association Advisory Council and contributed to the recommendations and policy briefs developed by the G20 Interfaith Forum.

About this Brief

This brief highlights contributions to the “North America Regional Consultation” for the 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum. The consultation brought together religious leaders and development practitioners to consider refugees, COVID-19, and anti-racism in advance of the G20 Interfaith Forum set for October 2020.



The World Faiths Development Dialogue

(WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, DC, WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

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