**October 14. Panel Supporting Vulnerable Groups in times of COVID-19 (PD06)**

**Moderator: James Patton**, President/CEO of the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD)

**Speakers:**

* **Dr. Mohammad Sammak**, Secretary- General of the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Lebanon and member of KAICIID Board of Directors
* **Dr. Mohammed Elsanousi,** Executive Director of the Network for Traditional and Religious Peacemakers
* **H.E. Amb. Teresa Indjein**, Director General for International Cultural Relations of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Austria
* **Rev. Victor Kazanjian**, Executive Director of United Religions Initiative (URI)
* **Ms. Sara Rahim**, Head of Programme at A Common Word Among the Youth (ACWAY) and Youth Representative to the United Nations for Parliament of the World’s Religions
* **Prof. Mariz Tadros**, Director of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) and Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK
* **Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe**, Director of Arigatou International in Geneva

**Summary of discussion:** Inclusiveness. Hate speech. Pre-covid dynamics accentuated. Time to rethink religion, caste, class. Intersecting issues

**James Patton** introduced the panel, lamenting the COVID-19 emergency and its painful disruptions. Disparities have long been a critical issue. Identity conflicts have raged across the world. Different religious actors have reimagined a global community that elevates every one of us. Jesuit theologian, Tich Nhat Hahn among them. However, governments have not always received them. How do we reimagine life in response to this pandemic or will fear and danger pit us against us more fervently against one another. Will there be a rise in authoritarian politics? What is the role of faith groups in leading efforts to change. With 8 in 10 being believers, how do they already lead the way?

**Dr. Mohammad Sammak**

* Large gaps that exist between word and deed.
* Religious leaders need to work together for human fraternity. As St. Paul put it, to the pure all things are pure, but no one is pure
* Political leaders are of two kinds: populists guided by their own view of what is good. Political and religious leaders both suffer from the same notion that they can do it alone without cooperating with the other.
* Beliefs are harder to shake than knowledge and nothing is more firmly believed than that which is least known
* Vulnerable people caught in between. Are best served if religions and political work together. This has happened in different parts of the world both before and during the pandemic
* KAICIID strategy: we are one family. Is this possible? KAICIID says yes.

**Dr. Mohammed Elsanousi,** Executive Director of the Network for Traditional

and Religious Peacemakers

Anniversary of R2P. Religious communities can do a lot to combat COVID. Eg Somalia. Religious leaders have more authority. Support of government of Finland. Kenya. Especially Muslim leaders, committee with guidelines. Trusted partner of government. Use contextual theology, safety matters. Youth play major roles. Southeast Asia, report fake news. Intergenerational campaigns. Civil society and faith.

Multilateral actors are cooperating. SDG 17. Partnership.

**Dr. Mohammed** Elsanousi we have a responsibility to protect vulnerable communities during

this pandemic. Religious actors can positively contribute to preventing spread of virus and serve

as source of reliable information. Religious actors are well positioned to communicate

information and teach communities during a crisis. Through this added value governments have

sought to collaborate with religious leaders to provide services. In Somalia, people don’t have

access to correct information disseminated by governments. In many instances, religious leaders

have more influence in communities than national governments. With international financial

support and partners, we were able to disseminate information to communities so that they can

get correct information that they need. The national Muslim COVID-19 response committee in

Kenya also worked with government and religious communities to address similar issues. They

have more than 30 organizations and institutions in collaboration each one complimentary to the

other. The committee has taken and interreligious approach. The committee while mostly

comprised of Muslim also includes approaches transferable to other faith practices. The minister

of health in Kenya has encouraged the Christian community to use guidelines developed by the

committee when convening their gatherings. Since the onset of the pandemic, the committee has

considered religion to be a key actor by the government for curbing spread of virus. In addition

to promoting government messaging, promoting contextual theology when communicating to

faith communities in relation to safety measures and hygiene practices to prevent spread. Youth

played a major role in this collaboration. And women of faith as well. They are well positioned

to function in a time of crisis as resilient community actors. Another example comes from

southeast Asia where youth mobilize actors to counter false misinformation and fake news. And

intergenerational campaign to promote interfaith values to provide information related to the

pandemic. Civil society and faith-based organizations integrate moral lessons into the current

circumstances. Multilateral institutions address hate speech and misinformation in southeast

Asia. These few examples illustrate SDG 18 which calls for partnerships across society and no

one shou8ld be left behind. We have to have courage to reach those who are vulnerable. You

have to reach out to them during a crisis. The UN told us you can’t go to kilometre 5 because it is

a dangerous place. I said I need the courage to go there. When I got there, there were 35 Imams

there waiting for me. There were dead bodies and they needed help to bury them. That courage

to reach out to vulnerable people is critical. Second, we talked a lot about religion. I want to also

mention that custom and tradition is critical. Vulnerable people have their own beautiful customs

and traditions that have to be taken into consideration.

**James**, Mennonite leader? Fight disinformation.

**H.E. Amb. Teresa Indjein**, Director General for International Cultural Relations of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Austria

(Especially arts). In a time of crisis. Public actors under pressure, also climate crisis. Suffering and pain. Time to reflect, look inward, what really matters. Values. Fratelli Tutti. Warns against society of exclusion. At core is problem of vulnerability.

In Austria, aware of importance of arts. Essential for creating consciousness. Crushing impact on arts sector. National, regional, local levels, initiatives. Adapt way of working, need physical presence.

Cooperate arts and science.

Digitalization, online entertainment. Online behaviour manipulated by articifiial intelligence. Can polarize, increase distrust. Digital humanism, not manipulated

**Sarah Rahim**, Head of Programme at A Common Word Among the Youth (ACWAY) and Youth Representative to the United Nations for Parliament of the World’s Religions

Engage young people. 1.2 billion young people. COVID has increased gap. School closures. Many difficulties including FoRB.

Young people are stepping up. Volunteerism. ACWAY has goals like SDGs. Intergenerational engagement. Interfaith education and religious literacy.

More policies to protect and develop young people, climate change.

**Prof. Mariz Tadros**

* Different vulnerabilities intersect during the COVID-19 crisis; a religious marginalization
* COVID religion blind but response is not. Sobering situation of intersecting vulnerabilities where people are poor and excluded by geographical marginalization,
* No deliberate hierarchy of violence or suffering. Women have suffered from domestic violence, poor people in settlements have lost livelihoods, and there has been mass suffering even across the middle class. Situation serious for society at large
* Hate speech in Pakistan towards Shia: “Shia virus” because of returnees from Iraq. Shia working in hospitals forbidden to work, quarantined in inhumane conditions.
* Hate speech not a national phenomenon: Based on rumors and stereotypes, it circulates to become a global phenomenon. Need a global response. Power in collective action. Are we willing to speak up to people whose faith is not our own? Are we willing to stand up to them? We also know hate speech spills across borders. Hate speech India or Pakistan spreads across the borders. Hate speech in India became problematic because it was violent and affected livelihoods. People won’t buy from them or allow children into schools. COVID-19 = ‘Jihadi virus’.
* Minorities despised class seen as dirty, lacking in cleanliness. Laid off first from service sector. Chilling sense of any group as unclean or source of dirt. Often servants, hairdressers. Need to challenge preconceptions of class, caste, religion. Not asking the hard questions.
* Crisis amplified dynamics, especially for those isolated, lack access to resources and accurate information to represent faith.
* In Uganda, government invited faith leaders to negotiating table, small indigenous religious groups excluded: Time to rethink inclusion/exclusion.
* Care with religion disaggregated data; can accentuate inequality and marginalization. Consistency is important. Trust between policy makers religion and government at issue.
* Ahmadiyas, with Facebook, taken down only with enormous pressure. Scapegoated.

**Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe**, Director of Arigatou International in Geneva

Tricky to think of people as vulnerable. Not agent. Not static of absolute. Focus on conditions. Children very much the focus. Children out of school. Impact still invisible in policy response. Profound effect on physical, spiritual lens.

Endemic, seen too much alone, all against backdrop of inequality. Can increased children in poverty 100+ million. Mothers could die. Closing of schools, only meal. Food security very serious. Multidimensional effect. Ethnic groups disproportionately affected.

Empowerment. Build resilience, see as part of solution, not part of problem. Strengthen connections, spaces to participate and raise voices. Focus on spiritual well-being. Citizens empowment. Language, cyberbuilding. Inclusive education

Interconnected and interdependent. Development, humanitarian, peacebuilding fields. Epidemics create fear, vulnerabilities. Space to come together, community based approaches. Dignity of all, those at margins to the center. Moral imagination.

Deficit analysis: what is broken, rather than agency approach.

**Rev. Victor Kazanjian**, Executive Director of United Religions Initiative (URI)

Local grassroots? COVID reveals inequalities, opportunities. Beloved planet, wars, democracy, cry of earth, sickness and death of COVID pandemic. Ordinary people dehumanized, statistics. Put face on people. Rehumanize, wisdom of grassroots communities. Communities form network, give care, informal structures. Support informal systems, support them, at very local level. COVID teaching us something about connection.

How religion and cultural identity have been separatng forces. To claim truth, not open to humanizing force. Reveal brokenness.

James, some who protect, some who turn inwards. Arts and science share sense of wonder

**Ambassador Injein**. Science and faith? Art and culture? Longing for each other. Religion and arts can both do this. Fall completely in love. Introspecrtion. Arts like a sun. Science always new to discover. Creation endless.

**Sammak**; Lebanon?. Unique country, 18 religious communities. Faced pandemic in very cooperative ways. Religious leaders worked together to help those in need. To close churches and mosques. Took decisions collectively.

Lebanon has experienced protests and civil unrest in addition to bombings, but there is also a robust interfaith effort there. The history of this religious cooperation helps provide a pathway forward amidst these many difficulties. Lebanon is unique in the middle east. We have 18 religious communities that are living together. The way we face this pandemic was in a cooperative way. The pandemic came at a politically and economically and socially difficult time. Religious leaders is the only place in the Middle East where religious leaders work together to assist and help those in need during this pandemic. They work together

to close churches and mosques in order to avoid pandemic spread. They took their decisions to

protect people.

**Sarah Rahim**. Participation of youth. Restrictions of freedom of movement and worship. Balance safety and freedom. How defining community? Possible to move to digital space. Concept of equity. Zooming, digital mosque. Digital divide.

**Mariz Tadros.** Hate speech? Shia pilgrims from Iran to Pakistan, Shia virus. How to disentangle? Historic. Do see clear points of dehumanizing from officials. Governments need to take action. Not new. Deeply embedded. Tipping point circulation of rumors to violence. Things circulate very quickly. Excuses, etc. What are excuses, justifications. Talking about social cohesion. Protecting who we are, not just community. Our collective responsibility. CREID coalition, Very concerned about pattners in Pakistan, more solidarity important.

Inclusivity and intersections, equality is important. Religious inequality more important than FoRB.

Trust is important. Consistency is important for trust so that things are evenly and fairly applied so no single group feels scapegoated. This is a time to build back better in recognition of: hate speech, attend to religious minorities, and pay attention to regional spillover – there is a ripple effect beyond and our

collective responsibilities. I tis very complicated because historically as far back as the middle

ages, the Jews were held responsible for the plague. Pogroms wiped out communities thinking

that if you eliminate these communities, you eliminate the virus. We do see clear points of

mobilization by political and religious leaders. We need to look where people are seeking to

establish legitimacy through dehumanization of others in a context where this is pre-existing

dehumanization. Governments should take action against government officials should they tweet

hateful statements about religious minorities such as President Trump. There is an appetite for

these types of things. How do we bring it down again. Accountability is important. People know

that their account will be suspended if they malign and stigmatize any group on social media.

The speed with which we respond is important. Things move from hate speech to violence

quickly. Faith leaders need to respond quickly to say these are rumours, we can’t buy into this.

Things circulate quickly. We need to be able to understand and take it seriously that people come

up with excuses ‘it’s not that bad,’ ‘but everybody’s suffering,’ ‘give it time.’ These excuses

make people be unwilling to take it seriously and see it not just as a threat for those stigmatized

but also for the community as a whole. Everybody is affected. It is not just about protecting the

community but also about protecting who we are. Stopping hate speech needs to be more

powerful. It is not just about a group defending itself but about the effectiveness of the

community’s reaction. Our organization’s local partners in Pakistan said we are concerned about

what officials are saying about minorities (they should be beheaded). We immediately wrote

them and said we are watching you. They immediately removed their hate speech. Not as quickly

as we wanted but we hope that they now are aware that we are watching them. It took them 48

hours. We are a coalition for equality and inclusive development not a coalition for religious

freedom to bring in principles of inclusivity in relation to poverty, gender, youth. On purpose.

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**Maria Lucia Uribe**. Uncertainty. Planning difficult. Schools, out of work, divisions. Billion out of school, half don’t have internet. Violent. Do face bullying and corporal punishment. Disconnected education is from community. Rethink how education works, how it connects to community. Ethical responsibility. Educaion needs to focus on vulnerable children.

**Victor Kazanjian**. Religious difference a source of creativity. Learn from each other’s spiritual aspirations. Circle, images on box. Perception shaped by our experience. Perspectives valuable and partial. Need collective approach. Not complete in ourselves. Diversity is essential.

**Mohammed El Sannoussi**. Pearl of wisdom? Consistency, courage to reach most vulnerable. CAR after crisis. Custom and tradition are important also (besides religion).

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Patton: how can religious leaders find common ground with policy makers to support vulnerable groups? Vulnerability is itself a tricky concept that is bounded by context and can contribute to barring people from empowerment by categorizing groups into powerless preconceptions. When we take a deficit approach we fall into the trap on occasion of looking at things in terms of what is broken rather than looking for places where people have agency that we can emphasize and bring to the fore. This is also a time for religious communities to reconsider ways in which religion has been a force for isolation and separation from the community, turning us inward. This is a perennial challenge for faith and one we should try to unpack the profound points that have been raised. The religious and the artistic can remind us of how wide beyond the boundaries of our awareness things are. In relation to the coalition for

inclusivity rather than coalition for religious freedom, I agree that it is the rights regime that

needs to be protected.

**H.E. Amb. Teresa Indjein** expressed gratitude and KAICIID team. We are in a time of crisis. A

health crisis and an economic crisis. This puts public actors under pressure in the context of

climate change. Challenges that we try to respond to. So much suffering, pain and hope. Many

activities have slowed or come to a halt. This means in a way that there is time to reflect, look

inward, reconsider, reshape and become aware of what really matters. Now is a time to

reimagine how we want to look closely at our values and see if they correspond to present needs.

In Encyclical Fratelli tutti, the Holy Father Francis warns against radical individualism, society

of exclusion and carelessness. We hear from him the eternal call for brotherly and sisterly love a

culture of dialogue and compassion. Some bitterly smile but the road the most courageous have

taken is tenderness. He invites us to go despite suffering and pain. This crisis forces us to do

things differently. At the core is a notion of vulnerability. At the core of my professional life are

intercultural relations and the arts. I share the following, in Austria, the cultural dimension and

awareness of what the arts contribute to the fabric of life is high. They are more than decoration.

They are essential for creating consciousness. Religion, philosophy and the arts in paradise could

be one. They touch the essence of our being. They help shape our reality. The current pandemic

has a crushing effect on the arts sector and intercultural relations. Postponed or canceled

activities, arts groups forced to close their doors, and they move to a digital response. But how

do we move forward. Regional and local and national governments have responded. EU” has

launched creative platform for initiatives. Friendly relations with the world require that we adapt.

So we adapt digitally but the need for face to face performances remain. Culture is at the heart of

progress. It can play a key role in the crisis. In Austria there is a process to give even more

weight to culture so artists can make clear how we want to live tomorrow. Their connection with

others can lead to results that infuse hope. A successful platform repairing the future in Austria is

a national effort for the challenges are being collected with view of putting them into practice.

We want to go international with this initiative. Secondly, a different kind of vulnerability exists

in relation to digitalization. The pandemic has accelerated digitization. Cultural life of online

entertainment but online behavior may differ from our behavior in the real world. It is also under

surveillance. It can be manipulated by AI and personalized addictive offer. People turn to media

for information. It is a new behavioral behavior that increases distrust in institutions or polarizes

opinions. This affects the underlying structures and values. We need a new digitized humanism

that ensures that our digitized world and new technology like artificial intelligence puts the

human dignity in the center. It is imperative to avoid degrading human being to a manipulated

resource. The arts are essential in dealing with digitized humanism. This all takes us back to the

question; which image of the human do we embrace? Which relation to mother earth? Religions

can give us guidance and the arts enrich our lives. It is the soul that enriches human beings and

guides us through time. How can art and culture help us move forward to envision what we can

become in the future? If we feel that what helps us get through life is the notion that something

around us helps take care of us whether longing for the other or longing for something intact

despite our suffering in this world, religion can provide for that. But the arts can also have this

function. If you like the music of Bach your life is different after you have heard the music than

it was before. If our life is to fall in love with it, the arts help us. In Austria, art helps us

introspect to get in touch with something beyond ourselves. I had a friend in Auschwitz who said

that music helped him get through the toughest of time. The arts can be like light. Science always

takes us toward new discoveries. Creativity is also endless. As a consolation, art is soothing.

Science and art come together in the fields of sustainable architecture. Scientists inspire artists

and vice versa.

**Ms. Sara Rahim** talked about how young people have been impacted by COVID-19 19. I am

humbled to be speaking with you and speaking on behalf of ACWAY. I hope to share how

young have been impacted and discuss opportunities for collaboration. Since adoption of SDG

our government has included youth to achieve stable societies and address climate change,

economic instability, gender inequality, conflict and migration. Today our economy includes 2.4

billion 16% of global population. Challenges remain with access to education. COVID-19 has

widened the already existing education gap affecting youth, women and people with disabilities.

Over 75% of those surveyed experienced school closures and not all have been able to transition

into online schooling. This highlights the digital divide. Access to stable employment for youth

has increased. Pandemic has increased this. People in lower income countries are most exposed

to reduction in working hours. Over . of young people experience religious restrictions. Climate

of fear, intolerance and disconnection have impacted youth. Youth remain committed to steeping

up and partnering with social institutions actively engaging in volunteerism and donating to

COVID-19 response. They work from home when possible. First recommendation is the

incorporation of the interfaith development goals developed by ACWAY. They are intended to

complement to address the gap where religious leaders contribute to SDG implementation. Two

in particular are IDG 4 intergenerational engagement. Encourage youth to become civically

engaged to support cross cultural understanding. IDG 6 access to religious literacy and interfaith

education. We need to educate across faith and culture during a time when fear is a pandemic.

We need to create experiences that promote knowledge of the religious other. Recommendations

often are based on practitioner knowledge but how effective can they be if they do not involve

young people? Develop policies that integrate young people social protection, employment for

youth, online training for youth, stronger mental health resources and investing in partnerships

that combat climate change. We challenge you to focus attention toward increasing youth

participation to yield more sustainable programs that have intergenerational support. When asked

to address how freedom of movement abased on COVID-19 have impacted youth, the first thing

we can agree upon is that these are unprecedented times. COVID-19 has impacted how we think

of religious freedom. How do you protect civil liberties while also protecting public health? How

do you find the balance? Who decides? The young people I am hearing say we are in a space of

transition. Places where they would socialize are not accessible. How are we defining

community for young people and are we creating access to those communities to young people?

I attend a mosque and we pivoted to a digital format. But there is a large digital divide so that is

not the case for all. So, how are we addressing digital divides? Youth are convening WhatsApp

and Zoom meetings to maintain a sense of community. There needs to be more attention to this

for young people who do not have the right to access in the safety of their own home.

**Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe** addressed going from vulnerabilities to empowerment of religious

communities during a time when the pandemic compounds the situation. Thinking of people as

valuable can be tricky because it makes us take a deficit approach that labels vulnerabilities in a

vulnerable category. Vulnerability is not static or absolute. Putting people in categories in a

vulnerability framework might impact their capacity to cope with the challenges they go through.

We should focus on the conditions that can strengthen their response. So am centering my

comments on children. From the beginning children were made invisible. We were told they

were not highly affected by the pandemic. Later they were identified as vectors and schools were

shut down leaving children in 188 countries out of school with long term impacts on their future.

This impact is invisible in policy responses. Children are affected by the pandemic emotionally

spiritually and physically. So there are 3 ways children are valuable. We need to understand the

systematic way the pandemic impacts interacting with chronic diseases against the background

of inequalities. UNICEF estimates that the ongoing crisis can increase the number of children in

poverty to 170 million by end of this year with an addition of 1.2 million could die in next six

months due to changes. Closing of schools affects meal provision affecting food security.

Evidence shows household food insecurity also affects child development, mental health,

infectious diseases in children, etc. Evidence shows that people from religious communities and

ethnic groups are discriminated against and disproportionately affected by virus. The pandemic

exacerbates the impacts. Moving to resilience and empowerment with young people can help

children see themselves as part of the solution not the problem. To connect with one another and

strengthen connections. Create spaces to participate and raise their voice during a time when

civic space has shrunk. Help them voice the future they want to see. Focus on the spiritual wellbeing

of children. Spirituality contributes to strengthen people’s resilience and is critical

response to negative impact of virus. The pandemic has shown importance of citizen

empowerment. The unprecedented closing of schools make it more valuable to address cyber

bullying and exposure to hate speech. Children’s navigation of internet exposes them to this. We

need to empower them to deal empathy with one another and expand their opportunities to

participation. Focus on interdependence and interconnected. We have never seen before how

important it is to break through the silos to address the long term impacts of COVID-19. Our

religious traditions emphasize interconnections. We know epidemics create fear. To change the

discourse we need to create more space for people of diverse backgrounds to come together

dialogue and collaborate. We need to develop interventions where youth take leadership and

develop strategies to challenge view of powerless to empowered. Religious communities are

essential to this community based approach for affirming the dignity of those at the margins to

the center to shape this new normal. This is needed to develop moral imagination for our

societies to affirm the wellbeing of children around the world. Thank you. I believe that the point

is that more than a billion children are out of school and most of the children out of school do not

have access to the internet so they are totally cut off from education. Add to this the violence at

homes. This impacts health. Schools are protective places for children where they receive meals,

they can share their feelings, and at times where they feel safer than at home. Children also

experience bullying and corporal punishment in school. But looking forward, the emphasis

should be on a community approach. Education is disconnected from the community safety nets

that surround children. We saw that the teachers have to walk miles to reach one child to bring

them materials to do homework. Alternatives include radio programmes, the use of WhatsApp

groups, etc. we need to rethink how education can continue for children who are cut off. How

education connects to community and the role communities can play. We need to demand

governments to do something but the telecommunication companies have an important role to

play. They have an ethical responsibility to provide access to children for education. We need to

focus education toward the socioemotional well-being of children not just exams to develop

projects in the community.

**Rev. Victor Kazanjian** offered insights into what some local grassroots faith leaders are doing

to provide solution and a way forward that addresses some of these problems. COVID-19 has

revealed pervasive injustices that continue to exist. As our panelists have emphasized, this also presents us with opportunities to emphasize we are all one, collaboration with different sectors,

call for compassion and tenderness, promotion of young leaders to be an inclusive movement,

intersecting vulnerabilities and the suffering of those who are marginalized, hate speech and the

impact of children and building resilience. The devastation caused by the pandemic, wars, gender

injustice, democracy itself and the earth has put a spotlight on our structures of what does and

does not work in the lives of human beings. Ordinary people lie buried in a mountain of statistics

in the way that the pandemic is presented. People become dehumanized. I have the privilege of

calling to mind the faces, the particular individual people, the indigenous persons, the children

and those who are poor – calling to mind those faces – people we know who are particularly

vulnerable and expressing what they are feeling and rehumanize this dehumanizing moment. So

many people who are struggling with the disruption of their lives and the devastation of this

illness. For those of us whose behaviors emerge from spiritual principles – part of our work is to

constantly rehumanize this dehumanizing situation. Bring to life and to mind the experiences of

people living in cities and urban areas. The wisdom that emerges from grassroots communities is

what we need to hear and incorporate and it is often what is left out. Caring for everyday lives of

people – the ways people deliver food, watch out for those who slip into places of crisis – those

ways in which communities form a micro network in which care is given in part through

assistance but also in part through informal leadership that is emerging from the grassroots. The

formal structures are crucial in creating good policy and we often focus on formal leaders, it is

often the informal systems that are operating powerfully that kick in during moments like this

when there is paralysis in other parts of society. How we support those and get out of the

structural systems and look at how we can resource people in our communities at the local level

is what we are challenged to do and what many of the groups in the faith sector are particularly

oriented towards. That allows us to put into existence on the ground grassroots action and return

to the core that the pandemic is teaching us something about interconnectedness and the

perceived separation of our lives being an illusion. For people of faith this is particularly

important. We also need to consider how religion has been cultivated as separating forces in our

lives. They are also forces of justice and peace. Religions when they claim truth in ways that

create borders and are not open to connections is revealed as well. The pandemic reveals

brokenness in society. This is at time for religious groups to take stock of our own religious

communities as well to become deeply connected. There is a simple exercise I use with folks.

When I am with people, we try not to bring institutions together to resolve theological conflicts.

We bring different cultures together to address issues in the community. People are in a circle

and a box is in the center with different pictures on each side. A few rules come into play. You

can’t move the box and you can’t move to a different chair. How do we know what problem that

is presented by the box? The only way we can construct an understanding of the box is if we talk

to those around us and together construct what the box looks like and communicates a problem

that needs to be resolved. It is crucial for us to realize that each of us are valuable but also partial

in our knowledge. Without a collective construction of understanding of what the problem is we

canno9t develop a collective approach to addressing it. In individualistic cultures we tend to

think we are complete. We need each other. Diversity becomes an essential resource for

engaging these problems and for solving these issues. That is where we start. We need each

other. We are incomplete and partial by ourselves. This draws us into collaborative approaches

for peacebuilding and development. We do not bring institutions together to reconcile but bring

human beings together to resolve these issues.