

ENGAGING THE FAITH COMMUNITY IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Members of the faith community—clergy and lay people of all religions—**can be a powerful voice in addressing local violence prevention issues.** They bring with them the **moral force of their faith**, the **strength of their numbers** and their **position in the community.** How can you engage them and keep them active in your violence prevention efforts?

This publication is part of the *Engaging Communities in Violence Prevention Series*, which provides information to practitioners and ways to connect with various sectors many believe are difficult to reach. ICP publishes practitioner-to-practitioner tipsheets on the following topics: **Collaboration, Faith Communities, Gang-Involved Youth, Neighborhood Residents, Police as Partners, Schools,** and the **Health Community.** The tipsheets also identify additional helpful information for violence prevention.

Engaging the Faith Community in Violence Prevention draws on the work of three of our local partners who have successfully engaged the faith community in their violence prevention efforts. Most resources, like the ones we've listed here, are directed toward members of the faith community. While they may be helpful to your local effort, we hope this guide will help you—the community-based practitioner—engage the faith community and keep it active in your local violence prevention efforts.

GETTING STARTED

Be inclusive! Reach out to a wide variety of religious leaders and congregations. This shows that your perspective is broad, that you're interested in diversity, and that you believe that everyone has something important to offer. It also builds trust around the table.

Bring the faith community to the table from the start of your initiative. The best way to assure the success of any project is to make sure that all participants have a sense of investment and ownership in it. No one likes to feel like an afterthought, and you will gain valuable insight by including members of the faith community during the planning stage.

Understand the context of the faith community. Which denominations/congregations are traditionally activist, and which have conflicting opinions about violence prevention? Other factors to consider are: does the clergy have another job or other time restriction? Do congregation members live in the community where services are held? What is the governance structure of the religious institution? How much influence do clergy and lay leaders have in their congregations and in the community? Also, be sensitive to the religious and cultural demands of different faiths (for example, don't invite Muslim clergy to a meeting on Friday, their Sabbath).

Enlist clergy who are already committed to your initiative to reach out to other clergy. By and large, people trust those with similar backgrounds, beliefs and concerns. Thus, clergy are likely to listen to other clergy because they share certain assumptions and understand many of one another's issues and constraints.

Help members of the faith community make the connection between violence prevention and their spiritual mission. Members will be much more likely to join your initiative if they see violence prevention as an extension of their spiritual work. It's important to approach congregations not as institutions or as individual groups, but as unified members of faith communities.

MAINTAINING ENGAGEMENT

Ask for something specific. It's easier to get a commitment to a specific activity—especially one that has clear boundaries of time and effort—than to a vague process. People are much more comfortable when they know what's expected of them, and how their role will contribute to the broader initiative.

Choose your requests carefully. Build your initiative on principles that are agreeable to everyone involved. There is so much variety in the makeup and philosophies of different faith groups that it is sometimes tricky to define an issue in such a way that virtually everyone can support it.

Offer training. Even those congregations that enthusiastically embrace violence prevention may not know how to address it. Training around specific violence prevention strategies by experienced members of the faith community and those who are directly affected by violence can provide folks with the tools, information and confidence to get involved.

Keep in touch with everyone in the faith community, whether they've joined your initiative or not. This way, you spread information about your initiative, increase the chances that more clergy and congregations will participate, and confirm your sincere desire to include everyone. Newsletters, invitations to meetings and events and indirect contact through a clergy group can all serve the purpose of maintaining contact.

Members of the faith community will be much more likely to join your initiative if they see **violence prevention as an extension of their spiritual work.** It's important to approach congregations not as institutions or as individual groups, but as **unified members of communities of faith.**

THINGS TO REMEMBER

It's all about personal relationships. Building familiarity and trust with members of the faith community, and encouraging or taking advantage of the relationships that already exist among members of that community, are crucial to building a successful partnership. This includes your commitment to attend events that are important to faith communities, inviting them to yours, and where appropriate, forging relationships that transcend violence prevention.

Involve the key individuals in a congregation. A congregation's continued involvement in violence prevention depends on getting and keeping the clergy person or other key individual involved. Although primary responsibility for participation in programs may be delegated to congregation members, clergy needs to accept responsibility for maintaining the community's involvement in the initiative.

Stick to your issue. Be careful about discussing broader issues; you'll risk losing people of faith if you start questioning their beliefs or customs. You don't have to agree on everything to collaborate on creating a safe community but you do have to be clear about your limitations. If members of the faith community try to get you involved in one of their issues, you may have to politely decline due to funding or other legal constraints regarding your work with religious groups.

Faith-based organizations are just that—organizations. They come with all the structural and interpersonal complexity that organizations entail (e.g., limited staffing, bureaucratic decision making procedures). Take the time to understand the organization and its unique characteristics in the beginning, before conflicts can arise.

Members of the faith community need to be encouraged to take responsibility not just for the program they run or just for their own congregations but for the larger communities around them. Communities of faith can be a powerful force for change if they see your mission as part of theirs.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Don't fail to recognize the limitations of the capacities of the faith community. If you ask clergy or congregations for more than they can deliver, you're setting them up to fail, and effectively shutting them out of the initiative.

Don't ignore the fact that faith communities have their own agendas, and that these may be challenged by broad-based community work. As much as they may want to be involved, it may be beyond the ability of community members to embrace your approach.

Don't underestimate the difficulty of bringing together congregations of different faiths around a single issue. Some denominations and congregations may be more comfortable with social activism than others and doctrinal differences may keep clergy or congregations from working together. For these reasons, using an interfaith council as the vehicle for engaging the faith community in violence prevention can be tricky.



LOCAL PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Neighborhood Violence Prevention Collaborative

FLINT, MI



The Neighborhood Violence Prevention Collaborative (NVPC), was based in Flint, Mich. and all of Genessee County, empowering neighborhoods to reduce and prevent violence by assisting them in addressing the underlying causes of violence and creating an environment that promotes peace. Following a particularly devastating shooting in which one first-grader killed another, Pete Hutchison, NVPC Director, approached a group of clergy he knew, asking "shouldn't there be a faith-based reaction to this?" His challenge led to an overwhelming response from the faith community, with over 50 congregations becoming involved in local violence prevention activities.

Besides their involvement in NVPC programs, the local faith community formed a study circle on violence prevention to develop an action plan for area congregations. Pete advises encouraging the faith community to form its own approach to violence prevention, and then integrating that approach into the larger community plan.

LOCAL PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Rockford Violence Prevention Collaborative

ROCKFORD, IL



The Violence Prevention Collaborative (RVPC) of Rockford, IL is committed to establishing safe communities in Winnebago County by advancing the primary prevention of youth and family violence. (RVPC)'s Geri Alten and Sheila Hill chose the faith community as their starting point for reaching out to families in the area most affected by violence. They began with a mailing to all congregations of all faiths in the Rockford area.

Sheila's active involvement in her own church and in the religious community helped her understand that many churches and clergy didn't see violence prevention as part of their spiritual mission. Her familiarity with the faith community made it easier for her to approach clergy and to develop a program they were willing to support.

For more information contact:
Geri Alten, Project Director • Sheila Hill, Project Coordinator
Violence Prevention Collaborative, Rockford, IL
Tel: (815) 962-5092 • www.rockfordvpc.org

LOCAL PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Fountain For Youth

NEW YORK, NY



New York City's Fountain for Youth (FFY) believes in the positive potential of young people and promotes healthy communities where youth and others at-risk are offered positive alternatives to violence. They offer training in conflict resolution and youth leadership development to youth-serving organizations.

One of the critical components of FFY's work is through an Interfaith Council. Over 30 faith-based groups come together across faiths and denominations to address violence prevention from a youth perspective. Reverend Alfonso Wyatt, FFY's Chairperson attributes the Council's success to a number of things, including: its focus on training in areas chosen by the congregation itself; its understanding of volunteers and their needs and limitations; and its willingness to approach the faith community without its own agenda. These practices have contributed to making faith-based groups a key part of a community-wide effort that also includes non-profits that work with youth, government agencies and individuals.

For more information contact:
Sheronia James, Project Director • Alfonso Wyatt, Chairperson
Fountain For Youth, New York, NY
Tel: (212) 925-6675

RESOURCES

The following organizations are experts in engaging the health community in violence prevention. For additional information, contact:

INITIATIVES

Public/Private Ventures (PPV)

2005 Market Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Tel: (215) 557-4400
URL: <http://www.ppv.org>
Through its work with the Partnership for Research on Religion and At-Risk Youth, PPV explores the potential of churches and faith-based programs to reach and redirect the lives of high-risk youth, and to mobilize communities' other resources around the future of their children.

National Ten Point Leadership Foundation (NTLF)

Ella J. Baker House N411 Washington St.
Boston, MA 02124
Tel: (617) 282-6704
URL: <http://www.yesamerica.org/NTLF.html>
NTLF mobilizes religious communities across the country and provides specific strategies for creating coalitions to prevent child abuse and neglect, street violence, drug abuse, school failure, joblessness and hopelessness among at-risk inner city youth.

The Black Church Initiative

25 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
Tel: (202) 628-8787
URL: <http://www.childrensdefense.org/bccc.html>

Works to create a resource manual of unique and innovative "model" church-based youth outreach programs and convened several regional summits focusing on ways churches can positively affect the lives of young people in their communities. An initiative of the Black Community Crusade for Children coordinated by the Children's Defense Fund.

FOR FURTHER READING

Evaluating Faith in Action: An Initiative of the United Way of Massachusetts by Jim Wallis. Annie E. Casey Foundation and United Way of Massachusetts Bay, 1999.

Faith-Based Institutions and High-Risk Youth by Harold Dean Trulear. The first in a series of reports from the National Faith-Based Initiative for High-Risk Youth of Public/Private Ventures, 2000.

Faith Matters: A Ministry for the Mean Streets by Christopher Reardon. Ford Foundation Report, Spring/Summer, 1999. Available online at <http://www.fordfound.org>.

Contact ICP:

1522 K Street NW, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 393-7731 • Fax: (202) 393-4148
E-mail: ICP@InstituteForCommunityPeace.org
URL: www.peacebeyondviolence.org

The Institute for Community Peace changed its name from the National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention in June 2003.

Rabinowitz, Phil. *Engaging Communities in Violence Prevention Tipsheet Series: Faith Community*. Institute for Community Peace. Washington, DC: 2004.

THE ICP MISSION

The Institute for Community Peace promotes a safe, healthy, and peaceful nation by mobilizing community resources and leadership. We engage in strategies that emphasize civic empowerment and focus attention on the range of factors that contribute to and prevent violence and promote peace.



INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY PEACE
1522 K Street NW, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20005



Institute for
Community
Peace

ENGAGING THE
FAITH COMMUNITY
IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

A TIPSHEET FOR PRACTITIONERS

