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Matthew 25 vision is lifted up at a global human rights prison reform conference

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The 9th International CURE Conference explores global incarceration

by Hans Hallundbaek | Special to Presbyterian News Service

The 9th International
CURE Conference



Conference delegates visit Naivasha maximum security prison in Kenya. Seated in the center are CURE founder and president, Charlie Sullivan, with May Muthoni Muriuki, and to her right, the Naivasha Prison warden. (Photo by Kennedy Omondi Onyalo)

(<https://justiceaction.org.au/kenya-cure-conference-2023/>) was held this year in Nairobi, the capital of the East African country of Kenya. From May 1-5, 95 delegates from 28 countries and 12 African nations came together under the banner of Pan Africa CURE to further their agenda of human rights and prison reform efforts in the United States and the African continent as well as other countries throughout the world.

International CURE (Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants) is a U.S.-based grassroots organization started in 1972 dedicated to legislative change on criminal justice issues. It has more than 30 chapters in the U.S. and abroad. In recent years, conferences have been held in Bangkok, Thailand; Costa Rica; and Kigali, Rwanda. These efforts for criminal justice reform are strictly guided in accordance with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>).

The opening address of the Nairobi Conference was a welcome speech by the Commissioner General of Kenyan Prisons, John K. Warioba, who closed his inspiring message of the need for prison reform with a wish for “a good conference and for a revolutionary conference.”

During the four-day conference, topics discussed in panel format featured a broad spectrum of issues including challenging prison conditions, human rights violations, the treatment of juveniles and women, and issues of educational programming and re-entry training.

The topic of faith-based rehabilitation was not ignored, and its panel included a lively presentation by Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Christian presenters demonstrating that prison reform is a common global concern in all major religions.

A most relevant highlight of the Pan African CURE conference was a visit to the Naivasha maximum security male prison two hours’ drive into the stunning Rift Valley (<https://www.andbeyond.com/destinations/africa/kenya/rift-valley/>) region of Kenya. Here, less than three miles from beautiful Lake Naivasha, reside more than 2,000 men incarcerated behind 20-foot-high concrete walls. Security is tight and no photography or direct communication was allowed with the inmates lined up in secure distance as the visiting delegation toured various sections of the prison: food preparation, cell blocks, a printing shop, and a carpentry section where inmates learn to build upholstered mahogany furniture for sale to the outside world. To everyone’s delight, and especially the prison population, the visit included the top ministerial secretary for Correctional Services in Kenya, May Muthoni Muriuki, who addressed the incarcerated men in an affirming and inspiring speech.



Conference delegates at the Pan Africa CURE Conference were photographed at the Boma Hotel in Nairobi taking a break from deliberations in the East African equatorial sun. (Photo by Kennedy Omondi Onyalo)

While the conference concluded that prison reform is still an urgent need in many countries, what became clear was the urgent and important need of better treatment of women in prison. The proportion of females in prison compared to men is increasing globally, and in most countries that increase is not reflected in proper attention to the special needs of women in prison and

their children.

The Rev. Stanley Chimesya, a Presbyterian prison chaplain from Malawi, struck a chord when he said, “In my country, a prison sentence is often considered a death sentence.” He added that in a women’s prison he serves, it is considered a privilege to have one meal a day and a mat to sleep on.

Horror stories in prison systems span the world, panelists said, from Brazil to Japan, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to China. In Pakistan, children are eligible for the death penalty and in Uganda, execution is back on the books for aggravated homosexuality.

The small African country of Rwanda is facing a special issue caused by the aftereffects of the Rwanda genocide of 1994. Many thousands of long-term prisoners from that era are to be released over the next several years back into a society which is working hard to overcome the still lingering original causes of the massacre almost 30 years ago.

Banchayehu Bekele, an Ethiopian social worker, described in striking terms the horrendous condition for incarcerated women in her country, explaining the need for soap, hygiene products, clothing and other items as well as the regular abuse to which female prisoners are exposed. Her visualization was so moving the moderator called for a minute of silence at one point to give the audience time to absorb the depth of these descriptions.

Alice Sevilla, a prison chaplain from Cuba, described how the general dire economic conditions in her country along with the increasing youth emigration are impacting the general climate in the prison system. "How to recover hope?" she lamented.

Constructive recommendations and hope that emerged from the conference included a call for the opening of modern telecommunication means through email, messaging, and video to include the world of incarceration. Brett Collins of the Justice Action (<https://justiceaction.org.au/>) organization based in Australia is spearheading this very timely initiative.

Another recommendation highlighted at the conference was to foster enhanced local community engagement with neighboring prisons, as scripturally suggested in Matthew 25:43: "... I was in prison, and you did not visit me." This idea of engaging communities in their local prisons has been modelled in the U.S. based on its Adopt-A-Highway concept.

"Adopt-A-Prison" has been successfully

introduced, practiced and perfected (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0521-prison/>) in two New York State



Human Rights lawyer Sarmad Ali (left) donates soap, toothpaste and other goods to Superintendent Muhammed Farrukh Rasid for distribution to inmates at Attock District Jail in Pakistan. (Contributed photo)

female prisons: Bedford Hills (<https://bedfordny.gov/town-government/committees/prison-relations-advisory-committee-prac/prac-adopt-a-prison-photos/>) , a maximum-security facility, and its neighboring medium-security Taconic Correctional Facility (<https://doccs.ny.gov/location/taconic-correctional-facility>) . These two correctional facilities together hold close to 1,000 incarcerated women.

The Adopt-A-Prison concept (AAP) has now been piloted in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Pakistan. The AAP program was well received at the conference and recognized as a timely gospel-inspired concept. From an interfaith harmony perspective, it is encouraging to note that in Pakistan the AAP program is now piloted by two separate Christian and Muslim organizations.

In his closing remarks, Peter Onyango Olwal, Coordinator of Pan Africa CURE, expressed gratitude for the conference's unwavering dedication to human rights and prison reform efforts and reminded the audience the year of 2023 is the 75th anniversary year of the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Right on December 10, 1948. Closing on this high note, and like many other conferences, one lingering question remained: Where will the next conference meet? Possible sites mentioned included Australia, Pakistan, China or Japan. Only time will tell.

The Rev. Dr. Hans Hallundbaek, a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is a co-founder of both Rehabilitation through the Arts (<https://www.rta-arts.org/>) and the Interfaith Prison Partnership (<https://www.interfaithprisonpartnership.org/>) , an outreach of Hudson River Presbytery (<https://www.hudrivpres.org/>) . He is an adjunct instructor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (<https://new.jjay.cuny.edu/>) and Marist College (<https://www.marist.edu/>) . He lives in Katonah, New York.



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