

KROC *Insight*

LOOK BOTH WAYS: RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND THE CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING COMMUNITY AND POLICE

Reflecting on his work with the Community Assistance Support Team (CAST), Bishop Cornelius Bowser tells a story illustrating the balancing act religious leaders play working with police and the community.

“ I received a phone call from a community member that there had been a gang-involved shooting. I rushed to the scene to find out what had happened in the hopes of preventing escalation and further violence. By the time I arrived, the victim had already been transported to the hospital, but the scene was still crowded with community members and the police conducting their investigation. I approached a gang detective to get information that could help me get out in front of the situation to prevent any retaliation.

“The detective shared with me what had happened: a car pulled up, and someone jumped out and shot a young man in the leg before speeding off. After our conversation, I looked around at who was still present at the scene. Seeing a youth I recognized, I walked over to speak with him. The young man had seen me talking to the detective and had likely seen a recent photo of me with some officers as part of some work we were doing together. So when I asked him what he knew about what had gone down, he started to say something but then glanced over to where I had been talking to the detective. Looking down, he said, ‘I don’t know, Pastor Bowser. You’re kinda like the police.’”



Bishop Cornelius Bowser in the San Diego Community.

THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF TRUST

Across the United States, including in San Diego where the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (Kroc IPJ) launched the Building Trust Partnership (BTP), relationships between communities and law enforcement are strained and plagued by mistrust. To build relationships and restore trust between police and communities while confronting

difficult, emotionally and politically charged issues, religious leaders must engage with both sides and remain neutral, even when speaking to one may be interpreted as violating the trust of the other.

Our assumption at the outset of the BTP was that faith leaders would be drawn from and deeply rooted in the community and would therefore already have the backing and trust of its members. Police, perceiving these religious leaders as aligned with the community, and perhaps even as anti-police, would view these individuals and their actions with skepticism. In order for clergy to play a pivotal role in bringing police and community members together to build trust in such a context, the project would need to establish or strengthen the relationships of some religious leaders with police but could rely on the resilience of their credentials within the community.

“ The question we have been wrestling with is, where does this trust come from and how do clergy maintain it?”

What we have found instead since initiating the BTP is the extent to which faith leaders have had to continually weigh the effects of their actions on relationships in the other direction — with the community. They consider how their words and deeds will influence their credibility with the people. Ultimately, efforts to improve public safety that involve religious leaders without a strong standing in the community are destined to fail, as

people question the goals of these initiatives and the motivations of those involved. Consequently, the BTP has sought to identify and engage with those religious leaders who have the trust of the people. The question we have been wrestling with is, where does this trust come from and how do clergy maintain it?

FOCUSING ON CLERGY-POLICE COLLABORATION

Much of the academic literature around successful clergy-police-community collaborations stresses the importance of relationship-building between clergy and police, while paying significantly less attention to the equally necessary work of clergy building and maintaining their relationships with the community and its leaders. Research by Winship and Berrien and by Brunson et al. on what is arguably the most well-known clergy-police-community collaboration, Boston's Operation Ceasefire, repeatedly focuses on the relationship between the clergy who formed the Ten Point Coalition (TPC) and the Boston Police Department (BPD), highlighting the evolution from an initially adversarial relationship to one marked by a real rapport between clergy and specific officers.

For law enforcement, working with faith leaders is a well-established strategy to strengthen connections with the community and build support for their policing efforts. Brunson et al. write that, “Forming effective working partnerships with black churches seems to be a logical mechanism through which police executives can strive to build better relationships with the black community.” Unfortunately, police often run the risk of collaborating with faith leaders who lack authentic

credibility in their community, failing to create what Winship and Berrien call the “umbrella of legitimacy” needed by police to operate in the community. Doing so can actually delegitimize police efforts to engage community members.

BALANCING CRITICISM AND COLLABORATION

A willingness on the part of clergy to publicly voice concerns about the police — in an effort to raise awareness, promote accountability and push for policy changes — can be one method for maintaining credibility within the community. However, loudly and repeatedly criticizing the police and their actions can result in an exclusively adversarial position toward police, preventing the formation of any kind of productive, working relationship — precisely the kind of relationship necessary for religious leaders to collaborate with law enforcement to develop long-term solutions to address community needs.

Striking an effective balance between working with police and publicly raising concerns when needed can help to preserve credibility and trust in both directions, yet rarely is the issue explored of how clergy are able to do so.

STAYING GROUNDED IN THE COMMUNITY

While researchers have largely not focused on clergy-community dynamics, the religious leaders themselves are well aware of the difficult balancing act they must perform to avoid being labeled as either pro- or anti-police and, conversely, as either against or for the community. One-third of the TPC clergy interviewed in Winship and Berrien’s analysis of Operation Ceasefire spoke

about “the complexities inherent in simultaneously representing the community’s interests and preserving positive relationships with BPD.”



SDPD Lt. Ernesto Servin speaks at the Building Trust Partnership Southeast Cohort’s immigration update event.

Similarly, religious leaders in San Diego who are part of the Building Trust Partnership recognize this challenge, and we have learned from them a number of different approaches for how to walk this fine line of impartiality when confronting hot, sensitive issues. For clergy seeking to establish and/or maintain the community credibility needed to work on contentious police-community relations, without at the same time sacrificing constructive relations with law enforcement, there are a number of approaches available:

- **Community Native:** For some clergy, their credibility is the product of their long history in the community. They were born and raised in the community with family going back generations. At the very least, they have lived the majority of their adult lives in the community working for its people.

- **Behind-the-Scenes Intermediary:** Through extensive one-on-one meetings with stakeholders from law enforcement and the community in which they spend time listening and discussing the issues, religious leaders can prove their genuine interest in finding a resolution that meets the needs of all. This may require multiple rounds of phone calls and/or in-person meetings with numerous parties to explore the problem and develop solutions. By being open and transparent about all their actions with both sides, religious leaders ensure that everyone knows what they are doing and why.
- **Relationship Builder:** Through intentional outreach, religious leaders can establish relationships with non-religious community leaders. Clergy can rely on these individuals to vouch for them when members of the community see or hear about them working with police and have concerns. Clergy may consult these individuals prior to taking action to get their advice and to give them advance notice. This relationship building may take place through formal (e.g., membership on a common board) or informal (e.g., seeing them around the neighborhood) channels.
- **Justice Seeker:** Claiming the mantle of righteousness, some religious leaders feel that, by standing up for and speaking about that which is just, they are not for or against anyone but rather are for justice. With biblical grounding — “Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right” — they feel that

they can avoid criticism or, if it comes, have a means to justify their actions.

- **Public Advocate:** As previously discussed, for some religious leaders, credibility comes from a willingness to publicly take a stand denouncing police actions. Religious leaders trying to build trust will often use this approach sparingly and strategically, as it can damage important relationships with police.

CONNECTIONS AT ALL LEVELS

Organizers of clergy-police-community collaborations take for granted strong bonds between clergy and community members at their own peril. Making simplistic assumptions about dynamic communities with deep histories and complex relationships is not only offensive to these communities and their residents but also ultimately counterproductive to achieving one’s objectives. Anyone seeking to understand and effect change — policy-makers, community organizers, academics — must appreciate the need to establish, strengthen and maintain relationships in all directions.

“ Only then will these clergy members be able to speak uncomfortable truths...”

Religious leaders need to devote energy to understanding and connecting with their

communities whose members will, in turn, view them as credible actors working on their behalf. At the same time, religious leaders must maintain relationships and channels of communication with police who will therefore believe these leaders to be acting in good faith. Only then will these clergy members be able to speak uncomfortable truths that may be hard to hear to all parties — and, in so doing, support the difficult work of bringing police and community together to repair damaged relationships and build trust.

Bishop Cornelius Bowser is a co-founder of the Community Assistance Support Team (CAST), a grass-roots violence and gang intervention program, the founding pastor of Charity Apostolic Church, and a member of the Building Trust Partnership.

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ABOUT

The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies (Kroc School) at the University of San Diego is the global hub for peacebuilding and social innovation. Founded in 2007, the Kroc School equips and empowers innovative Changemakers to shape more peaceful and just societies. It offers master's degrees in peace and justice, social innovation, conflict management and resolution, and a dual degree in peace and law — programs which have attracted diverse and dynamic students from more than 50 countries who want to lead change. The Kroc School is also home to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, the Trans-Border Institute, and the Center for Peace and Commerce (a partnership with the University of San Diego School of Business) — award-winning entities which further enable the Kroc School to take applied learning beyond the classroom. Through groundbreaking research and forward-thinking programs, the Kroc School is shaping a future in which peaceful co-existence is the new normal. To learn more, visit sandiego.edu/peace

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