

Episode 29: Leveraging Faith-Based Leaders for Gun Violence Prevention: A Conversation with Pastor Monroe

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Intro 1:

Welcome to the NCJA podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning, and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program or Byrne JAG contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Demaxia Wray:

Hi everyone, and welcome back to another episode of the NCJA podcast. My name is Demaxia Wray and I am a program manager here at the National Criminal Justice Association. Today, I am thrilled to have Pastor Gilford Monroe on the podcast to discuss the impact of faith-based leadership on gun violence prevention. This episode covers the benefits and importance of faith-based leaders taking the initiative to combat the violence epidemic and non-traditional criminal justice stakeholder collaboration. Thank you so much for being here today, Pastor Monroe. Would you mind telling us a little bit about yourself?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

So thank you so much for inviting me on today to talk a little bit about my experience and the work that we do around gun violence. I'm Pastor Gil Monroe. I do most of my work in Brooklyn, New York. I serve as the faith advisor to the mayor of New York City. I am the founding president of the God Squad and the National Convener for Clergy for Safe Cities.

Demaxia Wray:

Thank you for that introduction and thank you again for being here. From your perspective, why is it important to engage faith-based leaders in criminal justice issues, specifically in the gun violence prevention space?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

I think it's important because in the faith community and in terms of gun violence overall, we see that there is a specific role for the faith community to play, and we would like to continue to develop how, number one, states or cities see faith community, number two, how the faith community see themselves, and then number three, how do we collaborate and use the resources that the faith community harness to be able to make a profound impact on gun violence. So I think that it is very important to engage the faith community because I think that we have so much to offer that is not being used at this point in time.

Demaxia Wray:

What services does God Squad provide?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

So initially, God Squad, or the 67th Precinct Clergy Council, it's really a group of clergy members who lived work and had houses of worship within this particular area in Brooklyn. So how New York City is

broken up is that precincts, you have precincts in boroughs and you have about, let's say twenty-four precincts in Brooklyn, and we were just one of those precincts. So the work that we provided was direct victim services to those who was harmed or life was impacted by gun violence. Then after that, we saw that mothers and fathers and children coming out of this trauma had no support unit. So we created a mother support group initially that then take mothers to support them with other survivors of gun violence to put them in these spaces that they use the pain and turn it into purpose to be also advocates to ending gun violence.

So their voices were authentic in that sense that they went through the pain, the suffering, and now they had the credibility of speaking on the subject. Also to right now we have morphed into a full [inaudible 00:03:36] academy, which is a mentorship program mentoring young people from the age of 14 to 21, and we have about 80 cohorts in every class, male and female. We have the single parents university, which we take single parents from within these high risk gun violence area which we serve and offer single parents the opportunity to increase on their skill sets, to get them ready for jobs to help them in terms of time management, to help them in their financial goals because we know that a lot of our offenders come from single parent home. So we try to help them again, just be a well-rounded parent, but give them the support that they need. And then of course, we have our clergy team who supports on the ground, street level engagement with young people and also community too as well. So in a nutshell, that's what we do. We can say more, but we leave it right there.

Demaxia Wray:

And more so, what is the target audience for your God Squad outreach?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

How we started off in the beginning was just a group of clergy who decided that not one shooting will go unanswered, and so we wanted to be true to that statement in our community. We had also wanted to make sure that we were able to show love, compassion, and mercy to those within the particular confines where we live in Brooklyn. And so our general target audience was of course those people who live within the scope of where we served. Of course, the children working with crews and gangs in that particular area, people who are high risk, young people who are in front of the gun, behind the gun.

Demaxia Wray:

Nice. And so you talked about God Squad based in Brooklyn, and now I want to zoom out to a national initiative, Clergy for Safe Cities. What is Clergy for Safe Cities and how does this fit into the work of God Squad?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

Yeah, so Clergy for Safe Cities really started during the summer of George Floyd. And during the summer of George Floyd, one of the things that we saw was that the faith community was looking for ways, and clergy from around the country was looking for ways up to, number one, how to engage community. Number two, being a police-involved shooting how to hold the police departments accountable in their local communities. And then number three, what the uptick of gun violence after COVID-19, just trying to figure out what would be the best way to handle violence and crime in their communities. So we decided that why don't we put together a national outfit that deals with clergy supporting faith leaders in their local communities, working with faith leaders who probably loosely organized in their communities, giving them the tools to be able to organize, giving them models to work from, that's

what's working best throughout the country, and then being able to give them the technical resources to stand up their organizations or their clergy collectives.

So we started off after the summer of George Floyd and just trying to work with faith leaders who wanted to get a grip hold of the crime and the violence in their local community.

Demaxia Wray:

It's really important when you do outreach to just really know your audience and it seems that you guys got that down pat. I really like that. How have you found and engaged members to join your Clergy for Safe Cities Coalition?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

A lot of our work is organic, like colleague sharing with other colleagues, looking at devastating stories in the newspaper across the country, doing reach out, working on a heavy cycle of social media advocacy work, and then just each one telling one. We don't have no ad campaign. This is just really clergy who is seeing the need for help. One clergy deciding that, hey, I have a friend who's in a particular state that needs some outreach and need some support. And we have just been maintaining and growing just by conversations, clergy, colleagues, connecting through the denominations, through their friendship, through their conferences, professional circles, and that's how actually people join Clergy for Safe Cities.

Demaxia Wray:

That just goes to show the power of word of mouth. I like that. And how can we influence state agencies to incorporate collaboration with faith-based leaders in their community violence prevention, and what does or should this collaboration look like?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

Yeah, and I'm thinking too as well, when you have that whole idea of how states should look or cities should look at the faith community, it needs to be a reimagining us to, first of all who we are, what we provide. First of all, number one, I would say that faith leaders, we are teachers, professors, professional workers, storytellers, pioneers, moms, dads, have regular jobs. So faith leaders across the globe, especially those of us who are bivocational, do other things just besides pastoring or leading congregations, whatever tradition that you belong to. The second thing that I would say too as well is to understand what we provide and what we could provide to you. Number one, most faith groups that we know of, let me take for example, in the 67th Precinct in Brooklyn, New York, our houses of worship that we work with, we are the largest land owners within the particular area.

What does that mean? It means that we have ton of spaces. We have gyms, we have space to do trainings, we have places to do conferences. We have classrooms. There is so many different, we have outdoor facilities. So just in that alone, a lot of times orgs and individuals don't look at us as having a lot of space to do a lot of programming. That's number two. And then number three, we bring a lot to the table to offer. We have professionals in our houses of worship. If you can think of any profession, we can harness even within our house of worship, a talent pool that is unmatched by any other. I would say that the fourth thing would be is that on the gun violence prevention side itself directly, faith communities across the country, we have seen have a lot of great models that needs to be highlighted.

I can think of, number one, we have the Boston Miracle and the whole Season of Peace led by Reverend Jeffrey Brown. We have in Indiana, led by Reverend Harrison Barnes, the 10-Point Coalition. We have in

Chicago, Pastor Cory Brooks who was building a thirty-five million dollars community center. These are all different ways that the faith community, faith leaders are directly driving the issues to reduce gun violence in so many unique ways. Then you have Clergy for Safe Cities, which we are training hundreds of clergy throughout the United States to work on on the ground street engagement with young people, but also to how do you can support families who are victims to gun violence, who are survivors. So for us, is that we want to be looked at in our totality of what we bring to the table and not just in that one sense of just the spiritual aspect of it, but it has to be an holistic approach. And so the faith community is a holistic community and we want to be viewed that way.

Demaxia Wray:

That was an amazing answer, and even as you were answering it, I really liked how you talked about the space. Regardless of what religion you belong to, whether it's a church, a synagogue, a mosque, that's essentially the safe space. It's the holy ground. But when you think of it as a physical space for so much opportunity for collaboration, to really foster collaboration and to really bring the community together, I definitely could see the faith-based places of worship being overlooked when it should be like, hey, hello, I'm here. So I really liked how you talked about that. What are some of your best practices for engagement with the community and other faith-based leaders?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

So some of the best practices is again, holding police accountable, but having relationship with police. What does that mean? In terms of best practices is that we have to have a relationship with police and an understanding that, number one, we'll hold you accountable. But then number two, when we go on the streets and there's issues that is arising, we are always going to take the side of the community. In other words, when we get out on the street and we are trying to mitigate situations where there's a police-involved shooting or there's an uprising, one of the best practices is that we always stand on the side of the community, allow the community to vent the frustration. And the police, of course, knowing that we have a relationship, and then being able to say to the community, let us then figure out how we can then best triage this problem or this situation with the police department. That really has worked well for us, especially in police-involved shootings in Brooklyn.

The next best practice is organizing our community. When there is a matter of violence in a particular community and we go into that community or that particular neighborhood where we serve, we don't just go in and leave. What we work on in terms of best practices is that we have to engage the community, provide some tangible changes. For instance, if a light had been blown for many years and they have complained about this before, and in the anger and frustration of a shooting that happened within that area are one of our best practices that allow government to then fix that issue. Go in with the idea that we are going to be fixing things that the community has on their mind for concern, roads, parks, graffiti cleanup, leaving a block association, helping them organize, then coming back and giving back.

If they're having a block party or they're having a day of remembrance for the person who was killed on that particular block, how do we support them? We give them resources. If they want toys for kids, if they want turkey for Thanksgiving, we provide those things to them. So our best practices is that when you are engaging in community, it helps you with your credibility, but it helps you be part of the community and you're not just looking like an outside force coming in to conquer or coming in to tell people what to do, but you're working together with that community. So we have to be engaging or we have to be strategic. We have to be intentional about creating a level of community within that

particular area that have seen the violence. And once that is done, then the community will work with you because they know that you're not just coming in to say what is wrong, but you're actually helping with what is wrong. So these are some of the best practices that I can say to you that we do when we are on the streets.

Demaxia Wray:

Why do you feel it is essential as a pastor to do this work and include other faith-based leaders to reduce gun violence?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

I think for us it's a calling. Why do I feel that it's important to include all the faith leaders? It's a calling. It's a calling in our lives. The other thing too is that we have no other option. There is no other "savior" who is going to come to save us. We have to save ourselves. We have to be the answer to the problems in which we're looking for. We have to answer the questions. We have to be the ones who is going to take our community and say that we want to be able to live in a place free from violence. I believe that it can be done. I know that it can be done. And if we're not working towards leading to a place where we believe that violence can end, then our faith should be in question.

So for me, we need to engage other faith leaders to say that, hey, we have a particular role to play, that only we can play that role. There is no other group of individuals that can come in, move away. Let's say all the crowds. You go on strike and then we'll say, okay, let's bring in some other people to be faith leaders now. We are the only one that can do our job, and so community needs us. We need to be on the front line. We'll continue to ask faith leaders that to understand the text in which they're pulling from, that it's about helping people, and helping people means that we have to go set of four walls to help those in need. So we'll continue to engage other faith leaders because we are the only ones that can help ourselves.

Demaxia Wray:

How did you get into the gun violence prevention space? It's a very unique space to get into. You don't see a lot of faith-based leaders, or at least back then, you didn't see a lot of faith-based leaders so heavily involved in gun violence. How did you get into the gun violence space or gun violence prevention?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

Yeah, so I would always say that gun violence met me and choose me. One day I was in my church and a lot of commotion came on in my office. I got the knock on the door, said, "Did you hear what happened?" A young boy was shot and killed right down on the block from my church. And so from that day, I just thought about the fact that, hey, if I'm going to pastor in this community and we have this problem which called gun violence, we need to be working on it. God has called us our city. God has called us to be able to be helpful. And so gun violence met me and choose me. I did not choose it. And because of the fact that I saw that Harry is a young boy, 16-years old with his whole life in front of him, that was snatched away by a simple stupid decision by someone who feel empowered with a gun, a weapon that they had no business having, that was totally legal, that should not be on our streets, but his life was ended.

And for me, it will be unconscionable not to have said I want to help. And so that's how I started the work, because of that one incident that happened in front of my church.

Demaxia Wray:

I like that. It was like a call to service. You couldn't resist it. In your introduction, you mentioned that you serve in an advisory capacity to the New York City mayor. Can you speak a little bit about the work that has come out of that partnership?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

Yeah, sure. Serving as the faith advisor to New York City mayor and leading up the Office of Faith-Based and Community Development really was put in place to help faith leaders navigate the complexities of government. And it means that, of course, faith leaders, their everyday job, for the most part, if they're not bivocational or if they are full-time in ministry, their work is not to try to figure out the bureaucracy of government. They spend a lot of times with little budget, little staff, who are stretched in working on their community issues. We thought that it would be best to have someone who understand what faith leaders go through and what is needed to be able to be supported by government. And that faith leaders would have just a one-stop shop, a "boutique service" in government that is, as opposed to trying to call different agencies, they can just make one phone call to the Office of Faith-Based and Community Partnerships, and then we will then return, put them on to the right individual.

So my job is to look at the city resources, have the opportunity and the ability to make sure that the faith community understand that they have the ability and the right to be able to apply for funding, give them the opportunities for training, also to building capacity. Because a lot of the budget that you spend over all across America, especially with New York City and New York state, a chunk of those budget goes to faith-based communities to do the work, to help with single parents, to help with gun violence, to help with mental health, to help with housing, social services, senior citizen homes. And so all of these are faith-based communities or nonprofit organization that is in contract with the city. And the work that we do is showing again and helping the faith community be competitive, to be in the know of the things that they can provide.

A lot of people and a lot of houses of worship and faith leaders are providing the service, but they're not having the money or the funding to do so, and they can scale up too as well. They run great food pantries. A plus one across the country and across New York City. They run mental health. Who did the government turn to when COVID-19 as started to ravage through America, they turned to the faith leaders who was trusted and we opened up our houses of worship as sites for education, information, sites for COVID tests and for the shots, for the vaccination. So here we see that the faith community always play a critical role in helping government do its job. And so for my role in New York City, my job is to continue to harness those relationships and bring them into relationship with the city.

Demaxia Wray:

That really concludes all of our questions for today, but I just wanted to just thank you once again for coming and sharing your input with our listeners. And I'd just like to add that as someone who sits on our equity committee, specifically, that's for racial inequality when it comes to criminal justice funding, we talk a lot about nontraditional relationships and stakeholders, partnerships, and definitely, faith-based leaders being a part of our criminal justice system, and the impact has come up multiple times. So I'd like to thank you for really sharing that input and your experience. And I know it's not easy, but the work that you do is remarkable and it shows and it's really been a staple, not only in your community, but nationwide. Is there anything that you'd like to add for our listeners?

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

I think just one more thing that I can say as I encourage people who are listening is that really finding creative ways to engage with the faith community. We are capable of handling funding. We are capable of running organizations. We have been doing the work for many, many years. It's a time to reimagine what the faith community role is in gun violence. There is not no one bullet solution or silver bullet to end gun violence or reduce gun violence or to stop the carnage of violence that we see in our cities. It will take a comprehensive, holistic effort. So I am saying that again, engage the faith community. We are here to be used and we have a lot of resources that we can give and provide. And also, of course, this is what we are called to do and we want to be helpful.

Demaxia Wray:

I really do hope that, from this podcast, a lot of people take this and take this back to their states or take this back to their organizations and really foster these collaborations. And so I'd like to thank you on behalf of NCJA for joining us today, and thank you for our listeners that tuned in today.

Pastor Gilford Monroe:

Thank you.