

— conversations on —
FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by



Faith and Food Justice
April 20, 2022
Summary to Action Report

Session Description:

On April 20th, 2022 Share Our Strength, in collaboration with Food & Society at the Aspen Institute, hosted the latest edition of the [Conversations on Food Justice Series, “Faith and Food Justice”](#) featuring speakers, Abby J. Leibman, Anwar Khan, Eugene Cho, and Preet Singh, moderated by [Simran Jeet Singh, Ph.D., executive director of Religion & Society at the Aspen Institute](#). The panel discussed the history of faith and its connection to anti-hunger work, the current focuses of different faith-based organizations addressing this work, as well as best practices and shared commonalities in thought.

Summary and Key Takeaways:

“To give food can be transactional, but what would it look like to be transformational?” – Anwar Khan

This session showed us that unity, vulnerability, boldness, and respect are some of the key qualities needed to achieve a transformational difference in the food justice space.

Simran Jeet Singh first posed a question to the group regarding the strong connection that many Faith-based organizations have in mobilizing their communities to fight food insecurity. What did this connection mean to each individual?

- Abby J. Leibman noted that the stories told in Judaism, at holidays and through the Torah, are rooted in issues of justice and survival. The desire to step up and help others has been ingrained in synagogue life for millennia. Even the word for charity in Hebrew, tzedakah, translates to justice. These notions about justice, service, and survival are integral to the modern Jewish approach to faith and its practices.

- In the Sikh faith, in the 1400s, Guru Nanak acknowledged the importance of feeding the hungry. One of the guiding principles of Sikhism is *sewa*, which is defined as selfless service. You nourish yourself by nourishing others. Preet Singh provided this historical context to express the importance of food in Sikh culture, and convey that works of service combatting food insecurity have been inherent in the community since its inception.

Eugene Cho expressed these commonalities and shared thoughts between panelists succinctly when he said, “How can we not be engaged in this work? For us, our faith is part of our identity. [...] It is the very essence of who we are. To not embody these values and convictions would in some sense be a betrayal of our own identity in many ways.”

Though each panelist has personally felt a call to action to address food insecurity, it is the work they have done in their respective organizations that have made them uniquely positioned to create significant impact.

- Eugene is President and CEO of [Bread for the World](#), an organization urging America’s decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad by helping to inform policies that will shape our nation and the world. The organization is grounded in values of faith, human flourishing, justice, courage, prophetic voice, nonpartisanship, collaboration, and impact. He sees the biggest challenges to addressing food insecurity to be policy and connecting grassroots to grassroots.
- Abby J. Leibman is President and CEO of [MAZON](#), an organization inspired by Jewish values and ideals with the mission to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds. Mazon’s work focuses on the populations and the issues that are either going unaddressed or under-addressed by the larger anti-hunger movement. Abby, alongside Eugene, believes that policy changes are essential to progress in the anti-hunger space. She notes that it is through policy, law, and lawmakers that the community expresses itself and its priorities. When the community begins to prioritize food insecurity, this will influence the government’s priorities.
- Preet Singh is Director of [Khalsa Food Pantry](#), a food pantry located in Pacoima, Los Angeles, with the goal of helping under-served families decrease the stress of obtaining groceries and providing food for their loved ones. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Preet noted that attendance rates have sky-rocketed, with over 1,000 families being served by the food pantry every week.
- Anwar Khan is President of [Islamic Relief USA](#), an organization with the mission to provide relief and development in a dignified manner regardless of gender, race, or religion, and works to empower individuals in their communities and give them a voice in the world. 80% of Islamic Relief USA’s 240 local partners in America are Muslim, but 20% are not.

Being Muslim is not a requirement to receive care. Anwar noted that providing those in need with direct services is the traditional avenue that people of faith have addressed this work, but advocacy has become increasingly important.

When asked by Simran what best practices each panelist has followed to ensure the work to fight food insecurity is effective, there was collective agreement that perspective, education, stamina, and compassion are all important aspects of doing the work successfully. Abby expressed that so many different issues intersect with hunger, and it essential to shift your perspective in order to identify these problems and incorporate them into solution planning. Though you may not see the connection at first, rising gas prices, for example, will impact how families are able to access food. Anwar noted the importance of educating yourself. If you do something the wrong way, learn to do it the right way. It is easier to ask someone to teach you, than it is to have to start from the beginning. Preet and Eugene articulated the importance of securing stamina to prevent burnout. Anti-hunger work is incredibly taxing. It is essential to create barriers to exhaustion, because there is a duty in the anti-hunger space to continually serve to those in need. As Abby noted, “The food insecure people in America wish that this war was over too, [we] have a responsibility to them [...] to not give up”.

With final remarks, panelists had very insightful summations of the session and their thoughts. Anwar tied back to his faith and said, “When we pray, when we read our scripture, or when we do our worship – that is about improving ourselves. When we feed others and help others – it is about changing society and seeing what effect our prayers and all of the knowledge we’ve gained as people of faith has had.” Eugene ended the session with this statement: “Let’s elevate the importance of empathy. For our hearts to remain tender, [...] vigorous, and committed, because even as we speak we know that there are children in the wealthiest nation in the world [...] that are effected by a lack of food.”

Regardless of religious background or faith, all of our panelists shared commonalities in their work to address food insecurity. Every panelist works at an organization that provides support to individuals regardless of their faith and background. As Eugene noted, “In all of our respective traditions, we realize that to love our neighbors, it is not simply to love those that look like you, think like you, feel like you, or even worship like you.” It is important to also realize the impact that Faith-based organizations have in the anti-hunger space. Preet revealed that 70% of all food pantries, and 27% of shelters are run by faith-based non-profits (Aron and Sharkey 2002; Poppendieck 1998). Faith-based organizations are committed to this work, and are

References:

Aron, Laudan Y., and Patrick T. Sharkey. 2002. *The 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients: A Comparison of Faith-Based and Secular Non-Profit Programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

Poppendieck, Janet. 1998. *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. New York: Viking.

Call To Action:

- Be comfortable asking questions. It is better to ask and be taught, than to feign knowledge.
- Be aware of fatigue when it comes to anti-hunger work. Ensure that you take breaks and receive support from colleagues so that you do not forget the importance of what you are working towards.
- Foster genuine relationships to ensure that you are not dehumanizing people or exploiting stories through this work.
- When you read the news, regardless of subject, think to yourself: “Is this good or bad for the anti-hunger movement?” It is through this practice that you may uncover different issues that touch food insecurity that you didn’t realize before.