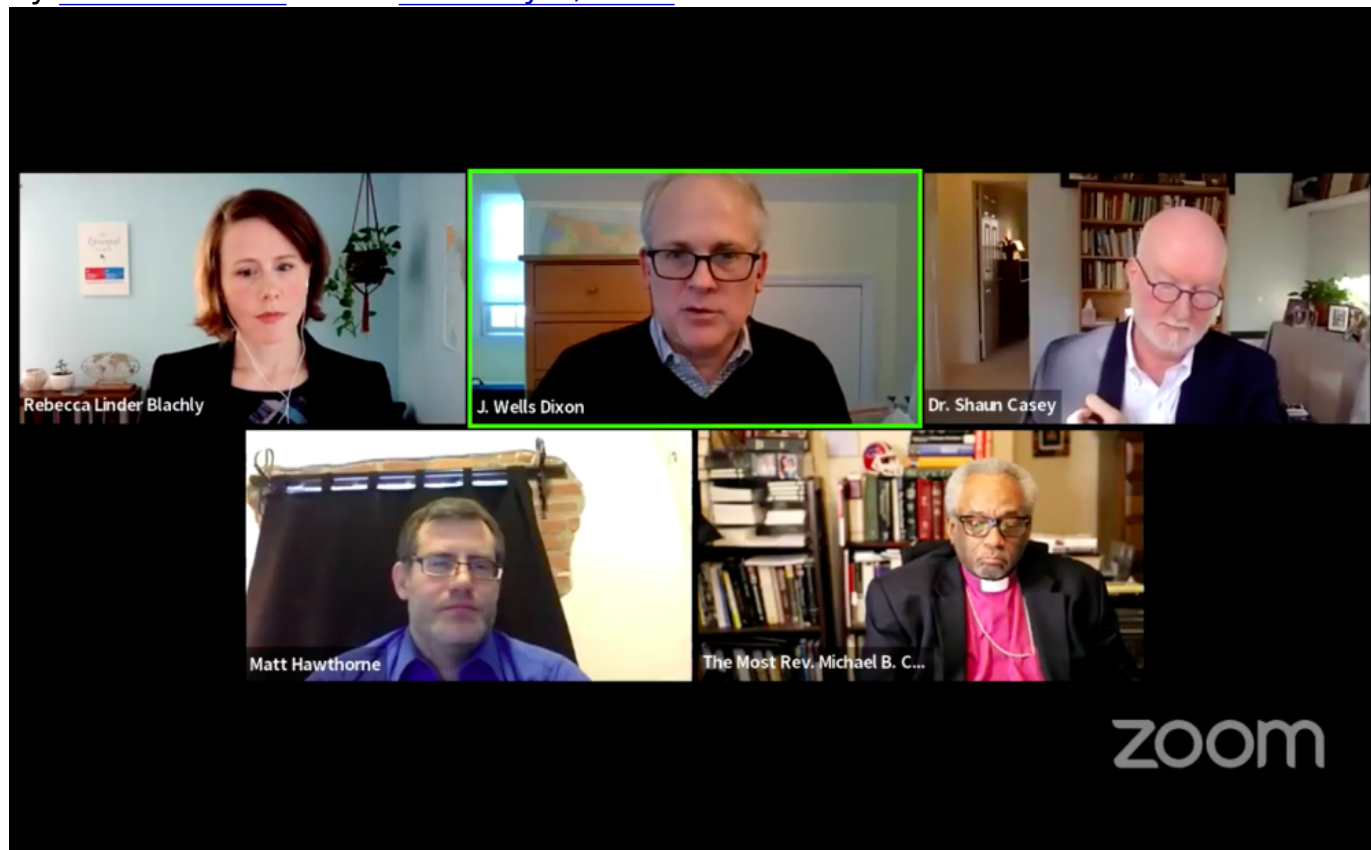


Episcopal Church webinar marks 20 years of Guantanamo Bay human rights 'disaster'

by [David Paulsen](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue



The Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations director Rebecca Blachly (top left) moderates a January 11 discussion about the Guantanamo detention facility with (clockwise) attorney J. Wells Dixon, former State Department official Shaun Casey, Episcopal presiding bishop Michael Curry, and Matt Hawthorne of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. (Video screengrab)

Twenty years ago, the first detainees arrived at the United States detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as part of the Bush administration's war on terror, launched in 2001 in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Since then, 780 people suspected of terrorist connections have been held at Guantanamo, but few were ever tried or even charged.

"They called them the 'worst of the worst,' but ultimately many of the people who were sent there were basically innocent who had been swept up in our war on

terror,” Matt Hawthorne, of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, said January 11 in a webinar hosted by the Episcopal Church’s Office of Government Relations.

Today, 39 detainees remain at Guantanamo, and only 12 have been charged or convicted of crimes. About 18 have been cleared for transfer, once the US government can arrange for other countries to accept them.

The Episcopal Church is among the faith organizations that continue to pressure the federal government to transfer the rest of the men and to close the detention facility. Even now, the webinar’s panelists argued, Guantanamo is associated globally with inhumane treatment of detainees, human rights violations, and an indiscriminate anti-terrorism campaign that almost exclusively targeted Muslims.

“Guantanamo is fundamentally a prison for Muslim men, and that really, to me, underscores the importance of faith-based advocacy to achieve closure,” said J. Wells Dixon, an attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights who has represented Guantanamo detainees in their uphill battles to win transfer or release from the facility.

Hawthorne and Dixon were joined in the church webinar by Shaun Casey, a Georgetown University professor who formerly served in the US State Department as special representative for religion and global affairs.

Guantanamo “is still the human rights and rule-of-law disaster that it’s always been,” Dixon said.

Casey concurred. “It continues to be a moral stain on our country,” he said.

He described some of the challenges the Obama administration faced in its failed attempt to close the facility and noted that such efforts date back to the final years of George W. Bush’s presidency. Officials at the Pentagon, State Department, National Security Council, and White House often clash on how and whether to close Guantanamo, Casey said, and political pressure from Democrats and Republicans in Congress can pull in both directions.

Even so, by the time Bush left office in 2009, more than 500 detainees had been transferred out of Guantanamo. Hawthorne said Bush had concluded it was an inefficient prison and not worth the financial cost or the cost to the United States’

image abroad. During Barack Obama's presidency, nearly 200 more detainees were transferred out of the facility.

Only one prisoner was transferred from Guantanamo under President Donald Trump, and one prisoner so far under President Joe Biden. "President Biden has all the authority that he needs under current law to transfer all of those men and to close Guantanamo," Dixon said. "I think what remains to be seen is whether he has the political will."

Casey suggested that sending personalized letters to members of Congress can have a powerful impact on the public policy debate around Guantanamo. Elected officials on both sides of the aisle have questioned the prudence of keeping the facility open. One challenge is "the status quo has prevailed."

"It's just part of the facts of the world now. It's not seen as an active negotiable issue," Casey said. "So what do we do to try and move that?" He said that in addition to lobbying members of Congress, people of faith can work through affiliated international bodies to apply leverage.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry opened the webinar with a prayer and followed the discussion with brief final remarks.

"I would close with thanks to each of you and thanks for those who continue to lift the torch of human dignity, equality, and liberty," Curry said. —Episcopal News Service