Faith-based organizations and human rights groups both tackle global health problems, but their different ideological approaches can create division and ultimately undermine their efforts.

That's the idea examined in the book "Beholden: Religion, Global Health, and Human Rights," which earned author Susan Holman the 2016 University of Louisville and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Grawemeyer Award in Religion.

U of L presents the awards annually for outstanding works in music composition, ideas improving world order, psychology and education, and presents the religion award jointly with the seminary.

The 2016 winners will present free lectures about their ideas in April when they visit Louisville to accept their $100,000 prizes.

In her book, Holman, senior writer at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator at Harvard University, examines two major groups working to improve global health.

One is religious; the other includes non-governmental organizations and other groups such as Doctors Without Borders that focus on health and human rights.

Both, she argues, fall short in solving health problems around the world. Each has strengths but what they both do badly is work together.

Human rights groups overlook the important role religions play in communities, and faith-based groups focus on their own giving rather than on the people receiving help. Having the groups talk to each other in a way that would incorporate religious views as well as economic and social rights, she said, would make a difference.

But there's suspicion from both sides, which can hinder the conversation.

Human rights groups fear that faith-based organizations will focus on proselytizing. And religious groups, especially conservative ones, have an unspoken fear that people who "demand their rights" somehow pose a threat.
Holman gives an example of how a former student, an Episcopal priest, refused to use the term "rights" or what people "deserved" because she said she'd be thrown out of her church. So she made the same appeal but with different language so congregation members wouldn't act defensively.

"My point in the book — with its emphasis on health — is to say, 'Hey, look. When it comes to basic human needs like hunger, thirst and sickness, there's really no conflict here,' " she said. "Jesus talked about feeding the hungry, giving drinkable water, tending the sick, providing housing, etc. And this basic religious mandate is exactly what we find in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"Let's not be afraid of one another's language as we work toward such common ethical and religious ideals and improving the world's health."

Holman said she knows the combined efforts work.

An example she uses in the book is the timing of medication with religious ritual that saved people dying of tuberculosis and HIV in a remote area of South Africa. A low-budget, faith-based health outreach program first focused on intensive home visits for basic needs and support.

Then, once there was a government program with medications in place, they helped people survive because of this individualized attention, which also involved encouraging people to take medication on their prayer schedules.

"I had not thought at all about religion and global health beyond thinking, 'Gee, global health is a problem, and my religious convictions make me wish it were better,' " said the Rev. Dr. Shannon Craigo-Snell, a theology professor at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and the Grawemeyer religion award director. "She opens eyes as to the different ways that religion can be an asset in promoting global health, but it needs to be used thoughtfully and in conjunction and collaboration with people who come at it from a human rights point of view."

Craigo-Snell added: "We've got some serious problems ahead of us, and we need to get the people who are religious and the people who are not operating out of religion to talk to each other in order to be able to do this well."

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