

Cyprus Social Outreach Forum 2020: finding good in Covid-19

Amidst the challenges of Covid-19, the 2020 Cyprus Social Outreach Forum was held via Zoom on 7 September. It brought together 35 individuals with a keen interest in social concern, including representatives from a wide range of organisations across the island, Imam Shakir from Hala Sultan Tekke in Larnaca, the newly arrived pastor of the Scandinavian Church in Ayia Napa, and representatives from the Anglican church.

Convened by Archidiaconal Social Concern Officer the Reverend Anne Fitcher on behalf of the Anglican Church in Cyprus, the meeting aimed to celebrate achievements; share challenges, learning points and good practice; and consider how participants might support one another locally during 2020/21. Importantly too, the Forum offered space for individuals to reflect on the emotional demands of their work with trafficked women, children in need, refugees, migrants, the elderly and the mentally ill. Archbishop Michael paid tribute to participants' "sheer resilience", describing their determination, persistence and imagination as "humbling".

The organisations involved in the Forum face significant challenges at the best of times, and a number spoke of still greater financial difficulties and the loss of much of their volunteer base amidst the pandemic. But there was much to celebrate, too.

Burcu Mahmutoğlu from SOS Children's Village spoke of how, contrary to all expectations, she and her colleagues saw huge gains in the educational development, health and wellbeing of children in their care during lockdown. Dolores Savvides from Agapi celebrated drawing in younger volunteers and beneficiaries alike to help with food distribution, and Caritas highlighted the valuable contribution of their interns. Meanwhile, Cans for Kids eagerly awaits the arrival at Paphos Hospital of a "pricey piece of kit" to help disabled children and others improve their mobility, purchased with proceeds from the recycling of aluminium cans.

Joel Kelling, who represented the Middle East region of the Anglican Alliance, and who also ably assisted technically with the meeting, spoke of how forming an online Community of Practice has enabled church representatives across the region to support one another better in serving those in need.

Imam Shakir highlighted the unexpectedly large number of requests for help during lockdown—from Muslim and non-Muslim alike—and his community's efforts to help all in need without differentiation. This included the daily provision of 200 cooked meals and food packages in Larnaca alone. "It was impossible to reach everybody because of communication and distance," he said. "But I am happy that we did our best."

Participants later broke into three virtual groups focussed around the South East; Paphos and Limassol; and Nicosia and the North, to reflect on what they had heard, the assets and gifts they shared, and what they could next do together.

Some parish representatives spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of those in need, but also deeply encouraged by the many community and faith-based groups who were passionate to help. Tribute was paid to organisations' creativity and innovation in finding ways to work differently during lockdown and beyond, and to cope with funding shortfalls.

A recurring theme was the sense that, despite its significant challenges, the pandemic had served as a catalyst for individuals and organisations to pause and reassess. This had led to more people engaging in new and different ways; to moving beyond comfort zones; and to collaborating together in support of those in need. It was celebrated that, despite the demanding nature of the work to be done, there was a strong shared sense of compassion, passion and desire to help.

Emerging from discussion groups was a clear consensus that next steps should include measures to counter a sense of isolation and to further communication and coordination.

Three specific suggestions were made:

1. explore whether organisations might come together under a common umbrella to secure external funding
2. take a more developmental approach, making better use of the gifts and skills of those we are supporting, to enable them to contribute as well as receive
3. find ways of offering one another peer-to-peer support to counter volunteer fatigue and anxiety

In closing reflections, Archdeacon Christopher paid tribute to participants' sense of community—a readiness to commit to one another with mercy and with hope, irrespective of differences in areas of focus or worldview.

Revd Anne spoke of how privileged she felt to work with those present, describing the Forum as “a springboard for action” in the different areas around our own churches. Looking forward, she proposed to convene a meeting in each district over the coming months, to continue the conversation and to plan together. A follow-up meeting in the New Year would share progress made, map out next steps, and identify other organisations interested in joining Forum members in their work.

“We cannot live atomised lives,” Archbishop Michael concluded. “If there is one good thing to come out of Covid-19, it is to remind us that we are organically one.”