

Welcoming the stranger and any in need at St. Paul's, Nicosia

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.
Leviticus 19:34

Introduction

This article describes something of the experience of St. Paul's Cathedral community in welcoming the stranger and those in need in Nicosia. It outlines the current need and the response of the Cathedral and wider community, both before and during the COVID19 pandemic, highlighting particular challenges and joys, and future plans. In the light of its experience, some suggestions are also made that may be useful to other churches wishing to start a similar initiative. The article has been written following conversations with Dean Jeremy and Fr. Justin in Autumn 2019, and again with Fr. Justin in May 2020.

The need

In and around Nicosia, there are high levels of people who are, quite simply, hungry. They include significant numbers of asylum-seekers and other displaced people, who, together with local Cypriots, are struggling with high living costs. The impact of COVID-19 on the local and global economy has further exacerbated their plight.

The response

'We are here to serve' - Fr. Justin

A few years ago, in response to the perceived need, a monthly Monday evening meal for refugees and asylum-seekers began being served by St. Paul's Cathedral community. It has recently been 'rebranded' to broaden its appeal, making clear that any who are in need of a hot meal are welcome.

The Cathedral community participates in this initiative in two key ways: by cooking and preparing the food (either in their homes or on site); and by serving the meal and tidying up. From 6.00 until 7.30pm, guests would gather and queue 'canteen-style' to collect their meal and return to a table to eat with others. The evening is designed to encourage guests to chat and to share with one another. When the servers have quiet moments, they, too, circulate and talk with guests and over time, relationships are built.

There are other opportunities for fellowship, and for information sharing too. During the evening, guests have played the piano, table tennis is available, and the younger ones have also enjoyed the outside play equipment. Representatives from First Step (a programme providing vocational training for integration into the labour market) have also come to offer information to individuals. On occasion, the Thrift Shop opens, with additional helpers, for guests to select clothing.

In addition to the Monday meal, food has been served to those in need twice weekly from the hall at St. Paul's, by the Mercy Centre. A hot homemade meal and a breakfast is served on Wednesday evenings and Friday mornings respectively. On Wednesdays, following Grace, a team of volunteers serves the guests at table and later clears away their plates. This model of hospitality is best described as one in which 'everyone sits down and receives'. The style

for Friday breakfasts is more relaxed, with food parcels also being distributed. Throughout the week, too, there is a small *ad hoc* food bank for those in need, that operates out of the Deanery. These different acts of Christian hospitality share a common feature: they all offer a welcoming and safe environment in which relationship, dignity and respect can flourish.

The onset of COVID-19 in Spring 2020 has meant that firstly, the need for gifts of food within the community is greater; and secondly that finding a way to respond effectively within the necessary government restrictions is particularly challenging. Clearly, meals needed to be brought, ready packaged, to the homes of those in need.

Early in the lockdown period, the Cathedral put out a call for volunteers through social and other media. The response was heartening: a volunteer from the Women's Fellowship Guild offered to cook 100 meals on a weekly basis; and another individual offered to cook an additional 40 meals per week. There were further offers of help too: to collect and deliver food gifts; and to support the logistics and administration of a new system for providing food gifts.

And so it was that by Monday 13th April, in excess of 100 cooked, ready to eat meals were being packaged and delivered to individual addresses around Nicosia on Mondays. Following a request for an additional 80 meals from the Cameroon Church in Nicosia, the Dean and Fr. Justin also began making bulk deliveries to them and to some other single addresses on Wednesdays. By early May, there were some 200 meals (half meat, half vegetarian) being delivered each week. If the number of people needing a meal on one day seemed low, the administration team would call previous recipients to check whether they might also need a meal, always capping the deliveries each day at 100 due to the resources available. Additional food parcels were also being added to the delivery runs, for distribution as needed.

The Cathedral office has served as the initiative's administrative hub. Here volunteers and staff receive food requests and donations, both through the Cathedral's landline, and via SMS and WhatsApp messaging on a dedicated mobile phone. Requests for food are also received from Caritas for people whom they know are specifically in need. The day's most efficient collection and delivery routes are planned and forwarded to individual drivers. Arrangements are made, too, regarding patterns of deliveries. Individual talents of volunteers were identified and used effectively, so that efficient logistical planning began to evolve and the workload was distributed more effectively.

Challenges...

Knowing whether meals are reaching those most in need is always a key challenge, and during lockdown, this has especially been the case. Initially it proved particularly difficult to obtain accurate details of residential addresses. As deliveries continued, this became clearer, as did the number of individuals within each household who needed a meal.

Communication with those receiving food can be challenging due to language barriers. During lockdown, it has proved additionally so. Volunteers want to be able to respond to a person in need, with sensitivity and care. Under normal circumstances, they are able to communicate their compassion through

appropriate non-verbal means. During the COVID-19 crisis, however, such options are necessarily restricted.

Ensuring the security and safety of volunteers during lockdown has been challenging too. The needs of individuals have been so considerable that, on occasion, a number have gathered in the hope of receiving food intended for just a few households. It has been hard for volunteers to send people away empty-handed. And they have, at all times, needed to be especially mindful of their own health and safety, and of that of others.

Data protection is another key challenge: lists of home addresses of individuals require treating sensitively, as does access to volunteers' personal mobile phone numbers.

...And joys

The opportunity to link with other NGOs, both faith-based and secular, across the city to serve those in need is a particular joy. The help received from Caritas has been noted above. Additionally, volunteers from Refugee Europe have assisted with deliveries both for the Cathedral and for Caritas. Donations of money, food, take-away containers etc. have been made by different groups and individuals, including some from outside Cyprus.

Fr. Justin identified other joys, too: those of discovering individuals' latent talents (e.g. in logistics or catering etc.); of facilitating an important opportunity during lockdown for members of the Cathedral community to come together to serve others and to enjoy fellowship outside the home (while maintaining physical distancing requirements); and of establishing rhythms of working effectively together. And perhaps above all, the community of helpers has felt blessed by the simple expressions they've received of grateful thanks, surprise and joy.

And what of the future?

Following a relaxation of lockdown restrictions on 21st May, the Cathedral community will offer a take-away collection service from St. Paul's in lieu of the monthly June seated meal, perhaps with a few tables outside, in line with physical distancing requirements. This monthly take-away service will continue for the time being.

Conclusion

Giving hospitality is central to the St. Paul's mission, and the offering of a regular hot meal to the stranger and to those in need has become an important part of this. For the opportunity to be able to continue to serve in this way during the current pandemic, the Cathedral community gives thanks.

Recommendations

Reflecting on the Cathedral's experience of offering a meal to those in need, both before and during the COVID-19 epidemic, Fr. Justin offers the following pointers to churches that may wish to begin doing something similar:

1. Be clear about expectations and resources - what it is that you can, and are, prepared to do.

2. Be ready to say 'No' and '*if we can't help now, we'll try to help later*'. Advise volunteers to be clear about this where necessary, and to communicate that they will, for example, put a person's name down on the next food delivery list.
3. If volunteers are delivering food to home addresses, it is helpful to work in pairs, one as a driver, one as a caller, ideally calling ahead to the intended recipient in advance.
4. Consider how you might be able to partner those doing similar work from other denominations and faiths, and from the local community.
5. Take time to identify and appreciate the gifts of others and explore with them how they might best be used.
6. Consider how volunteers might be able to support one another, both through their expertise and fellowship; and whether they might welcome additional support and training in their support of the stranger and those in need.
7. Think through the logistics required for the smooth running of food packaging and delivery routes. Systems don't need to be complicated – simple colour coding can be very helpful.
8. Be aware of cultural issues, such as foods that particular ethnic or faith groups cannot, or prefer not to eat. The meal is not given only for physical sustenance. It is offered in the Christian tradition of hospitality, in the hope that it will also be savoured.

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