

Cyprus Social Outreach Forum 2021

On 8th December, 32 individuals sharing a keen interest in social concern gathered via Zoom. They represented a wide range of organisations and churches across Cyprus.

Chaired by Michael Lewis, the Anglican Bishop in Cyprus, and convened by the Revd. Anne Fatcher, Anglican Social Concern Officer in Cyprus, the Forum aimed to share and celebrate stories that inspire; contribute to developing further good practice; and explore opportunities for collaboration during 2022.

Rev. Anne reflected on how sharing concerns, hopes and ideas at the locality meetings instigated by last year's Forum had led to some tangible outcomes. Two organisations are now benefitting from much needed new accommodation; three new collection bins for recycling aluminium cans are in use; immediate action was taken to find a swift resolution to minors camping outside one immigration office; and new collaborations resulted in the strengthening of an existing project and the planning of a new initiative.

In considering perspectives on volunteering, Archdeacon Christopher Fatcher talked of how volunteers offer an 'exchange' rather than a gift. He identified 4 main goals for a volunteer: social contact, a sense of achieving; contributing to an organisation's purpose; developing skills and experience. Organisations need to address their goals and, in turn, enable volunteers to address the organisations' goals by having: clarity about their values and purpose; standards of behaviour, accountability and supervision; and willingness to accept constructive criticism. He ended with inspiring stories of two volunteers that illustrated the exchange of giving and receiving which is at the heart of volunteering.

This input prompted discussion on both challenge and opportunity. Gosia Chrysanthou from Caritas' Migrant Centre spoke of how they have needed to reduce their valued volunteer base due to Covid restrictions on numbers within the centre's physical space. Chris Jones from Friends' Hospice noted that they had been able to tap into support from students within the Russian community who translate and raise funds for them and are keen to be actively involved. Chris concluded that despite the many challenges, 'there is hope'.

Breaking into virtual groups, there was animated discussion in response to the questions posed relating to Archdeacon Christopher's talk and to the Forum's overarching aims.

Identified as working well within organisations to support volunteers were 'the simple things': focussing on their wellbeing; making time to listen; providing social activities, offering practical help e.g. a car ride. Creating and maintaining relationships and connections (remotely, if necessary) was seen as crucial, as was engaging volunteers' passions and interests. In this regard, Burcu Mahmutoğlu outlined the system used by SOS Children's Village to collate information about their volunteers' skills and work preferences, and then allocate them accordingly, via a central point.

Participants who were volunteers reflected on the privilege that volunteering afforded. They spoke of developing humility; of growing in respect for one another's

dignity; of 'recognising our shared humanity'. Some reflected on how volunteering gave them a sense of purpose, joy and affirmation in retirement; an opportunity to pass on skillsets they had acquired, and to channel their energy into helping others.

Stories that inspired over the past year were shared. Amongst them were:
...a 16 year old who had spoken of how she can now focus on her own studies without the anxiety of keeping her five younger siblings safe, given the care they together receive;
...a courageous woman who, having been trafficked, had gone on to form a stable relationship and to marry;
...and a boy who, following one organisation's successful grant application, had received life-changing surgery. He now walks unaided, and has effectively become an ambassador for their organisation, 'a living example to others of what our organisation is about.'

Regarding what would help to continue developing good practice, Evridiki Georgiou from Hope for Children spoke of becoming more specific about their volunteering needs and volunteer skillsets so as to recruit more volunteers skilled in children's group activities. Others spoke of instigating clearer systems e.g. appointment times; knowing when to step back to re-evaluate themselves and the situation; being part of global networks within similar fields of work where possible and 'being part of more localised gatherings like this Forum to network and to learn from one another'.

A focus on advocacy was seen as key in ways of working more closely with other organisations/religious communities over 2022; both with professional bodies (e.g. helping them recognise early indicators of harm or neglect) and with government ministers to enable them to help organisations in helping others more effectively.

In a closing reflection, Joel Kelling from the Anglican Alliance said he experienced the Forum as 'a space of co-operation and collaboration and understanding'. He was particularly encouraged to have heard recognition of:

- not over-extending ourselves/volunteers
- instigating systems to enhance service quality
- sharing information responsibly to grow capacity e.g. identifying potential volunteer bases that are rich in time and/or skills
- matching volunteers' skillsets to organisations' need
- engaging in advocacy. He underlined that ultimately it is through relationship that change is best effected.
- ensuring those who receive hospitality are empowered to give it.

Joel concluded that should Forum participants express a collective desire for support and capacity building, he would be happy to work with the Forum in that regard.

In closing words, the Bishop spoke of how his spirits were lifted to see the common ground among those gathered; seeing people doing their very best even in tough and challenging times; and exchanging skills and information too. Rev. Anne spoke of how encouraged she was by participants' desire to deepen relationships, exchange information and collaborate. Looking forward to facilitating further opportunities for this in 2022, she echoed the Bishop's fervently-voiced hope that we would meet not online, but in person.