

Social Outreach Forum 2023: Safe Space for All

On the afternoon of May 10th, the Home for Cooperation was buzzing as 46 participants of the 2023 Social Outreach Forum shared experiences and exchanged information. There was, as one person remarked, 'a lot of energy in the room!'

Convened by the Anglican Church, in collaboration with the Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, this Forum drew together those from different faiths and denominations and some 20 non-profit organisations such that collectively the needs of the following vulnerable groups were represented: asylum seekers and refugees; disadvantaged children and young people, those with dementia; with cancer; patients requiring support and advocacy; abandoned seafarers, those struggling with drug abuse; survivors of trafficking; and veterans of Armed Forces in Cyprus.

All shared a common concern to better the lives of the most vulnerable among us. And in this safe space they had come from north and south to learn more together about that very theme: 'Safe Space for All'.

In summarising recent social concern initiatives of the Anglican Church, Rev Anne Fitcher, Social Concern Officer, highlighted the centrality of partnership working to support better those in need. One participant observed from her own experience of such collaboration: 'It clearly showed that 1 plus 1 together does not equal two - but twenty-two! The value of working together is priceless.'



Mrs Salpy Eskidjian, Executive Director of the Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace process (RTCYPP) spoke of Safe Space from the perspective of the Home for Cooperation itself and of the RTCYPP. She particularly emphasised the importance of platforms in order to think together, and the value of reflecting on the concept of accompaniment in our work.

Participants heard different perspectives on 'Safe Space for All'. In his capacity as Safeguarding Officer for the Anglican Church in Cyprus, Archdeacon Christopher spoke about promoting the well being of all. He described 'safe space' as protecting people's health, wellbeing and human rights, and enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. He stressed the need for this to be deliberate, and for organisations to be able to articulate just why safe space matters within their own contexts. After identifying different types of abuse, Christopher offered advice on how to: recognise signs of abuse; respond to concerns about possible abuse; and respond to survivors. He highlighted the importance for organisations in modelling respectful behaviour towards others; challenging inappropriate behaviour; having a policy/guidelines and processes for creating and maintaining safe space.

Mrs Olga Komiti, UNHCR Cyprus Protection Officer, spoke about welcoming and supporting asylum-seekers and refugees safely. She noted that processes for doing so in Cyprus were still young and involved the complexities of working across the different legal frameworks of the north, south and the British Sovereign Bases. Her description of overcrowding in Pournara Reception Centre prompted later reflection on how the risks there could be minimised, and of the role played by police checks in general. Her mention of the humanitarian corridor in the UN Buffer Zone that existed before 2020 also sparked some discussion. Mrs Komiti expressed a desire of UNHCR for NGOs to get together and speak as a common voice.

Fr Bruno talked movingly of trauma - not just from his perspective as a priest and clinical psychologist but from personal experience as a sufferer. He focussed on how we might spot signs of

trauma in others and how we might help survivors. His simple answer to the key question of 'so what can we best do?' was a poignant one: 'Love them'.



Through group discussion and questions to the speakers, participants reflected on how what they had heard resonated in their own contexts; and the key learning they would take back to their respective organisations.

And realities were not dodged. The emotional toll to staff and volunteers in remaining empathetic and welcoming, in the face of burgeoning and seemingly relentless need, was acknowledged. One participant noted that a new insight for her was that some volunteers, as well as many beneficiaries within her Association, suffered from trauma.

There was discussion too, on how we create the means for voices to be heard by government authorities. That includes the voices of individuals/ communities that often do not get a hearing and our own voices as non-profit organisations/faith groups. A desire was expressed to use the opportunities we may have to influence, and to illustrate how the experience of those engaged in social concern can help governments in shaping/modifying laws and processes to promote the wellbeing of all.

In reflecting on just how we can build and maintain safe space, it was recognised that we ourselves need to be practitioners of a society/organisation that is healthy; that enabled voices to be heard; that listened well; and crucially, showed respect for all people. And that this meant for each of us within our organisations to work at, to model and to live, already, the cultural change that is needed.

One powerful contribution came from a lady who spoke of being Cypriot and a refugee herself. 'We are a traumatic (*traumatised*) people' she said. 'And yet we don't talk about our personal and collective trauma'. She went on to raise the question of the feasibility of opening a multi/intercultural trauma centre in the buffer zone as a safe space for sufferers to come together.

Participants wanted to find out how they might be able to access training in safeguarding procedures. While acknowledging that funding resources are scarce, it was suggested that perhaps some kind of platform could be developed that might include access to training material on building and maintaining safe space.

The meeting closed with Forum participants voicing a strong desire to work more closely together; and to continue supporting and learning from one another. Sharing contact details across the group was welcomed as a simple but effective immediate step, together with circulating more broadly the link to the Anglican Church's online concise social concern directory (<https://www.cypgulf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Social-Concern-Directory-concise.pdf>), and expanding the entries of the non-profit organisations within it.



Please do get in touch with Rev Anne Futcher (anne.futcher@cypgulf.org) or Mrs Salpy Eskidjian (salpy@religioustrack.com) if you are interested in developing any of these thoughts or issues further.