



Meeting Report

Post-COVID: The role faith communities can play in rehabilitating European cities

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Blanquerna Observatory
on Media, Religion and Culture



Dublin City
Interfaith Forum

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Introduction to the Cities Faith and Community Forum (CFCF)

Faith institutions have a unique role in leveraging social capital in communities to address key city priorities but also to support marginalised communities. They can be effective in tackling hate crime and extremism and work towards improving social cohesion. They are embedded in communities, and can, therefore, channel resources to support city priorities. CFCF combines the strengths of key leaders in Europe and the UK and is in a strong position to act as a bridge between governments and citizens.

CFCF vision is to promote strategic faith and community collaboration across and between major cities in the UK and Europe

Our mission is to provide a platform across leading cities in the UK and Europe for facilitating and developing learning and sharing best practice in positive engagement between faith groups, city governments, and institutions, in order to build more inclusive and integrated cities. We will specifically look to work with local city governing bodies (city Mayors) and local authorities in order to most effectively meet the needs of city residents

Our focus is *strategic intervention*, particularly focusing on issues and challenges that affect faith communities in cities, such as poverty, mental health, literacy, education, security, homelessness and the environment.

Our immediate aims

- Celebrating the contribution of communities
- Tackling extremism, hate crime and resilience
- Helping to shape and develop policies and programmes which enhance integration
- Seeking to improve the situation for migrant communities

Our Methodology will be to build consensual and strategic partnerships that create more inclusive cities. We will promote the sharing of resources and best practice and the open exchange of ideas and programmes.

Aims of the meeting

At a time when the European continent is seeing increased disunity and social and economic disparity, COVID-19 has added a horrific extra pressure on communities and a new dilemma that needs to be dealt with. Issues such as the rise of far-right extremism, racial injustice and economic deprivation have only been further magnified by this pandemic.

The CFCF held its first pan European online meeting on Wednesday the 17th of June 2020. The meeting was titled- Post COVID: ***The role faith communities can play in rehabilitating European cities.***

CFCF believes it is extremely necessary to create a pragmatic and honest dialogue on the roles that faith communities have and continue to play during this pandemic and for the future. The media narrative as a whole has not always been kind to communities of faith across Europe and at a time where unity and solidarity are key components for healing the issues of society, CFCF needs to be a key interlocutor.

The aim of the meeting was to invite experienced and professional practitioners from across different European countries to share experiences and identify positive and negative challenges that the wider community can understand and benefit from.

The meeting lasted 75 minutes and participants from 14 different countries were present.

Countries present-

Poland	Spain	England	Belgium	Scotland	Finland	Ireland
Netherlands	Sweden	Hungary	Germany	Denmark	Austria	

The objectives for the meeting were to: -

- have at least 10 different European countries involved
- have a good representation of cities/countries from across Europe within the panel.
- have a focused group of around 50 high-level practitioners engaged
- coordinate a discussion to benefit the wider community and create positive practical steps to be used by religious communities across Europe to help rehabilitate their respective cities post COVID.

Critically it was intended that the conversation would help springboard CFCF as an informal network enabling its members to: -

1. stay connected across the continent
2. be used as a platform for challenging conversations
3. share good practice

Key Points from Panelists

Based on the objectives the panelists were selected by their professional experiences and not on religious background and or belief. This is because the most important output for the panelists was to share their expertise within their respective fields.

In terms of the moderator it was important to ensure gender balance and expertise in interfaith. **Adrian Cristea**, the Executive Officer of Dublin City Interfaith Forum and already engaged in CFCF, was appointed.

For more information on the Panelists (see Appendix 1 for comprehensive details)

Kishan Manocha

The Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw

- Some communities have barely survived - it is sad and inevitable that exploitation by those with nefarious agendas who further stigmatize specific groups to stir hate against them. We need to combat this and be vigilant.
- Other communities have contributed to wider society, and collaborating effectively with local authorities, it is interesting and inspiring to see how resourceful and creative some religious communities have been - not only offering spiritual support, but logistically helping with the first response
- *If policy makers need proof of the importance of religious communities in society, look at what they have done during this period.*
- more understanding and bridges have been built between faith communities. Women and youth have played a large role in this. This is a plus. These need to stay inclusive. This bodes well for religious freedom and rights and in the future, this will be a big plus.
- Looking forward, we are looking at a mixed picture : there will be a continuing role for faith communities to deal with the negatives in the social fabric due to the pandemic, and also resetting the dimensions of social life, in particular the harsh decisions that need to be made on social justice and community building.
- As we look forward to the difficult conversations on social justice, *I hope there will be a shift to welcome the moral and spiritual dimension in this discourse. These need to be at the centre of the discourse.* It has been remarkable that during the pandemic, we have had protests against racism and calls for social justice and equality. This will open the door for debate, and religious and spiritual communities need to be present at these debates.

Katri Kuusikallio

The Executive Director of the CORE, (The National Forum for Cooperation of religions in Finland).

- Religious communities in Finland are very different in size, but we all have equal valuable rights, we need authorities to recognize this, need to engage with the minorities more and have their voices heard
- Our purpose as an organization is to prosper peace and harmony in society. In Finland, 16th march, lockdown began, as the situation developed, the Finnish government, led by five young female ministers, has done a fair job. Public discussion has not spoken about the deaths or the capacity of the health sector, but rather the social issues, such as people being out of jobs, domestic violence and loneliness.
- Religious leaders have come together to release statements and reassure people. Some bishops were criticized for not sending enough reassuring messages
- Religious leaders have been giving guidance to their congregants on how to carry on and have been doing services online.
- One positive thing that has been in the spotlight is a coordinated campaign between local authorities and religious leaders together to check on the over 70s and offer help.
- Religious orgs made prep for increased number of burials
- Groups identified as at risk from Covid due to employment are young people, old people asylum seekers and disabled part time workers and the BAME community.
- Moving forward, we need fair and just allocation of funds and other resources, gender equality and human rights are very vital. Religious communities and other social movements should act on behalf of those who are shunned by the government system, give a voice to those who have no voice, support those who are worst hit by the crisis, they will be builders of social justice.
- Religious organisations have not been able to collect donations, but the government has made funds available to them. *The crisis has shown us how similar we are as humans; cooperation is the best way to build peace.*

Miriam Díez Bosch PhD. Journalist and Theologian. Professor and Vice Dean of Research and International Relations at the Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations, at Ramon Llull University in Barcelona.

- Huge effect on Spanish Catholicism, especially in Andalusia, where religion is very important, dioceses have done things digitally such as WhatsApp groups.
- Muslims had issues with mosques during Ramadan and cemeteries.
- Religion in Spain has discovered not only that rituals are important but the sense of community is very important
- In terms of media, religions have been given a platform, having religious leaders invited on TV to speak about their communities etc.

- *social distancing has taught the inter religious network that we all need each other. The word brother has the word other within it*
- Media battle posing challenges- effects, fake news, claiming Muslims are immune to the virus etc. has seen a rise of hate speech against religious groups such as Muslims

Beatrice Frattini

The director's assistant on the advocacy works on anti-discrimination and freedom of religion at ENORB (European Network on Religion and Belief) in Brussels.

- Covid impact on minorities: *Faith communities have shown great resilience, even though practices have been suspended, faith communities have been innovative carrying on their work while maintaining social distancing.*
- Resilience: we have seen unprecedented ways they have continued while still showing resilience and connectedness playing a leading role including mobilizing support for the needy offering vulnerable care guidance, raising money, providing meals, Safe space, e.g. empty mosques in Spain being used by local authorities
- There have been meetings organised to identify needs in mutual communities
- Unprecedented technology used during social distancing, live streams have moved community gatherings online, *new reality shall bring new reflections in how this will be more inclusive*
- Religious communities have led the solidarity work, but they have paid the highest price, collected data have shown preexisting social inequalities.
- UK data have shown religions such as Islam and Judaism effected more than the wider community, in fact religious minorities and women, have been over exposed to the disease and death as they are disproportionately involved in essential undervalued sectors such as care, cleaning, security, which are all on the frontline. Also, they are disproportionately exposed to overcrowded housing and poor employment conditions.
- We have seen an increase in hate speech online, targeting some religious groups for spreading the virus.

Unanswered questions and reflections to be taken away

The meeting ran over its time limit due to the engaging conversation; several questions were left unanswered. These questions have been recorded and noted here as they reflect the insightful conversations during the meeting and the desire for continued discussion.

- Initially, we were concerned in the UK about overwhelming the National Health Service. With the possibility of a long term financial impact, and months or years until a recovery to pre-COVID-19 levels, and assuming much of the pastoral, material and spiritual support will fall on the shoulders of religious communities, what can we do to make sure we the faith sector also don't find ourselves overwhelmed?
- what would be the most effective action that we could jointly adopt, to ensure Governments support our capacity as faith orgs to articulate our values and beliefs of justice and equality for all
- In the UK, the Government commissioned research into the COVID19 impact on BAME communities? Is there any similar research in Europe?
- As we emerge from the crisis, there's an opportunity to address misunderstandings/prejudices across not only religion or belief groups but also other dimensions, notably geographic and to reach beyond the normal interfaith participants. Have we seen any examples of dialogue across these difficult dimensions exploiting the new technology with which we're now so familiar? What can we learn?
- The United Kingdom has had tens of thousands of excess deaths. To illustrate Government ineptitude and the role of non-state actors, most recently a footballer was credited with forcing the Government to provide meals for hungry children from poor or impoverished families over the summer. What is the role of the faith sector, especially those with leadership or representational responsibilities, in holding Governments to account for their management, or fatal mismanagement, of the pandemic?
- The question about collecting data on Faiths is interesting - what should be collected and how are those who have converted regarded. Greater clarification. Regarding data sets collected is important for analysis; Is ethnicity only data collected, as I think Heritage would be more appropriate.
- Covid is a crisis we were not prepared for. How can we be better prepared for next time?

Post-meeting - moving forward

How CFCF could support future challenges

The webinar was focused on thoughts and action regarding the role faith communities could play in rehabilitating cities coming out of COVID.

The underlying structural inequalities and discrimination of certain faith groups needs addressing, we believe the CFCF can play a major role in connecting local governments with faith-based practitioners and the grassroots that have proven to be major players when dealing with crisis.

We will all need to examine interfaith practice going forward, differences will need to be set aside, and more collaboration to occur.

Inspiring to see how different religions care as much or more about others. This will build more trust and we need to work at it, CFCF should facilitate this.

Long term plans should look at the social and economic impact of the pandemic, and address structural inequalities that minorities and religious groups face.

Dialogue between national, European and religious authorities should grow beyond what it is now, and be more inclusive to genders and other minority religions.

Experts noted the following: -

- **The powerful influence and contribution made by the faith sector during the pandemic.**
- **How relevant online positioning had become for the sharing of information. - The importance and significance of zoom meetings**
- **How governments across Europe were recognizing the sector not as tokenistic but as integral to a cities infrastructure, although there was much work still to be done.**
- **Praise was given to Ireland and Finland where governments were fully consulting the sector.**
- **The Scottish Govt had been engaging with the sector re-framing proposals as they emerged from lockdown.**
- **that the pandemic had exposed harsh inequalities for many groups and individuals especially from BAME communities and other disenfranchised groups and that there would be a significant role across Europe for the sector dealing with the negative legacies of the pandemic.**

- **Rise of Islamophobia and Far right, racism**

CFCF coordinators believe the points highlighted to be of critical relevance for all Europe and see the need for further ongoing conversations framed around them. Future meetings to discuss: -

- **The relevance of Strategic Communication**
- **How Government /City hall continue/improve collaboration with faith sector**
- **Exposing inequalities, promoting diversity and inclusion**
- **How the faith sector can combat Racism in Europe**

Conclusion

As shown in this report, the first CFCF pan European online meeting was a huge success. This is based on reaching all the objectives and from feedback received. The majority of attendees asked to join the mailing list and be informed of future CFCF projects. The following 2 quotes from panelists and participants also highlight the success:

'Thank you for the invitation to yesterday's CFCF event. Please allow me to share my appreciation and some feedback. It seemed well-organised and I applaud this idea of messaging across cities throughout the UK and Europe, to try and share best practice and to put into place a platform for solidarity.'

'I thought this afternoon's webinar was excellent, the best so far of all the online events addressing religion and the pandemic that I have participated in. So many congratulations to you. Would be interested in being part of the discussion re next steps. CFCF will emerge much stronger as a result of today so well done again.'

Appendix 1 Expert Panel

Kishan Manocha

Kishan was Director of that UK Baha'i community's Office of Public Affairs and has extensive experience in freedom of religion or belief and related human rights issues in Europe, North America, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central and South Asia as an advocate, researcher, trainer and consultant to a number of international and non-governmental organisations.

Kishan holds degrees in medicine and law from the Universities of London and Cambridge respectively. He is a Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK) and a barrister. He has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the Carr Centre for Human Rights at Harvard University, a Fellow of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, and a Special Adviser to the late Shahbaz Bhatti, former Minister for Minority Affairs in Pakistan.

Kishan is a Research Fellow at the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation and a Professional Associate at the Centre for Law and Religion at Cardiff University. He is currently a member of the Global Steering Committee of the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes.

Katri Kuusikallio

Holds a master's in theology, specializing in Social Ethics, from Helsinki University.

She is a Lutheran priest, who has worked for over 10 years as a parish priest and has worked 3 years as a coordinator in the Lutheran church in Tanzania, both in Morogoro and head office in Arusha.

She has several positions of trust: a member of the City council and the vice member of the City board in the town she is living, Järvenpää.

She is also the Vice President in the national section related to religious affairs of the Green Party.

Miriam Díez Bosch PhD.

Director at the Blanquerna Observatory on Media, Religion and Culture. Director of Global Engagement at Aleteia.org. Vice President at Catalunya Religió Foundation. Member of the Global Board of the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture. Member of the Steering Committee at the Institute for Migration Studies at Comillas Pontifical University of Madrid.

Member of the Executive Committee at the REFAL (Red Española Fundación Anna Lindh). Member of the ARC Advisory Board - Centre for the Anthropology of Religion and Cultural Change at the Catholic University Sacro Cuore (Milan), Member of the Advisory Board at Genius Vitae Universitas Experientiae (Holy See and University Sacro Cuore Milan). Member of the Board at FEM (Fondazione Evangelizzazione tra i Media). Member of the Editorial Board in

Qüestions de Vida Cristiana (Montserrat and Fundació Joan Maragall). Coordinator of “Communication and Church Seminar” at Fundació Joan Maragall for Faith and Culture. Regular Contributor at El Nacional and El Punt Avui.

Professor Miriam Diez Bosch holds a PhD in Social Sciences (Pontifical Gregorian University), a Degree in Journalism Studies (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and a Degree in Ecclesiastical Studies (Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya).

Beatrice Frattini

Beatrice is in charge of monitoring French-speaking media outlets on hate speech and discrimination on religious grounds. She also works on documenting the impact of COVID-19 on minorities and religious groups while supporting the advocacy works at EU level.

In 2018 she contributed to the research work of the Italian National Research Council on minority rights and the right to self-determination of peoples. She holds a degree in International Studies (BA) at the University of Trento (Italy) and a degree in Human rights and Multi-level Governance (MA) at the University of Padua (Italy).

Adrian Cristea

Adrian holds a Master’s Degree from Trinity College Dublin and played a key role in establishing the first official Interfaith Forum in Ireland launched in January 2012. He lives in Dublin where he works in interfaith and integration in a multicultural city context. He led the process of devising the ‘Dublin City Interfaith Charter’. He is passionately committed to the achievement of racial justice and interfaith dialogue. His interests include human rights, interculturalism, inter-religious dialogue and activity, and the role of religion in integration and social cohesion.