

## South East England Faith Forum 2021 Annual Conference:

### WHO CARES? CARE, DIGNITY, GRIEF AND FAITH IN THE TIME OF COVID19



The Conference was held via Zoom on Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2021.

Kawther Hashmi, Chair of South East England Faith's Forum (SEEFF) began with an introduction followed by a minute silence.



Dr Harriet Crabtree, Executive Director, Interfaith Network UK spoke first with reflections over the pandemic and set the scene. Dr Crabtree spoke of the astonishingly rapid response that faith communities made in the face of widespread illness and death, particularly in terms of meeting practical needs and providing pastoral care. Minority communities faced disproportionately high death rates including those amongst health professionals. Normality was denied - not being able to be present at the death of loved ones or to gather for funerals. Faith bodies were quick to increase the use of technologies - zoom, skype and streaming etc. While this was a time of sorrow and difficulty there are positives, such as closer working relationships between faith communities and learning which will be positive for the future

Jason Mather, Head of Client Services, Citizens Advice in West Sussex (North, South, East) talked about two projects they conducted to explore the disparity of Covid-19 with the Crawley BAME Communities. The projects were done by survey, interviews with focus groups and reached also on social media. Mather said that the study concluded four major insights on BAME communities: Information gaps, Communication and language barriers, Worries about access to healthcare and other support services and the Lack of trust in the government. The NHS inclusion services came up with some recommendations like; continuous engagement, establish trust, simple language to engage, transparency is key to engagement, early support with other issues to prevent disparity between health and social inequalities and improve the relationships between healthcare settings and community.



Dr David Knight, Spiritual Care Lead, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust talked about end-of-Life Care and Faith. He stressed the importance of end-of-life care from the spiritual perspective. He said that UK is the world leader in end-of-life care. The spiritual care offered by the services. NHS was remarkable in dealing with this huge, unprecedented problem. Despite the isolation in NHS wards, the ability to adapt to cope was amazing. However, he cautioned: "We have overdone the isolation that it went into inhuman domain - end of life care particularly in care homes and maternity wards."

RCN report says we will not include the isolation in end of care but consider including relatives and faith representatives." He concluded that he was optimistic about new settlement for future crises.

Dr Sohail Bhatti, Director of Public Health, Slough Borough Council talked about How Care was supplied by the health sector in Slough during the Covid crisis. Dr Bhatti apologised that he was very new to Slough, so that he would offer his experiences as an epidemiologist. Dr Bhatti talked about his experiences in Gibraltar which was a small community, and it was not difficult to shut everyone and close the frontier.



The first step was to turn care homes into hospitals for elderly. Because they were a connected, small community, one loss of life was too many. They did not have any issues with PPE "Brexit helped us" he said jokingly. There was no treatment in place but a very effective lockdown. So they had no deaths until November 2020. But this had a negative impact because people did not believe this was a serious disease there; they did not grasp the gravity of the threat.

Dr Bhatti talked about his experiences of four different pandemics. He said: "Pandemics happen, regularly, as populations increase, and connections are getting bigger - Gibraltar's first case was from Wuhan football team." He said that people wanted to connect, particularly during religious festivals - Eid, Hanukah etc, people understood, but Christmas, they wanted to get connected, so we had a major spike after Christmas. There is exhaustion in every quarter, practitioners are exhausted too. In this climate the role of faith communities is very important to raise community immunity, like in the medieval times, how faith communities protected the population.



Laurence Gamlen, Chaplain at St Peter's & Ashford hospitals spoke about his personal experience of loss due to Covid-19. Gamlen said that he had many losses to Covid and listed: "A loss of my own health, the loss of my partner's health; my son caught covid on holiday; loss of my composure - trembling, loss of a faith community leader; loss of certainty - I like order and predictability; loss of volunteers - who visited patients in care; loss of control over my time; loss of focus on my work; loss of temper; loss of faith in god occasionally.."

Jamie Green, Slough Council for Voluntary Services talked about How Care was organised by social organisations during the Covid crisis. Green Introduced the model #OneSlough which is an excellent example how Slough Borough Council, Clinical Commissioning Group, NHS Frimley health, Thames Valley Police, Public Health Slough and Slough CVS came together to create a joint community response to Covid. Their mission was: "We will do whatever it takes to keep our most vulnerable residents as safe as possible during this dangerous time. We will be united under #OneSlough Brand, No Egos, No Logos and we will work for our residents, we work for our own town." It is a Voluntary Sector Forum set up in March 2020 with 55 faith and community group attending weekly to respond to imminent need, everything fed into a database of vulnerable people to create resilience against loneliness. It is a partnership Working by utilising furloughed staff and unused spaces, to make and distribute food. Main aim was to cut through red tape. Set up call centres to identify the most needy and address their needs, from food to loneliness through befriending teams." He concluded that their 2040 vision is to embed #OneSlough into everything, set up a business plan, to strengthen the infrastructure, continue the steering group, create a larger database of the vulnerable and create strong, healthy and attractive neighbourhoods.



Dr Zafar Iqbal, Senior Policy Officer, Woking Borough Council talked about personal experience of loss due to Covid-19. He told us that his children got infected from school. Following that his aunt, himself, his wife, and children all had Covid. His aunt got it very bad and passed away within four hours after she was hospitalised. He, himself got it very bad too, taken to hospital - isolation was very serious, two week in hospital, eight of these days were touch and go.

During his stay, a particular person, a nurse, Anna, he saw her as his guardian angel. He said: "She caressed my head and said don't worry. I felt like my mother caressing my head. I believe in the power of prayer; they were praying for me. It wasn't just my Muslim friends, Christian friends fasted for me." He continued: "I couldn't go to my aunt's funeral. My nephew helped to arrange the funeral.

He said that he is still suffering from Long Covid, a little understood disease. He concluded: "It is very difficult to go back to yourself, the one you had before Covid. But we will go through this and it teaches us to be better human beings."

Revd Canon Dr Joanna Collicutt, Supernumerary Fellow, Harris Manchester College, Oxford gave an introduction to her talk on Avoiding Science. Dr Collicutt talked about Psychology of religion and how faith communities were seen as scapegoats. We are aware that there is misinformation spreading and setting conditions in our societies. These conditions are:

Post modernity is science - culture clash with medicine. Doc Martin - Two alternative views on human body. Doc is shown as scientific and others conflict with his standby being shown as intuitive, spiritual. Scientific one is robotic and cold - but he saves us all the time.



Trappings of modernity, conflict. One of the indicators is you are more likely to consult a medical person rather than a faith person. Basic human responses to stress - Seriousness of the situation creates stress, dilemmas, take the child out of school or keep them educated; such dilemmas paralyse us.

Collicutt quoted Mary Douglas who said that degree of threat becomes part of the solution. She said that vaccines are pollutants to our bodies, but they are also part of the solution.

She listed manifestations of anxiety as rationally; in an aggressive way; Hide and Avoid from threat; Pretend that it doesn't exist and stressed that they all had a place in faith context.

There were Q&A sessions throughout the conference and a total of 45 people joined on zoom.

Recordings of the conference are available in three parts:

**Part one:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFG24Bz3l14>

Dr Harriet Crabtree, Executive Director, Interfaith Network UK

Jason Mather, Head of Client Services, Citizens Advice in West Sussex (North, South, East)

Dr Sohail Bhatti, Director of Public Health, Slough Borough Council

Jamie Green (Chairman, Slough Council for Voluntary Services (SCVS)

Dr David Knight, Spiritual Care Lead, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust

Laurence Gamlen, Chaplain at St Peter's & Ashford hospitals

**Part two:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDCj1E0Eauc>

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**Part three:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFyWVi16pfc>

Avoiding Science: Revd Canon Dr Joanna Collicutt, Supernumerary Fellow, Harris Manchester College, Oxford