



Working Group on Practitioners

Ekerö, 11th - 14th of November 2019

1. Introduction

Under the banner of 'A World of Neighbors', the Church of Sweden is seeking to strengthen and envision the work of religious communities – as receiving communities – with refugees and migrants, and to enhance the interreligious infrastructure of Europe in service to the journeys and aspirations of 'people on the move'. As a result of over 150 site visits this past year to receiving communities, their affiliated humanitarian organizations, and partners in the broader civil society in nine countries, a variety of critical challenges and promising opportunities have emerged. Drawing on what has been learned, seven working groups will be convened during the years 2019-2020 to strategize about how to enhance and further this crucial work, on topics such as: strengthening receiving communities, refugee and migrant policy, the role of youth, the role of practitioners, social cohesion, media and narratives, and a vision for Europe.

Reflections and recommendations from these working groups will form the basis for a European strategy to be drafted at a pre-summit early 2020. This strategy will then be presented to a wider European audience of political religious leaders at a summit, called by the Archbishop Antje Jackélen in February of 2021, associated with receiving communities somewhere in Europe. The Church of Sweden is committed to cultivating the evolving network of communities and practitioners growing out of the initiative process, and supporting the efforts and partnerships associated with the strategy emerging out of the 2021 summit.

The working group in Ekerö convened between the 11th and the 14th of November 2019 focused on a specific category of people engaged in the

process of receiving people on the move - practitioners. Practitioners have been defined as those who have one foot on the ground, directly taking part in the reception process, and one in the worldly structures, advocating in the decision-making processes. They can be found at the train stations, in the docks, at the borders, at the airports, in the city centers, local neighborhoods, in their faith communities and at the demonstrations. They are characterized by a certain décor – their offices are furnished with file boxes, blankets and food on the shelves. They are the ones with mud on their shoes.

Preliminary research and site visits showed that they are often extremely skillful, and could well take on any other job, but they choose to do this particular kind of work. Many of them experienced dislocation in one way or another – either themselves, or through those they cared for. They often feel exhausted, are underpaid, and carry the burden of needs beyond those that can be met.

Based on site visits and previous working group, the following three themes were chosen as the focal points of this working group:

- **How can practitioners be a catalyst for change?** Practitioners are the heart and pulse of the religious communities. As religious communities cannot be best at everything – what are the specific role, added value, and strengths that practitioners contribute where other actors cannot? What gaps can practitioners provide in reception, what role can they take in advocacy? What does not fall within the sphere of religious communities – a rights-based approach discussion.
- **What do practitioners need to sustain their humanity over the long-term?** How do practitioners engage in shared interreligious praxis while navigating religious and cultural differences? What narratives, language, ways of reasoning from our own traditions can practitioners draw on for encounters with each other? How can practitioners share with each other from their own experience - their challenges and aspirations, their mistakes and learnings, their needs and sources of resilience?
- **What mindset and practices can promote practitioner self-care?** How do practitioners discern realistic expectations for their work, and cultivate healthy support systems? How do practitioners deal with

their own sense of vulnerability with working with the most vulnerable? What can best practices and methods can be shared?

The following report gathers the most important inputs provided by the participants who all can be categorized as practitioners themselves.

2. Practitioners – A Catalyst for Change

The participants of the working group noticed, that their primary tasks as practitioners focus around two elements: (1) accompaniment of people on the move, from their arrival, through primary reception, documentation and legalization of stay, to settling in, finding a job and building a community; and (2) social change, which can be effectuated in many ways.

By being involved in the reception processes, practitioners offer a valuable input in the wider discussion on migration issues. As they are involved in the process of recognizing needs, they can relate them to policymaking, and take an active part in advocacy and education. They are able to take a position in society, while staying close to the individuals. They are also able to counter misrepresentation of issues in media and political debates, spreading knowledge and building solidarity. They volunteer themselves, and organize others who want to contribute.

Accountable to different stakeholders, practitioners are a connecting point between different social groups – between the receiving communities and people on the move; between the secular and the religious; between journalists and those who need to get their narratives out there; between people in the inner city and those in the suburbs.

In the complex maze of religious affiliations and political belongings, many practitioners carve a new space for themselves and show a different way to be religious. In the time when religious

For me, God tests us in different ways. He challenges us to do the best we can with the means we have.

Kajs Atallah

beliefs are hijacked by nationalist or extremist groups, practitioners try to reclaim the healthy aspects of their respective traditions, and show the social message that flows from them. They try to exemplify and explain their beliefs with their actions, focusing on the visible social engagement, and quiet individual work.

Practitioners are the primary defenders of human rights in action – they are able to recognize their violation and react in an adequate way. They are able to act by themselves, or engage necessary expertise to help those whose rights are not respected. They are able to offer guidance in difficult situation, and emotional support in moments of crisis.

Our task is to support, serve, and defend.

Sr María José Rey
Merodio Argerich

Different practitioners have different focus areas. Some, like those working for JRS in France and Italy, Muslim Relief and Goda Grännar in Sweden, or Kalunba in Hungary offer a wide range of services on a continuous basis focused primarily on reception – from housing, through food provision, to legal help. Others, e.g. those affiliated closely with the churches, like Diaconia or Caritas, or grassroots projects like Integrationswerkstatt in Unkel, work in a project-based manner, targeting specific problems, e.g. access to job market or cohesion of a particular community, working towards solving them with a specific scope. Yet, others, like Tillsammans för Sverige or Tillsammans för Finland, focus on education and religious literacy, bringing knowledge and offering a place to share narratives among school pupils and students. They try to improve the functioning of social diversity by equipping individuals with tools for interaction and cooperation.

3. Struggles of everyday work

Practitioners struggle with a number of issues. Most often they feel a lack of support – both institutional and communal. Even in cases where

We are obliged to be practitioners, because institutions do not work.

Emmanuelle Ricci

they are employed or funded by the national or international institutions, or their work is closely associated with them, they feel as if they have to go beyond the institutional policies in order to do the work that is needed. They bear the burden of responsibility, as they feel that without their personal involvement, the institutions will not fulfil their role. Some of them feel marginalized in their workplaces, as their work is not viewed as important, or in any way essential. They also have to put a lot of work within their own communities, whether religious or local, convincing them to get engaged, patiently explaining the situation, and asking for help.

There is also growing lack of understanding for the humanitarian work. The growing political pressures to resist migration, and the growth of radical nationalistic movements, additionally limit resources and force practitioners to find creative ways of engaging in the reception processes. The growing criminalization of help, in more radical cases, forces others to hide their activities, in order to continue working. They also encounter problems with religious literacy – people lack understanding for the religious difference and the religious background of their work.

Practitioners have to also be wary of language struggles – people often feel most comfortable in their mother tongue, which can be a point of tension on the side of both people on the move and receiving communities. On the other hand, English can be a sweet trap for integration – it can be so easy to fall back into, that there is no place for creation of common language.

Practitioners also struggle with counterproductive practices of the migration bureaucracy. They see the harmfulness of forced relocation after the asylum process ends. As it can take 3 to 4 years to process an application, people build their lives, establish communities and professional networks only to be unrooted once again and put in a completely new situation, to go through the settlement process again. Or they see people placed in camps that make it impossible to integrate in any way, situated far from the cities and without access to any services.

They, finally, struggle with the argumentation around migration. The change after 2015 turned migration into an issue at the top of the list for the electorate, and thus requires much bigger effort in arguing for welcoming society. Practitioners engage with different strategies. Some cautiously engage in the debates around aging society and the needs of labour market, although they see risks in financialization and economization of these debates. While trying to engage with the humanitarian argumentation, they provide insight into the social benefits and showcase communities that were enriched and enlivened by the arrival of the people on the move.

4. Resilience and boundaries

Practitioners have limited resources – both material and emotional. Thus, they have to navigate the difficulties of establishing boundaries. They have to be able to know when to say yes to helping, and when to draw the line and decline requests. They have to strategize and time their support well, to maintain full operability and adequately allocate resources. They have to decide where to locate their efforts, and be able to explain why they are helping, or why they are not.

I find it particularly helpful to have a job description.

Åsa Nausner

Some, like JRS's housing program in France, establish clear boundaries via a contract and a strict set of rules – they pair refugees with families for a period of only 6-weeks, without any possibility of modification. They also employ a lengthy vetting process to ensure that everything will go as smoothly as possible. Because of that, they cannot help those who are looking for a long-term lodging, and they limit the amount of families that could possibly help. At the same time, this saves everyone from disappointments, heartbreaks, tensions and possible conflicts.

While struggling with institutional support, many practitioners find strength in the everyday effects of their work. They see value in struggling for change, even if that struggle seems to be losing. They often have a sense of personal mission and an ethical imperative that moves their work forward. They find strength in their faith, and they employ culture as a source of resilience – from poetry to movies. They also rely on their smaller community and family support, who help them maintain psychosocial wellbeing.