

**Sarah Meyrick** hears how a partnership at St Anne's, Soho, is helping gay men to explore faith and sexuality

ON DEAN Street, in Soho, no. 56 is home to one of the largest NHS sexual-health clinics in Europe; it is part of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. At no. 55 is St Anne's. For the past few years, the two institutions have been involved in a groundbreaking partnership to support men who identify as both gay and Christian, and who find this dual identity problematic.

The idea came from the clinic, the Rector of St Anne's, the Revd Simon Buckley, says. The lead psychosexual therapist at the clinic, Remziye Kunelaki, explains: "I treat people for a variety of sexual problems, with talking therapy. [A few years ago], I noticed that more and more gay men, regardless of their sexual problems, were presenting as having an issue around the acceptance of their sexuality and their faith.

"They were asking: 'How can you be confident in your sexuality and still integrate your faith?'"

Short of any better idea, Ms Kunelaki — a Muslim — rang the doorbell next door. "I thought I should talk to the nearest vicar; so I asked to meet Simon."

Fr Buckley's response was, "That's why we're here."

THE two of them first spoke in March 2014, when they began to explore whether there were ways in which they could usefully work together.

"We started collaborating, in a quiet way," Fr Buckley recalls. "There was a bit of a risk on both sides." Six months later, they were ready to offer a series of workshops, starting with an introductory module in which the issues were presented from both a Christian perspective and a psychosexual one. There followed six two-hour workshops, which explored specific related aspects. There is no entry requirement, beyond a curiosity around the question "Can I be religious and express my sexuality?"

Through the introductory session, several key themes emerged: shame and guilt; being a minority within a minority; the interrelationship between religion and sex; coming out; sexual interaction as a gay Christian man; and integrity and authenticity.

"It's about making honest conversation possible," Fr Buckley says. "I start with the story of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well, and set it out from there, giving a biblical basis. That's why I feel I can have this conversation. It revolves around the part when Jesus says to her, 'Go and bring your husband,' and she says, 'I have no husband.' Jesus knows that she's had five husbands and the man she lives with isn't her husband.

"[I point out that] Jesus is totally unfazed by this, and carries on talking to her. The point is that there's nothing in our lives that should prevent an honest encounter with Christ."

The responses from the men who have been on the workshops have been heartfelt; Ms Kunelaki has begun a formal Ph.D. study of the

# The psychosexual therapist and the priest next door



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The Revd Simon Buckley and Remziye Kunelaki, at St Anne's, Soho

outcomes for participants. A second programme was run under more rigorous conditions, to ensure that robust data could be collected and analysed. She and Fr Buckley have also spoken at various NHS conferences about the partnership and its results.

"People were amazed to have the opportunity to talk openly and honestly," Fr Buckley says. "To be able to have a conversation with a psychologist, and a man in a [clerical] collar — and in a church."

Ms Kunelaki agrees. "I remember, at one of the first workshops, one particular man came in tears. He said, 'I never thought this day would be possible where we were talking about sexuality in front of a priest.' It is a big deal."

PART of the power of the programme lies in the different perspectives of the two facilitators, Fr Buckley says. Each was aware of their particular responsibilities: Ms Kunelaki's concerns were about the ethics of bringing her patients into this forum, and establishing appropriate boundaries; Fr Buckley felt what he describes as the "weight of the institution". "But we balanced each other out," he says.

Ms Kunelaki agrees. Although neither Christian nor gay, she has experienced life as part of a minor-

ity, growing up within the Turkish community in Greece. This understanding feeds into her approach. "What we modelled was very crucial for the group. The fact that we put this together, and our relationship was working, was the best modelling. Just the fact that we were doing it said something."

There is no charge for participation in the workshops. Both Ms Kunelaki and Fr Buckley give their time as part of their work. Nor does St Anne's charge for the use of the space. That needed some careful thinking through, Fr Buckley says — "We were aware we were putting our heads above the parapet, making ourselves vulnerable" — but the PCC are fully supportive of this church's open engagement with the wider LGBT community.

Ms Kunelaki pays tribute to the management of no. 56, who support her involvement, in spite of this entailing the cancellation of a regular clinic next door.

Participants were recruited through their separate networks. The first programme attracted 29 men, and the second 24, of whom 15 will be assessed as part of Ms Kunelaki's formal study. Their ages range from 24 to 80, and they represent a mix of ethnicities. So, what do they have in common?

"Most, if not all, are from quite traditional or conservative upbringings," Fr Buckley says. "They have been told explicitly or implicitly that being gay is not acceptable, that being gay is inherently sinful. As they came to accept their sexuality, they were forced either to suppress their sexuality and practise their religion, or ditch their faith to practise their sexuality. They have come to recognise that this is not a comfortable place."

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HAVE there been any surprises along the way? After some thought, Fr Buckley says that it is not always easy to work out whether someone's sexual dysfunction is a matter of religion, or culture as shaped by religion, or something else. "Disentangling that is sometimes tricky."

He often finds the stories of the men heartbreaking: "People who said they could never be reconciled to their sexuality — not that God couldn't handle it, but that their mother couldn't. That's really difficult."

He adds that priests from other traditions, where they are forced to live in denial, have sought his advice. "It's clear that, within that denomination, you are stuffed. There's no wriggle room."

Is it easier in this generation to be gay and a Christian than it was a generation ago? "I want to say that it's getting easier," he says, but he is not sure. He quotes the case of Lizzie Lowe, the teenager from Manchester who took her own life in 2014 (News, 9 January 2015). "There's still a lot of work to be done."

The greater openness in society can even be problematic, he continues. "It can put more pressure on to disclose [that you are gay] when you are not ready. The pressures are different."

Being a minority within a minority is challenging. "People say it is easier to come out as gay than to come out as Christian."

"They are carrying a double whammy. That's tragic, how toxic the Church is viewed to be. And the Church doesn't take that seriously enough."

He recalls the aftermath of the shootings in the gay nightclub in Orlando in June 2016, when thousands of people descended on Soho

to express their grief (News, 17 June 2016). St Anne's ended up distributing candles for the vigil. "People were shocked and stunned and thankful that we were so compassionate in our response," he says.

THE collaboration in Soho has been broadly supported by the church hierarchy. Fr Buckley quotes from a letter written by the bishop who conducted his most recent ministerial review. "He wrote, 'Thank you for the positive ministry of welcome that St Anne's, Soho, has taken up with regard to its place in Soho, and the welcome the Church of England needs to give to the LGTBI community.'

Fr Buckley has been asked by other churches to help make them more LGBT-friendly. And, when Ms Kunelaki's Ph.D. is completed, she hopes to develop some guidelines so that others can consider similar work in other contexts. They are both aware that this collaboration is unusual, and works particularly well in the particular context in which they find themselves serving.

Where does this partnership go next? Fr Buckley is cautious: he is aware of the real value of the work, but he is equally mindful of his responsibility as a parish priest. "I need to make sure that St Anne's doesn't become a sector church. People sometimes say, 'Isn't that the gay church?' But we are much more than that."

He laughs. "People sometimes come and find we're not quite as gay as we are expected to be." It is not a sole ministry, he insists, although it is about modelling an absolute, unequivocal welcome. "We need to look and see what is appropriate and needed."