



Dialoguing together as a neighbourhood group
- The Prophets' Stories

It all started with my involvement in a cooking group which is part of the offer from our local church community centre situated in the multi faith area of the city in which we have made our home in the UK The local school is next door so it's a great place for mums to meet up and to engage in a variety of activities at the centre. We liked being together, we had a lot of fun together. We were also starting to ask questions of and about each other.

“Do Christians pray, then?”

“I didn't know Muslims knew anything about Jesus!”

“What do Christians believe happens after death?” following the news that one of the women's mother had died.

“I have no idea what's in the Bible/Qur'an.”

I noticed that faith was often spoken of in these contexts but there was lack of time and space for this to be explored together in any depth. I also picked up a recurring theme of anxiety around how women are to bring up their children in faith in today's secular environment. This resonated with me personally, as a mother myself, and it chimed with a piece I had read about work with women in the Middle East where the author had commented that:

'Women are 'burdened' with the responsibility of the preservation of tradition, (and, by implication, faith in the community)' ¹¹⁰

It was clear that we needed to find a way to talk about faith which would enable us to maintain the warm relationships we had been building up. Some considerable negotiation and talking through the possibilities were necessary. How could we engage within the context of women of different faith who live side by side in the community, seeking to understand each other while respecting our differences without animosity? The concept of sharing stories of the Prophets from both the Qur'an and the Bible came to us and seemed to fit our need. Together, we chose 7 such prophets – the main factor in the selection was based on familiarity and we were careful to arrange the sessions not around chronology but on working from commonality to difference. From a very tentative start this activity proved extremely popular. Those attending wanted to continue meeting to enable sharing of faith experiences and values. Myths about 'the other' were being dismantled, fear and suspicion turning to love and respect, deep things were being shared, new insights gained, and strong bonds were being formed. And so, for the last 5 years, the Prophets' Stories dialogue activity has been part of the annual programme of events on offer at the community centre.

Dialogue as Generous Hospitality

In my engagement with Muslim women from the diaspora, who may lack confidence in new situations and are working towards competency in their English language skills, I

¹¹⁰ Melanie McNeil. St Francis Magazine Vol.6, No 5/October 2010

have found it helpful to consider what “generous love”¹¹¹ might look like when designing, preparing and delivering the Prophets’ Stories resource.

One characteristic of this would be that we watch the abuse of power – we have the resources, the venue, the language, and in some cases, a larger pool of knowledge.

Another characteristic might be that we take time to negotiate for and ensure inclusion and accessibility. For our group this meant that rather than using the text of our Holy Books we found a way of relating the stories through the use of pictures printed onto cards, laid out on a table in front of us. The inclusion of ice breakers, listening games, and perspective sharing activities, which we engage in prior to exploring the week’s story together, help create a safe space to share and build tolerance to difference so that women find enjoyment in attending.

The role of the facilitator is key in both modelling presence and holding the group gently but firmly. Group management skills, a commitment to fairness in offering equal ‘floor space’, and sensitivity to those who struggle with difference is also needed in leading these sessions where all are invited to contribute from their own faith perspective. The focus is not on discussing ‘expert to expert’ or even ‘expert to grassroots’, it is people together, exploring and discovering.

These sets of attitudes and behaviours are consistent with the concept of the Hospitality of God – on which I had been reflecting in terms of cross-cultural mission - which forms the background to the ethos and methodology of this resource. It implies

¹¹¹ Title of paper 2008 An Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations
<http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/generous-love>

not simply refreshments, and a comfy seat, but an attitude of open-ness, a willingness to listen and to value.

Cultures differ in the emphasis they place on who it is that is being honoured in situations of hospitality. Is it the guest who is honouring the household by accepting the invitation or is it the household that is honouring the guest by inviting them to share time and food with them? In either case, I think we can recognize the huge privilege the church in a diaspora setting has in meeting in this way. Whilst we may be the host for our guests from around the world, we may ask ourselves with what values are we going to choose to host? Will we offer only the food we have to share or we will taste also the food they have to bring to the table?

Dialogue as risk

We were reminded that dialogue is seen as a risky thing by both faith communities. Christians from the liberal wing needed convincing that this is not an overtly evangelistic tool whilst evangelicals wanted reassurance that entertaining the listening to and discussion on the Qur'an at the same time as the Bible is not demonic. Some Muslim women were brave enough to engage from the beginning but many either chose to be vague and indecisive before they joined us or politely, but firmly refused.

The risk of misunderstanding each other to the extent of causing offence and even conflict was a real anxiety. The use of icebreakers and listening activities built into each session helped to mitigate this. However, perhaps more powerful was the relaxing of the tension in the room, which was physically palpable on our first meeting. Once we had seen and shared the Jonah/Yunus story and understood that we had much in common to start our conversations with, we were reassured that "we could do this".

There was recognition of the risk all participants felt of exploring another view in having their own beliefs challenged. “Is it Ok to think like this?” was a question individuals from both faith communities would ask themselves at times. Introducing the group to the document on faith sharing produced by the Christian Muslim Forum UK¹¹² was helpful in assuring all that this type of activity is, indeed, permissible. Using visuals instead of text turned out to have more than one positive effect. Having a third, inanimate ‘other’, (represented by the cards) on the table in front of us took away any unintended sense of personal challenge or attack. Being able to move the pictures around the table also demonstrated for us the nuance that there is when different communities interpret scripture. If it is possible that the story events were in *this* order, rather than in *that* order might that open the door to the possibility that the story might have an alternative meaning?

In my reading I came across an interesting term coined by Kwok, a Korean theologian: ‘the diasporic imagination’. This describes the state of a female diasporic, who, as a result of her life story is always doubly located, and having to negotiate consciousness between past and present, here and now. Kwok suggests that such a woman is having to reinvent herself as an individual, as part of a collective; struggling for ways to express herself, she may be able to formulate alternative views because she negotiates with multiple others.¹¹³ It occurred to me that the existence of this phenomenon was a significant enabler in our context.

¹¹² http://presenceandengagement.org.uk/sites/default/files/Ethical_Guidelines_for_Witness.pdf

¹¹³ Kwok 2005:25 in Grung (2010:47) Gender-Justice in Muslim Christian readings. Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Hadith

Religion is not a stable entity but needs interpretation and re-interpretation by its followers and believers. By being willing to engage in this way all the women, at different times in the series exposed themselves to the surprising possibility of obtaining new knowledge and understanding. Our activity resembled a negotiation between past and present, here and now, just as in the diasporic imagination.

Dialogue as empowerment

People of faith all over the world seek to interpret their texts, either written or orally handed down, in part in order to try and make sense of the world around them and the reality of the lives they lead.

“Most religious practitioners are not theologically trained, and their making meaning of texts and contexts are often overlooked in theological research”

GRUNG (2010:88)

So how is meaning made when one has either a low literacy level or is not literate to a high degree? Amina Wadud, Black American Muslim convert, writer of “Qur’an and woman” argues for experience as a form of authority. Indeed, she insists in the efficacy of female experience as a type of authority - as a new tafsir. She asks that, in addition to seeing authority as leadership/power, we start seeing authority as knowledge/expertise. Coming across the use of the conversation café technique¹¹⁴ was a perfect enabler in my context. It is a technique which helps to promote the ‘wisdom

¹¹⁴ www.conversationcafe.org

in the room' so that people feel able to start engaging in conversations about things that matter. Women who are not used to being given the time and space to share of their knowledge rooted in experience are emboldened to start speaking from their heart. The affirmation offered by the group gives courage to all. Women begin to discover that as a result of having to deal with, meet the challenge of and negotiate the impact of past experiences in our lives we, ourselves, are receptacles of wisdom and knowledge. It then sets the scene for really listening and valuing the Stories from each other's traditions and how we have come to interpret them for ourselves.

Dialogue as Discovery

The approach taken in the Prophets' Stories encourages discovery of new things rather than an expert teaching or 'telling' of the truth. Together, we learn how these stories and themes explored teach us about God and what they have to say to us today. The emphasis in telling the story is neither on the historical details nor on textual accuracy. Rather, since for both faiths, prophets may be said to be models for believers, the messages conveyed about God through their life events are taken as wisdom for the group to explore. Participants who would reject 'Christian teaching' have an opportunity to hear God's word speak *to* their lives as it speaks *of* the lives of others. The prayer is that through the exploration of the signs which God gives us, Christ will be discovered. Furthermore, some women have found themselves asking for Bibles in their own language in order to explore further.

The story of Joseph/Yusuf is much loved by both faith communities. Muslim women amongst us could very much relate to the sibling rivalry caused by the family situation where the husband has 2 wives; the experience of exile is a present reality for them as diasporic people, many of them having fled war and the economic

consequences of war; and, as in Joseph's experience, the wait for justice to be done is a long one.

The Hospitality of God includes making room not only for each other – giving floorspace to 'the other' story, but also room for the Holy Spirit to work and to bring to light. So, the role of questions, rather than statements is employed in the Prophets Stories as an aid in helping us explore their meaning. These questions are posed as wonderings and spaces for people to offer their thoughts rather than looking for a response that is the 'right' answer. We asked ourselves:

What did Joseph mean when he said to his brothers, you meant it for evil, but God intended it for good ...to save many lives?

What is the worst evil that can happen to us? Who can save us from that?

What is it that we fear in the judgement?

How do we move from being judged to being forgiven?

What does it mean to repent?

If Adam really repented and God forgave him, why was he not allowed to stay in God's presence, but instead was banished from Paradise?

Here we get to the nub of our (collective) hearts' cry – to be saved/to be forgiven/to be moved from judgement and hell fire to Paradise/life. And discussion flows.

When we look at the Story of Noah/Nuh, we note a striking difference in the way the story plays out. The Qur'an has a 'Mrs Nuh' figure and one son who doesn't believe. Nuh intercedes for them to be saved from the flood but God refuses since they

decline to enter the boat and instead seek their own rescue (Quran Surah 11: 42 and 66:10) The question can be asked:

Are we saved/believers as family/community or as individuals?

Is there a role for a mediator? – Nuh pleaded for his son to be saved

What gives Mohamed that authority above the other prophets to be the one who intercedes?

This opens up a whole conversation about Jesus, our mediator, advocate and intercessor.

A discussion on the story of Abraham offers us great moments of unity when we can affirm our insistence of worship of the One True God who made Heaven and Earth, but also dissonance around the meaning of the story of sacrifice of the son. Christians can suggest that this is a precursor to what happened to Jesus – and that He was the ransom, perhaps referred to in the Qur’an “And we ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice” (Quran Surah 37:106) Muslims will want to share the Qur’anic account of Ibrahim setting up the institution of the Haj. And Christians will be moved to hear the passion with which those who have performed the Haj pilgrimage speak of their experience of a “cleansing” there.

Moses’ early story resonates with women who have had to leave children behind (again as a result of violent conflict troubling their home countries) – trusting God for them. In the Qur’an there is no Passover story – which serves to point to the protective power of being covered by blood against the angel of death – a theme picked up again when we explore the story of Jesus. And once again we discover that

the Biblical accounts of the Prophets Stories seem to show God who acts for us and on our behalf, intervening in people's lives to deliver and to save.

Muslim women relate how they gain special comfort from the birth narrative of Jesus in the Qur'an whilst in labour or times of distress. And Christians will be intrigued as Muslims go on to talk of the vindication of Mary spoken by the child Jesus from his crib. Whilst Muslim women will know of some miracles Jesus performed, they know nothing about His teaching. They listen with great attention and respect to the meaning of the cross and the work of salvation through His death and resurrection. Then the response comes: "we don't believe that, but now we know why it's important to you."

Dialogue as Transformation.

Freire saw dialogue as having a transforming aim, at both individual and societal level.¹¹⁵

We see transformation of the individuals in our group and believe that this lays the foundation for social change.

There have been moments when women contributed in ways representing "transformative speech, addressing the here and now".¹¹⁶ Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers and reconciliation with them at the end of the story spurred one woman to decide out-loud to phone her brother who had long been estranged from the family. All the Christian women who engage, and some of the Muslim women express a desire to

¹¹⁵ Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Paulo Freire 1970

¹¹⁶ Grung June (2010:69)

return to the stories heard at their mother's knee - giving stories back to the women, perhaps?

Another woman, offered a thought after a silence in the room following the telling and listening of the story of Jesus and the assurance of forgiveness He brings: "You must be so grateful" .

A year later that same woman shared with me how, since she had heard the Prophets Stories, she knew that God loved her, so she felt she never needed to be afraid and, she added: "The funny thing is I feel I really don't deserve it". It's clear she is experiencing something of the love, freedom from fear and grace God, in Christ, offers us.

As regards transformation at societal level -

I would like to end with another thought from Amina Wadud who posits that the central story doesn't change when women put their stories on the table, but they invite men to the margins to experience life at the margins and to discover a new way of being human. In our local context there have been several attempts at dialogue in the form of Meetings for Better Understandings with men at the institutional level of church and mosque. In all cases they have broken down due to the adversarial nature of the engagement and the focus on doctrinal issues. Could it be that lessons learnt amongst women committing to engage by sharing from their knowledge and experience could show a new, more fruitful paradigm for male encounter groups?