

# Bridging the Gulf

Bringing Religions and Cultures Together

## Proof That Peace Is Possible In Our World By Doug Leonard

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In August I assisted in organizing and teaching a course at Cambridge University's Interfaith Programme summer school in religion and peacemaking. Rabbis, Imams, Pastors and religious educators gathered from 15 nations: Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Kenya, Austria, Poland, Ireland, the UK and the US.

All of the participants in the two and a half week long course had two things in common; they were all deeply committed to their own religious tradition, and they had all been dealing with intensive inter-religious conflict in their own nations.

The first two days of the course were tense. As organizers we wondered whether we had been too ambitious in bringing this group together. The profile of the students was clashing; an Israeli intelligence officer who had fought in the Israeli army and would have been mapping the tunnels in Gaza had she not attended the program, an Orthodox Palestinian Christian whose brother had been arrested and whose family business had been bulldozed by the Israeli Army during the last intifada, a Rabbi who was working in Poland not far from the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau - a grim reminder of past atrocities, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood

from Egypt, an Egyptian Christian whose churches had been burned down last summer when the Muslim Brotherhood led government was in power, a pastor from Nigeria whose community has been terrorized by the Boko Haram - a Jihadist movement in Nigeria, a Muslim woman from the US whose father had been the victim of Islamophobia. He was murdered after 9/11 by Christians in California. Nearly every participant in this year's class lives with the threat of religiously motivated violence around them and the unsettling, even sickening tension within. Were we about to release a Pandora's box of conflict by bringing this group together?

We all arrived with burning questions for the culpable other. We were disturbed, unsettled. Some were feeling physically ill in the presence of the other. The Christians were ardent to ask the Sunni Muslims in the group, "Why are you and your leaders remaining silent as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) cuts Yazidi and Christian children in two, crucifies Christians in the streets of Tikrit who refused to convert to Islam and displays the severed heads of victims on poles in the town square?" The Jewish students yearned to ask the Muslims and the Christians, "Why are you so naively siding with Hamas, a government which is receiving funding from Iran and is bombing Israel, and hiding its weapons in schools and hospitals in a gruesome strategy to attract world sym-



Rev. Doug Leonard  
Executive Director

pathy when Israel bombs Hamas' missile locations? Why are you against the radical Jihadi militants in Iraq and parts of Africa, but not willing to see that the conflict between the Israeli government and Hamas is similar to what is happening in so many Muslim-majority nations where marginalized groups are waging jihad against strong central governments?" And the Muslims had fervid questions of their own: "Why do Christian-majority nations like the US and the Jewish-majority nation of Israel channel funds and arms to Jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq when it serves their interests, and then turn around and blame neighboring Muslims nations and all Muslims for not resisting what the West has created?"

Tension, anger, manipulated information, passion, the intense complexity of national, religious and ethnic identity was facing us all as the course began.

We began each meal with a prayer from one of our faith traditions. In the early days of the course one of the Israeli students included the Israeli soldiers in her prayer. The Muslims in the group stood up and walked out of the room.



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In addition to having a strong commitment to a faith tradition and living in situations of intense conflict, each of the participants had something else in common; they all desired to lead movements of peace in their home countries, programs of reconciliation that would be deeply informed by their scriptures.

The course at Cambridge this summer became a test case, a laboratory of dialogue and conflict resolution. Does dialogue really work? Could the students as potential peacemakers achieve peace among themselves? If we, those who are committed to being peacemakers could not achieve peace through dialogue in our own real situations of face-to-face conflict during the Cambridge course, then we would have failed to achieve the integrity necessary to be peacemakers in our own communities. We wondered, could the impending conflicts between us really be managed, or would the group divide and separate, or descend into conflict and chaos?

There was a turning point during the first week of the program. During a group session one afternoon, one of the participants, the Israeli Intelligence Officer (a woman) said to one of the Muslim students, "Surely you don't support what Hamas is doing?. Hamas is trying to terrorize Israel." The Muslim student (also a woman) responded, "Of course I support them. I am a Muslim. I identify with them. You are oppressing Palestinians and so you are oppressing me. You are using excessive force against them. You are killing Innocent Muslims. I don't trust Israelis and I don't trust you." The room was silent, charged. We broke into small groups and as facilitators encouraged all of the students to voice their feelings about the conflict between Israel and Gaza. The Israeli students listened well as they defended Israel's actions. The Muslim students responded with strong disapproval of the killing of innocent civilians. A group of Muslim students wanted to end the dialogue saying, "We are not going to solve this problem. We are just one small group of people with no power to influence what Israel or Hamas decide to do. We should end this discussion." As facilitators we urged them to continue. We reminded the group that the purpose of dialogue is not agreement. The pur-

pose is to learn from the one with whom you disagree. Dialogue is an incredible opportunity to learn exactly what the other believes to be true and why the other believes as they do. The dialogue may and probably will conclude with disagreement, but the disagreement at the end of a substantial dialogue will be based on a deeper more nuanced understanding of the other's position. There is great value in understanding the argument and the feelings of the other, even if both sides continue to disagree. The conclusion of a successful dialogue is deepened relationship. If two sides can learn to maintain a relationship to one another while continuing to disagree, then the dialogue has been successful. The Israelis and the Muslims in the group did not reach agreement. But remarkably, they began to reach a more complex understanding and to show care one for the other. The Israelis in the group began to understand how painful the conflict in Gaza is for the Christians and the Muslims in the group and the Muslims and Christians began to appreciate the feeling of threat that the Jewish students voiced.

That night at sunset was the beginning of the Jewish observance of Tishah B'Av. A day of fasting and mourning in remembrance of the destruction of the Jewish Temples and a remembrance of all Jewish suffering in history. A few of the students went to one of the synagogues in Cambridge to learn about this ritual with our Jewish friends. When we arrived at the entrance to the synagogue in the quaint and quiet English city of Cambridge, we were stopped and searched at the door. The synagogue had received two bomb threats that day. One came with an angry letter asking the Jews of Cambridge to "go back to Israel", a message which we found to be ironic for its unintended Zionist stance. Suffering is common to us all.

By the end of the second week, many dialogues and shared meals later, after many impromptu late night conversations over coffee, all of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian students were bonding as friends. We had cried together, laughed together, argued together and experienced two and a half weeks of life together. On the last night of the program we stayed up into early hours of the morning, not wanting to say goodbye, not wanting the experience to end.

The students worked in groups to design follow-up programs in their home countries to keep the dialogue going and to deepen the relationships across the dividing lines of our faiths. The Israeli students and the Palestinian students designed a program to broaden and continue the dialogue in the West Bank.

On the last night of the program each student shared a final thought with the group. One student said in tears, "In Jewish tradition we have a story about the harmony between people in heaven. This month that harmony has come to earth here in Cambridge. People who hated one another have begun to live out the scene which I thought could only live in heaven." One of the Muslim students said, "I had never met a Jew before coming to this course. My friends all told me not to come. They said the Jews will be aggressive and they may have concealed weapons. They said the Christians will be on the side of the Jews. And the course is in the UK with British people and people also from the US. Maybe they want to eliminate Muslims. I was afraid to come to this course. I was afraid that I might be harmed. But I can't believe what has happened this month. I was so surprised that the Jews are not aggressive. They do not have guns with them. They smile at me. In my country, I only see Jews with guns and shooting at Palestinians with angry faces. But, the Jews here are very good people. Can you believe it? It is just as the Quran says; My enemies have become my friends? Actually, they are more than my friends. They are my family, my brothers and sisters for the rest of my life."

Peace is possible.

I credit Sarah Snyder, the course director, and the facilitators Miriam, Hani, Rachel, and the commitment and stamina of the students to get us through each point of tension. Peace is possible in our world. Heaven came to earth in Cambridge this summer.

Become a peacemaker in your family, your community, your country. Bring heaven to earth.

Peace and Blessings,



Doug  
Executive Director

## Moses of the Scotch Irish

This summer, on a trip to visit family in Northern Ireland, I went to Londonderry (Derry) for the first time. When I first started spending time in Northern Ireland, more than twenty years ago, Londonderry was not an easy place to visit. There were often roadblocks going into the city where your car would be searched and in many public places, your bag would be searched too. Even in London where I lived at the time, security alerts were common, and on one occasion, a large portion of the tube system and several mainline stations were closed due to a terrorist threat.

Yet, all that now seems just a distant memory: the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 saw the start of a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. In 2011, the Peace Bridge, a pedestrian walkway over the river Foyle in Derry-Londonderry was opened and in 2013 it became the UK City of Culture, hosting numerous events throughout the year.

After the trip to Londonderry, we went to the unveiling of a plaque commemorating James McGregor, the Minister of Aghadowey Presbyterian Church. In 1701, McGregor became the Minister of the Church<sup>1</sup>. In 1704, an act of Parliament, only allowed Ministers of the Church of Ireland to officiate at religious services thereby removing any legal standing that McGregor had and causing difficulties



over the validity of marriages within the church. By 1718, after a number of poor harvests and a significant increase in rents, McGregor took half of the congregation of Aghadowey and several families from the surrounding area in ships to Boston, Massachusetts. After a bleak winter McGregor and several families finally settled in an area 40 miles to the north west of Boston. Even then it was difficult to make any claim on the land as there were many parties involved. Finally, in 1722, the town they established was incorporated and named Londonderry. McGregor was dubbed 'The Moses of the Scotch Irish' and died in 1729. His legacy remains however, as one of his descendants, Senator John Kerry, is currently the US Secretary of State.

Hilary Hull

<sup>1</sup>Dr James McConnel, The 1718 Migration

<sup>2</sup>Photograph cain.ulst.ac.uk (Conflict Archive on the Internet)

## A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with DISCOMFORT...  
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,  
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with ANGER...  
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS...  
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them  
And to turn their pain into JOY.

And may God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS...  
To believe that you can make a difference in this world.

## Brooke Isingoma Moves on

Brooke Isingoma, Program Coordinator for the Oman semester study abroad program in 2014, has taken a job at Andrew College in Cuthbert, Georgia, US. Andrew is a small United Methodist institution, and Brooke serves as the Campus Chaplain and is teaching in the religion and philosophy department. She will miss Oman with the arrival of spring semester, but will be teaching a course on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam at Andrew so will continue to work with students in thinking through interfaith relations among the Abrahamic traditions.

We are sad to see Brooke go, are grateful for the time she was able to teach and lead in our semester study abroad program and wish her God's blessings as she continues her important work at Andrew College.



## Justin's summer in the United States

This summer was my first trip back to the United States since coming to live and work in Oman. I connected with family, preached in supporting congregations and met with global studies directors of colleges that currently send students and also colleges that will hopefully send students in the future. It also was a time of reflection as I re-encountered the culture of United States and the culture of the churches I attended.

One of the beautiful things about leaving what is familiar is that returning "home" can be sort of a measuring stick to compare before and after time away. Of course, while I was away people "back home" grew and changed too, but having been away I clearly notice the differences in me. It is like the physical changes in my sons. My wife and I know that our boys are getting taller, but we don't always realize how much taller until we see old pictures. The grandparents could easily see how much they had grown because they hadn't seen them in a year. I have grown and changed this year too, but not in physical height.

One of the things that I noticed was how much more tolerant I have become of other Christian beliefs. I have always been fairly tolerant towards beliefs of non-Christians, but in the past I have spent much energy on trying to get other Christians to see the Christian faith similarly to way I see it. Partly that is the role of the preacher and teacher, to teach others what you know. But living and dialoguing with Muslims on a regular basis has taught me to teach for knowledge, not to teach for agreement. It has taught me to teach for understanding, not for uniformity. Further, the Christian church in Oman has one theology in common, Jesus is Lord. Other than that there are many differing theologies expressed by the Christians gathered here from around the world. I noticed in the United States how much energy is spent in teaching for agreement and uniformity and I wonder how fruitful that is. Muslims and Christians here have taught me much

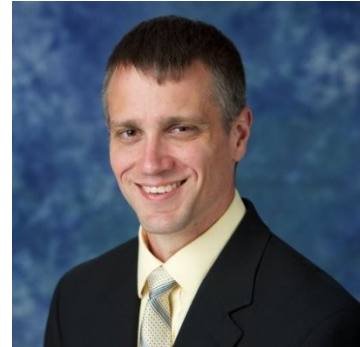
about living within diversity.

Amid the theological diversity here I also became even more confident in my Christian faith. Having to explain my beliefs using theological terms in new ways, to a different culture with a similar, but also a different, theological vocabulary has helped me to understand my own faith on a new level. I believe more than ever that Jesus is the Son of God, and that the world is made whole through him, but I also see the ways in which my Muslim friends can teach me about what it means to submit to God and follow God's will. They have inspired me to go deeper in my own faith.

I am envious of the way that Muslims regularly pray corporately. Lectures will be put on hold while they go to pray together. While driving with Muslim friends and colleagues, we will stop at a roadside mosque at prayer time so that they can pray with fellow Muslims. I know, as do Muslims, that we can pray at any time and any place, but I think that the Church would be strengthened by this type of devotion to public, corporate prayer. In the United States, I noticed that prayer is often only practiced when convenient, and often done alone or quickly before a meal. Imagine what it would be like if we woke up as Christians each morning, went to the closest church, no matter what denomination, before the sun was rising and prayed with whomever showed up? Think of how your faith and practice of Christianity in the United States would change.

If I were to keep describing the changes in just one year and reflections on them, I could probably fill a book. More importantly though than my changes and reflections is this: how could you change, even grow, by spending more time with people outside your own church, denomination, faith tradition or culture?

One way you could do this is by coming to Oman for a week, or two, or a whole semester, we'd be happy to have you come. Maybe it is reaching

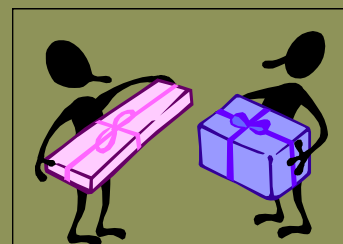


Rev. Justin Meyers  
Director of Education

out to the neighbor who is a Muslim, or a Jew, or an atheist and inviting them to dinner, to coffee, or to the park to have your kids play together. Not with the hope of convincing them that you know something better or coming to some sort of theological agreement, but with the hope of understanding who they are and by sharing who you are.

If you do this, I suspect your faith will change, will grow.

Justin Meyers  
Director of Education



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