

BRIDGING THE GULF

Bringing Religions and
Cultures Together



AL AMANA CENTRE
BUILDING TRUST AND PEACE

Quarterly Newsletter

Consortium for Reconciliation

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We have had a really full beginning of the year here at Al Amana Centre. Not only short-term groups and semester students, but also lots of new connections and ideas to collaborate with others working in the same field. Al Amana Centre is striving for collaboration with other faith-based actors which are working in the field of interfaith encounters and intercultural immersion as well as in the field of peace and reconciliation. This has been a guiding principle for us in the last few months.

Linked with these plans, I want to share with you some interactions I have had over the first months of this year. Firstly, I have just returned from a visit to Tanzania. During my visit there, I went first to Arusha where I represented Al Amana Centre in a World Council of Churches meeting. In the conference I had the pleasure of leading a workshop together with RCA and FELM representatives. We shared many of our stories about what it means to be living as Christian in a Muslim context and how it is possible for us not only to live together and work together with our Muslim friends and colleagues for a better world, but to do that in mutual respect and understanding. It was amazing and encouraging to see how people from different parts of the world and different churches had similar experiences. As there is certainly a need for building bridges between communities in the current world, these experiences from many actors are encouraging indeed.

After the conference in Arusha, I continued to Zanzibar where I visited an interfaith centre run by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Tanzania. The centre is called ZANZIC (Zanzibar Inter-faith Centre) and it is working on Christian-Muslim dialogue on the island. Lots of very good grassroots level work bringing Christian and Muslim women and youth together in practical activities and lowering the bridge between religious communities very effectively.

Whilst both of these visits have been amazing and provided a very good ground for our future collaboration with many new actors, I want to share with you a couple of thoughts on the topic of rec-

onciliation. It is a topic we discussed in length in our last Board meeting and it is linked with a newly established *Consortium for Reconciliation*, a loose Network of actors including Al Amana Centre.

The topic of reconciliation is key for Al Amana Centre as reconciliation is in the core of our faith. So often we do something which is not accepted by others and we seek forgiveness. We are seeking for reconciliation. This happens not only on an individual level, but also between communities. We seek for reconciliation and we are the ones to reconcile.

The New Testament speaks much about the need for reconciling. The concept of reconciliation is one of the key elements in Paul's theology. Often theologians speak about Paul's understanding of salvation and justification, but reading from 2. Corinthians is clear: he has lots to say about reconciliation as well. In the letter, Paul seems to be keen to highlight both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. In its vertical meaning, this reconciliation is a religious or theological concept referring to mending the relationship between human beings and God. In its horizontal relationship, it is referring to the mandate of those who are reconciled to God to seek to reconcile with other human beings, as well as to share the message of reconciliation.

As a Christian organisation working in very close relation with Muslim actors, Al Amana Centre is looking for possibilities to support community level reconciliation. Especially in the field of what Paul describes as horizontal reconciliation. We are here on earth to share the message of reconciliation and reconcile with each other. Religion plays a big role in peoples lives – no matter whether they are Christian or Muslim. We are all looking for possibilities to reconcile with oneself, with each other and with God.

As regular readers of our newsletter, I am sure you are aware that Al Amana Centre is working for mutual understanding, promoting the values recognised by both Muslims and Christians and for peace and understanding. This means we need



Rev. Aaro Rytkönen
Executive Director

to support communities which are seeking reconciliation and provide them a safe space to come together and discuss how to enhance reconciliation. We know also that there are a number of other actors working in the same field. We are thrilled to find synergies between those organisations as we speak.

Therefore, Al Amana Centre participated in a conference which brought together almost a dozen organisations and academic institutions which are seeking ways to support religious leaders in their efforts to reconcile in their own contexts and we are happy to be involved in the *Consortium for Reconciliation*, which was formed in that conference.

I do believe that lasting peace is not possible without people facing their history and healing memories. It is about apologizing and forgiveness. This is a core message also for us as Christians. Especially in the time of Lent which is just over. We are called to seek reconciliation with oneself, with each other and with God Almighty.

Wishing a blessed and joyful Easter to everyone celebrating,
Peace and blessings, Aaro

A Stone for You

The hospitality of the Arab peoples is renowned. It is based on their history and was a necessity particularly for travelers. There were no hotels or restaurants and it was impossible to carry sufficient provisions especially for long trips by foot or donkey or camel. Offering hospitality to strangers became not only a necessity but a deeply held tradition and nowhere more so than in Oman. I am often stunned at the extent of such hospitality. Traditions such as this, dating from Biblical times are alive and well in the region. There have been many times over my 30+ years in the Arabian Gulf that I felt I was living in the time of Jesus and where such traditions are not confined within religious boundaries but are still practiced by Muslims, Christians and Jews today.

It was Saturday afternoon and 3 of the 5 students in Al Amana Centre's semester abroad program had joined me for a short trip to see the ancient burial tombs at Bat which date back 4,500 years. We were lost in the town and on a quiet road surrounded by trees and extensive farmland. I spotted an Omani man parked by the side of the road and stopped to ask him for directions. He jumped out of his car more quickly than I could get out of mine and came over to see if we needed any help. Mr. Zaher had his two sons with him. I introduced myself (in Arabic as this always helps) and asked him if he could direct us to the tombs. "It's a little complicated," he said. "Why don't you just follow me?" And we did, weaving through twisting local roads. Upon reaching the site,

Zaher apologized profusely saying he had an appointment and would like to have shown us around. Then something rather astounding happened. He said that his two boys would substitute for him. He gave them some instructions and drove off, asking us to drop them back home when we were done.

Salim is 12 and in the 6th grade. His brother, Mohamed, is 9 and in grade 3. The two boys didn't speak much English but explained what they could about the tombs and we were touched by their attempts to speak about this aspect of Oman's history.

The boys pointed towards their house and said they would walk home. We thanked them for their help and wished them success in their studies. But before we left, Salim took from the pocket of his long robe 4 stones he had collected as we had wandered around, one for each of us. A guest must not leave empty handed! Perfect hosts at ages 9 and 12! A father who would trust total strangers, his guests, to look after his sons! Oman is a truly remarkable place!

Gary Brown

Women's Group, 8 –18 February 2018

Oman! As I'm reflecting on my time with the Al Amana Centre, I can still see the traces of henna that inked my fingers. Over the past few weeks, I've been reminiscing while munching on the last of my dates and karak tea - tourist stowaways that I eagerly brought back from our adventures. On February 8, nine women gathered from various parts of the USA, Finland and Italy to be challenged and encouraged by the work of the Al Amana Centre and the exquisite country of Oman.

The experiences curated by the staff led us on an amazing journey of sights and sounds, peppered with stories and encounters from Omani individuals that inspired and informed. Whether hearing stories of religious tolerance and dialogue, or flipping crepes at the Tourism College as we dined together in traditional cuisine, our experience was intended to deeply steep us in local practice and people in ways that would help us re-think our pre-conceived notions of our Middle Eastern neighbors. It was a hopeful excursion through the city and the countryside, where we engaged with strangers who became friends, over cups of cardamom coffee and a handful of dates. We were not tourists. We had the privilege of being learners.

What repeatedly struck our band of travelers was the incredible hospitality we experienced from the Omani people. At the annual Muscat festival, the souks, or the

mosques, it was humbling to be welcomed by strangers that hoped we would find their country peaceful, joyful, and exceptionally welcoming. This radical hospitality, additionally extended to us by the Al Amana Centre staff and their guests, felt like the singular most important challenge in returning home. How do we embody this when we get home? Where in many environments we often rely on our preconceived notions of our neighbors, Al Amana in many ways reflects the heart of Oman. There is intentional space made for everyone - reflecting a hope for peace, community and religious dialogue - that moves people from simply being neighbors into responding like a community. The staff created opportunities for us to not only dialogue what was next for us, but gave us some tools that we could use when we returned home.

Our little team of women left with a desire to see our communities and ministries transformed by what we experienced. I would encourage this experience for anyone who wants to see what a hopeful future could be - one where people can live with conviction while living peaceably together, with deep love and a heart of hospitality for their neighbor.

Eliza Cortés Bast

Trends in the Arabian Gulf

By the time you read this, I will have returned from London from speaking in Parliament to a group of politicians who are keen to understand and learn about trends and events in the Arabian Gulf. One thing which is emerging from the Gulf, is a Muslim led movement confronting extremist ideology by promoting the claims and practices of early Islam. The Medinan Constitution (an early policy document attributed to the Prophet Mohammed) according to world leading Islamic scholar Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah is a clear demonstration that the first Islamic communities lived in peace and harmony with their non-Muslim neighbours – and that over the years this Islamic spirit of tolerance has been subverted and lost. Sheikh Abdullah's mission is to reclaim a tolerant Islamic ethos. This agenda has the full political and financial support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

In recent weeks we have seen the Crown Princes of both the UAE and Saudi Arabia issue declarations which intentionally demonstrate their commitment to a return to an Islamic society which is comfortable in embracing a pluralist philosophy.

The renaming of a mosque in Abu Dhabi to that of Mary, Mother of Jesus is one iconic gesture in which the Crown Prince shows that this is the Islam which defines his people. The visit of the Saudi Prince to the Pope in Egypt and his hosting of the Maronite Patriarch in Riyadh signal a significant shift in Saudi policy towards the religious other. Where will this lead to?

I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that in Oman, His Royal Highness Sultan Qaboos and the Omani people have modelled for a long time, an Islamic community in which the ethos of hospitality and welcome are the norm. In this climate, the Church in Oman has flourished. The work of the Al Amana Centre in Muscat becomes even more significant when the wider region begins to look for best practices of interfaith relations. These are exciting times, and the quiet diplomacy and activity of the Al Amana Centre will position them as prime examples of how to live in a climate of tolerance and engage others faith to faith.

From the Chairman of the Board, Revd. Canon Andy Thompson MBE

Semester Abroad

Follow the link to read the blog of a current Semester Abroad student:

<https://blogs.hope.edu/off-campus/allison-loprete-19/>

My Church Family

A couple of weeks ago I went to a birthday party. I didn't know how old the person was and I hadn't actually known them very long. We had a great time playing games and eating pizza with friends we have made at church. The following weekend we were stuck for someone to mind our 9 year old whilst we went to celebrate St Patrick's Day. The lady who had invited us to her party immediately offered and was very excited about her play date.

Most Sundays after church we go out to a local restaurant with a diverse group of people for fellowship and food. This week I was surprised by two people in the group who said it was the highlight of their week. In fact, they look forward to each Sunday when they can meet up with their church family. People come from all around the city often travelling up to an hour to get to church. It can be quite a challenge to meet mid-week especially if you are working.

When you move away from family and friends, it takes time to find a new network. To find other people that you 'click' with. That's why my Church Family is so important. Already you have a set of people with the same beliefs as soon as you walk in the door. They may not be people that you would immediately be friends with: they come from a different country, a different church tradition, they have had very different life experiences from you. Gradually, as you meet each week and sometimes in between, you become friends, you share common experiences and can relate to the same events. Equally, you learn about different cultures, most likely not those of your host nation but of a country where you have never lived before. In this way, you can support your church family and they can support you. Each week you can go to be refreshed, meet friends and be prepared to face the week ahead.

Hilary Hull



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info@alamanacentre.org

and we will direct you towards the appropriate channels.

Be the Guest

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.² He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you;⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

Luke 10:1-9

Almost five years ago we left our home to come to Oman. While we took about 10 suitcases of our most personal possessions, most of what we had we left behind. We came to Oman and we proclaimed peace, and we found people here that share in that peace.

When we came to Oman, I'm sure that there were many people who thought we were being sent among the wolves. One person even charged me with being a bad husband and father for endangering my family. Yet, we found a welcome here that many people from our home context would find nothing short of amazing and wonderful. Just like disciples of Jesus's time who found welcome in the villages, we too have found welcome.

What strikes me most about this passage, was how Jesus was instructing his disciples to do the work of the Kingdom of God by being guests of the people to whom he sent them.

Growing up in the church I was taught how to try and be a good host, to invite people to my church. I was taught how to welcome them to join my faith tradition and encourage them to believe like I believe. However, for the last five years, my Christian mission has centered around being the guest. In this passage from Luke, I hear Jesus commanding his disciples to go out....and be the guest. Eat what they give you, drink what is put before you, and in return offer them the gifts of healing and the good news that the Kingdom of God is near.

During his public ministry, Jesus was usually the guest. He was invited into homes to eat, to heal, and to teach. He dined with tax collectors and sinners. He was the guest at weddings. He ate in the homes of his followers. He even sat at the table of the rich and powerful. He was a guest. He responded to their questions and engaged the topics they were passionate about. (This doesn't mean he al-

ways agreed with his hosts, and would challenge them appropriately...)

As people of faith, I wonder what would happen, if we focused less on inviting people to be like us and spent more time putting ourselves in positions to receive the hospitality of others? Being a guest can be a scary proposition. We have to give up control to someone else. As a guest we can't pick the menu, the timing, or even the conversation. All of these are the responsibility of the host. The most we can do is say "peace be upon this house!" and see what comes next. The goal of the disciples wasn't to convert people to a new religion. It wasn't to convince people that they were right. The goal was to be welcomed as guests and to give the gifts of the Kingdom of God, healing and the good news that God was near.

Conversely, judgement wasn't pronounced based on belief of the message, instead it was pronounced on those who did not offer the disciples hospitality.

I've learned a great deal from being a guest here in Oman. I have been richly blessed by my Omani hosts. I hope that I have blessed them back in return. I have had to give up control and go with the flow of my hosts. Through it all, I can report and rejoice that I have seen hatred and animosity be cast out and peace be proclaimed. I have had that peace returned to me from people who are Muslim, Hindu, and other religions as well. I have seen God working among people of many faiths to promote the values of the Kingdom of God. All this, because I submitted to being the guest.

My encouragement to you, the reader, is this: Go and put yourself in situations where you can be the guest. Learn to live into the space and the place where people who are other than you and your family reside. Proclaim peace, and see what happens. You might just find the Kingdom of God is near.

Peace



Justin