

BRIDGING THE GULF

Bringing Religions and
Cultures Together



AL AMANA CENTRE
BUILDING TRUST AND PEACE

Quarterly Newsletter

Review of 2019

Winter 2019
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Dear friends of Al Amana Centre,

Al Amana Centre is, by God's grace, about to wrap up a wonderful program year and it is good to look back at what has happened over the last 12 months. In this newsletter you will see stories and successes over the last months.

This fall has been especially busy in a good way. I was just reporting to our Board of Directors two weeks ago that between the November board meeting and the one we had in April, Al Amana Centre hosted six groups for peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. Three were American church and university / college groups and others have been supporting religious leaders and people of faith in conflict zones. We are still waiting for one group to arrive in mid-December and another one to land in Oman just before the New Year. We had to postpone two groups who had some internal challenges and they could not get their group together before the end of the calendar year 2019.

We had planned and budgeted our work for the year 2019 based on 80% success rate of 127 participants and 13 short-term groups. We have received eleven groups and so far, 107 participants. This does not include almost 40 participants we had at the Symposium on the "Role of Religion in Reconciliation", neither does it include the participants of the groups arriving in December. Six of the groups this calendar year have been part of our "Interfaith encounters and Intercultural immersion" program and five of them have been part of the "dialogue facilitation and safe space" program.

In the light of the number of groups and participants, it is safe to say that we have succeeded in our programmatic goals for the year 2019. It has been continuous work to reach out to new partners, and it is our intention to build partnerships who will work with Al Amana Centre with a long-term focus. This means that we will be providing training and workshops for strategic partners and accompanying them annually.

When preparing for the year 2020, we decided not to have a study abroad program in Spring 2020. We are working to upgrade our programs and partnerships so that we will have more students in Spring 2021. This means we will continue visiting universities and colleges in the US. Al Amana Centre is uniquely placed to build the capacity and provide experiences for American students. We are also hoping to provide possibilities for teachers and professors to join us for short periods of time in the future.

As our programs have been growing in terms of number of groups, staffing the program adequately has been one of the main priorities at Al Amana Centre. In addition to the permanent staff, we had the pleasure of having two volunteers this fall. We are also working on securing up to three volunteers for this coming spring. If you want to come and join us as a volunteer, please let us know. There are plenty of opportunities available.

Thank you again for accompanying us in the journey of peace, interfaith harmony and reconciliation. Your prayers as well as your financial support is always very much appreciated, and we want to recognize all of you who have been helping us in one way or another in the Anno Domini 2019.



Rev. Aaro Rytönen
Executive Director

Finally, as we approach Christmas, we pray that Christmastime would be peaceful for all people in the world. We are praying for countries and regions where violence prevails and ask for the guidance of God Almighty to stay close to everyone who is suffering. Let each one of us be instruments of peace.

A blessed and peaceful Advent Period,

Rev. Aaro Rytönen

Faith Friends

Eleven men from Pakistan gathered in the oasis of a date farm, a cool place offering respite from the 100 degree heat of the afternoon. "Look at how relaxed we are together," proclaimed one of the eleven men. "We are Shi'ite and Sunni [Muslims], Hindu, Sikh, and Christians."

They call themselves "Faith Friends." They came to Oman from Peshawar, a conflicted city of two million inhabitants in north-west Pakistan. Three of the men, two Muslim scholars and the Bishop of the Church of Pakistan*, started Faith Friends with the purpose of helping religious leaders and their congregations know each other better. Before starting their group in 2004, they recall being in "negative peace": different religious communities worshiped in buildings next to each other, but there was no social cohesion. "We did not practice shaking hands or eating at the same table together. Though we lived so close, we were far from each other."

"Now we are related on social, political, and religious levels," announced a Hindu among them. "There are more groups like ours today in Pakistan working for peace, but ours is made of religious leaders," explained one of the Muslim scholars. "It was difficult at first," he continued, "Students [at the university] questioned why Christians and Muslims were shaking hands." People in their communities thought they were starting a new religion.

The Muslim scholars gave lectures on common humanity and showed how this is founded in Islam. "There is no compulsion of religion; there are different religions and we are to live together in harmony." Others spoke from the perspective of their religious traditions, affirming, "We are all Pakistani and we should work on peaceful living together."

The group has even been able to hold interfaith conferences with local government ministers in attendance, helping to spread their message of peace to wider circles in Pakistan. They meet regularly within and between their communities. They often meet in each other's homes. "Before we could become a fraternity, we didn't know each other," said the Bishop. "But the fellowship has developed our understanding a lot. We think and care about each other now."

Their attitudes have changed. They are changing the attitudes of others in their community. The Bishop noted that during the last local elections there were no incidents of religious violence.

There is still work to be done. These members of Faith Friends came to Al Amana Centre to consider new ways for developing peace among religions throughout the religiously diverse society in Pakistan. They came to learn about ways Al Amana Centre is hosting interfaith groups. They came to see how the government of Oman cultivates a culture of tolerance and promotes a peace-filled way of life for people of all religions.

"Our area is a tough area," commented the Sikh. "We would like to see our friendship keep moving forward with this struggle, together."

**The Church of Pakistan is a union of Anglicans, Scottish Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans*

Melissa Bos

Interreligious Dialogue with Young People of Different Faiths at Shanti Mitra

Shanti Mitra has been organizing a monthly Interfaith Dialogue Session with young people in Bangladesh. In September, the dialogue session was arranged by taking verses from scriptures about parents.

Eighteen young persons gathered in the hall at Shanti Mitra. The session started with a prayer by Bijon followed by two minutes silence. Then Linda recited from the Bhagavad Gita. Mun Ghosh recited from the Quran. Mamun recited from the Bible. After the recitation, participants shared their thoughts and understanding about the three verses.

As the dialogue topic was parents, the starting questions was 'What do we think of our parents?' Almost all the participants shared their feelings and thoughts about their parents. They were visibly emotional. The participants shared beautiful and touching stories.
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Interreligious Dialogue with Young People of Different Faiths at Shanti Mitra

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One participant said that the roots of her existence are her parents. Parents are like a tree or an umbrella where you receive shelter and trust. Then the question arose, 'What are the responsibilities of parents to children and children to parents?'

The participants shared one after another on aspects of parent-child relationship. Again, some of the members got emotional during their sharing. In many cases they indicated the significance of parents in every child's life.

One participant shared that sometimes as a child he felt discriminated against by his parents. Niloy said "I love my father, but I feel that he doesn't love me. He loves my sister more. He never talks well with me." Other participants shared similar experiences.

Poli Drong, Director of Shanti Mitra said, "We have to remember that our parents are also human. They are not perfect. They have many limitations. Sometimes parents are concerned about a child who is weak or unsuccessful. What you feel is not fair for you now, you can make fair for your children in the future."

Finally, participants talked about the duty of children to parents. Linda said she had been cared for by her mother. Now she tries to reverse it and takes care of her mother. The dialogue seemed weighty, as all the members got emotional. They shared from their heart, which also made the dialogue session all the more unique and beautiful.

This report was original written by Mehedi Hasan. Mehedi serves with Shanti Mitra and is an interfaith fellow with the Network for Traditional and Religious Peacemakers which the Al Amana Centre helped to found.

Transformed by The Word to Love the World

Christianity is often understood to be a system of beliefs. If this is so, then Christians must recognize that the beliefs held by Christians include attitudes of colonialism, ethnocentrism, racism, paternalism, and phobia. Brian MacLaren asks in his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*, "What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is a beloved and loving community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?"

These are questions we ought to consider in light of the Apostle Paul's instructions in the second chapter of his letter to the Romans. The Christian's goal is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds into the mind of Christ. This is different than having all the right ideas and beliefs. Christians have had many wrong ideas. They have even claimed that these have come from the Bible. Thinking to have the right ideas, many Christians have fallen into pride and conceit (Romans 12:16). This sounds more like being conformed to the pattern of this world. The renewing of the minds does not mean we get smarter. On the contrary, we have much to unlearn.

We begin the unlearning process by dwelling with the Word. The Word proves us wrong. It humbles. It turns our values, ideas, and habits upside-down. It kills our self-centered existence. The transformation process does not bypass our personalities or brains. As the Spirit of Christ works within us, we are transformed first inwardly (mind), and then outwardly (body). When this happens, the downward spiral is reversed. No longer do minds "become futile in their thinking," as Paul says in the previous chapter. Knowledge is not increased or correct in so much as it is

rightly directed. By the working of Word and Spirit, minds are renewed to understand the truth, not to possess it but to pursue it and live.

As living sacrifices, we meditate upon God's Word and our daily experiences. We grow into knowing God and understanding the truth about ourselves. We are sinful, limited, and dependent creatures who may yet "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The will of God comes to expression in Jesus, the manifestation of God's love. God's will and the commandments are summed up in love, not merely knowing what that love is but in being love both in mind and body. The renewing of our minds returns us to our hearts in renewed action. Our actions become like those described by Paul in the remainder of chapter 12.

As we embrace Christ and engage people, the transformational migration moves us forward from preaching to listening, from teaching to learning, from fear to openness, from certainty to wonder, and hostility to love. They will know we are Christians by our love.

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them.

Just as love of God begins with listening to his word, so the beginning of love for our brothers and sisters is learning to listen to them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Rev. Jeffrey Bos
Associate Program Director



Welcomed to Oman

Before arriving in Oman, I had only met Aaro and Justin for one hour over Skype. I knew very little about Al Amana Centre or what my role would be, and I was nervous. Thankfully, if there is one thing Omanis and Al Amana Centre do well, it is hospitality.

I have lived in North Carolina and Virginia for my whole life, and I can tell you that American Southerners pride themselves on the warmth of their "Southern Hospitality." This ideal describes a place where people slow down, gather around home cooked meals, sit on the front porch, and say a lot of "yes ma'am" and "no sir." Friends are treated like family, and pitchers of sweet tea disappear over unhurried conversation.

Replace sweet tea with kahwa and dates, and Oman brings an abundance of warmth to hospitality (and I'm not talking about the warm temperatures). I have been in Oman for three months now, and I'm repeatedly blown away by the kindness I receive from strangers. Last weekend I attended a storytelling event with mostly Omani participants. Due to scheduling conflicts, neither of my friends could go with me, so I went alone. I stepped through the door and cautiously sat on a pillow near three

Omani women around my age. As soon as I introduced myself as new to Oman, they lit up and started asking me questions of my experiences so far. They asked about what I do here, so I told them about Al Amana Centre. Eagerly they responded by telling me how Oman is a great place to do this peacebuilding work. We shared stories of our experiences in other countries and here in Oman, and before the event had even officially started, we were exchanging WhatsApp numbers and making plans to go to a yoga class together.

By the end of the night, they had welcomed me, the stranger, so fully that I felt like I was at home in Virginia sitting around with old friends. It is through building friendships like these, both during AAC programs and beyond, that I feel like I am learning the most about Oman and peacebuilding. It is in the smiles and laughter, the focused listening and captivating storytelling, through which I am broadening my own understanding of tolerance and learning to practice Omani hospitality. I am only three months into my year in Oman, so I still have much to experience, but I am thankful that this holiday season Oman is starting to feel a lot like home.

Emma

Towards United Human Values

Last month, the Omani government under the auspices of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs announced the Sultan Qaboos Declaration Project on United Human Values and launched the #TowardsUnitedHumanValues campaign.

This campaign is a recognition that no matter what religious tradition we live within, we are all human and share a common humanity. While it is unlikely that religion will unite us as a planet any time soon, there is a chance that there are values, that may or may not be taught by our religions, that we as humans can unite around as we work for peace.

I find this an interesting solution to one of the key problems of interfaith work. The goal of interfaith work isn't to change someone's religion, to necessarily change elements of one's own religion, or even to accept that "other" religion as "right or wrong." We are unlikely to ever have, find, or create a universal religion. Instead, the goal of interfaith work is to understand each other's religions and faith traditions. While religion won't unite us, part of what we can understand about each other's faith traditions is the values that they teach us. These values can be a link between the various religions, and even link us to other people who may not subscribe to any religion at all.

The other thing I really appreciate about the campaign is that movement is "toward united human values". It doesn't presuppose that there is a universal set of human values that all people must, can, or should subscribe to have. It is an acknowledgement that while we might not

create a set of universal values, moving toward understanding what human values might unite us is a worthy, and worthwhile task. This is especially the case if it can bring us to a point of mutual cooperation around the values we all share, whether they are taught by our religion, or not.

I do not have a crystal ball that shows me where this campaign #towardunitedhumanvalues will finally bring us. I wish I could say for certain that it will lead to a more peaceful world where religions are working together to the benefit of all humanity, but I can't. I can however have hope. Hope that trying something new will produce different and maybe even better results. Hope that religions can speak into the humanity of others and we can see that even though we may have different religions, we share some fundamental human values that we can foster among all people. I can hope that HM Sultan Qaboos has given the world another piece of wisdom. I can hope that there are others like me who see potential in this way of thinking and working.

Al Amana Centre will continue to do the work that it has been doing these last two decades, but we will also join our Omani hosts in seeing if this new campaign can help us realize more fully what I feel both Islam and Christianity teach, us peacefully living together with all of creation.

Peace,
Rev. Justin Meyers
Associate Director

