

LEARNING TO BE A PEACEMAKER



REPORT

CAUX, SWITZERLAND
2009



Inspiration

“Europe is my home, I belong here. Islam is my religion and I am proud of it. My parents are Bangladeshi and I have married a Hungarian woman. So one could say I am British, Bangladeshi and European Muslim. I have two children; they are British, Bangladeshi, Hungarian and European Muslims. We all have multiple layers of identities; they have shaped me and my world view. Are they in conflict? No! They are enriching and complimentary.

“Where do I belong” is probably the single most important question every young Muslim had to answer at some stage in their life. I have asked myself this question many times. “Where does my loyalty lie” is the next logical question that arises from the answer of the initial question. I have thought about that throughout my youth and I still get asked this question by many of my fellow citizens. Young Muslims have been made to feel alien in their own homes, in countries where they are born and by some people they have considered their neighbours.

Islam has become synonymous with terrorism and violence. This is exasperated by the continuous negative media reports and irresponsible comments made by some politicians. Some extremist amongst the Muslim community have high jacked Islam to further their own political and twisted agenda. Often inconsistent and unethical foreign policies of our government are blamed for radicalizing young Muslims. All these have contributed to further mistrusts between communities and rise in the far right, racist and fascist leaning political groups. Some would go further and say Islam is not part of European Heritage since the Muslims are clearly not interested in peace. Thus fuelling mistrust and hatred between Muslim and non Muslim communities.

Christianity came to Europe from Palestine. It took hundreds of years for it to become part of the European experience. There is a long history of Islam’s contribution to making of modern Europe. As early as 7th century Muslims scholars, philosophers and scientists have paved the way towards the intellectual and scientific discoveries. Over time Islam will also become part of European experience. I believe this history is not fully appreciated by many Muslims and non-Muslims.

Islam as a religion of peace has a vital role to play in making peace in the world today. The blessed Prophet once said, “Spread peace”. I do not think this essential message of Islam is fully realized by Muslims and non-Muslims. Learning to be a peacemaker is about helping young Muslims to be confident in their identities, belonging and loyalty. It is about empowering young Muslims with the knowledge and skills to share the good teaching of peace and trust building with the wider society. This programme is about shaping the minds of the leaders of tomorrow – the young people. This programme is about making the leaders of tomorrow.”

Ajmal Masroor

Imam and broadcaster, London, UK



Rationale

My first encounter with the Muslim world was as a member of a student delegation visiting Egypt in 1973. I drew two conclusions that have stayed with me ever since.

The first was the discovery that there are deep commonalities in the characteristics that our respective religions try to instill in their adherents – for example, values of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, and the search for divine guidance. As these are the ingredients of trust, there seemed to be a basis on which people from these (and other) faith traditions could establish creative relationships.

The second was the bitterness that the British and European colonial legacy had engendered. The dilemmas that the countries of the Middle East (and other areas) inherited have diverted the energies of generations away from normal development, and caused huge loss of life, and dislocation.

I glimpsed that it would only be possible to build on the commonalities if this bitterness could be healed. Experiences of deep changes of heart on both sides gave me the conviction that through acknowledgement, forgiveness and mutual service, enduring relationships of trust could be established.

Since then, the 'Muslim world' is no longer 'over there', but has become part of the fabric of Western Europe itself. Collaborating with Ajmal Masroor on this programme is a precious opportunity to explore trust-building in this new context.

Peter Riddell

Initiatives of Change, UK



Rational

I arrived in Sweden as an immigrant, looking for better and brighter future. Sweden has provided me with opportunities, freedom and support that have been instrumental in my success and all the work that I do.

I noticed a huge gap in the Muslim community, especially amongst the youth, while many organizations were providing various projects and programmes to make the lives of people better, no one was promoting actively the Islamic peace culture.

Thus, training Swedish Young Muslims to become peace agents began. We brought together various partners and have successfully delivered and trained over 100 peace agents in Sweden.

Our partner and trainer, Ajmal Masroor, along with Sensus and Ibn Rushd in Sweden have been working together to further promote this concept across Europe.

This year, as a pilot programme, bringing so many young Muslims from various EU countries together has certainly confirmed my believe that this programme should be run in every European country as soon as possible. I am extremely delighted by the outcome so far and look forward to next round programmes.

Yasin Ahmed

Sensus, Sweden



“One of the strengths of the course was the balance between theoretical knowledge and enough concrete examples, making the former easier to assimilate, integrate and use.”

Asma Soltani
France

Introduction

Over sixty young European Muslims participated in the Learning to be a Peacemaker programme held in Caux, Switzerland, August 4 – 15, 2009. This innovative 11-day programme drew 18 to 30 year old participants from all over Europe. Groups of young, talented Europeans came together from Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands and Germany to learn and actively participate in an intense, but enjoyable journey of learning about peacemaking in Islam. Although the majority were Muslim, there were also non-Muslim participants.

Location

The venue, Mountain House, Caux, is not just breathtakingly beautiful with spectacular views over Lake Léman, it has some amazing tales of peacemaking. Originally a grand hotel, it was bought immediately after the Second World War by far-sighted Swiss of the Moral Re-Armament movement as a place where leaders from the former warring nations could reconcile. The

American founder of the movement, Frank Buchman, was decorated by France, Germany and Japan for his contribution to postwar reconciliation in Europe and the Far East. The movement was renamed Initiatives of Change (IofC) in 2001, and Caux, its European conference centre has become known globally as a centre for peace-making.

Far away from the daily chores of life, and in the unspoiled natural surroundings of the lakes and the mountains, the programme was able to keep a group of young people focused. No alcohol, drugs or smoking in the building, little tolerance for lewdness or intimate mingling between men and women, and the spiritual and selfless surrounding was simply perfect to put all participants' minds to the task at hand.

Team

The brainchild of London-based Imam Ajmal Masroor, the programme was developed in collaboration with Peter Riddell of Initiatives of Change-UK, Yasin Ahmed from Sensus of Sweden. The core team was supported by Marianne Spreng of the Foundation Caux-Initiatives of Change, Hennie de Pous-de Jonge of IofC-Netherlands, Dr Elisabeth Hamrin of IofC-Sweden, Howard Grace of IofC-UK and the whole Caux community.

The team also included over 30 Assistant Facilitators. They had undergone training prior to coming to Caux and some of them had taken part in one of the conferences the previous summer. Their roles included facilitating group discussions, workshops and providing general support to participants.

IofC in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK supported the recruitment of participants with funding and logistical assistance.

Programme Objectives

This unique relationship enabled a programme that seeks to address the issues Muslims face in Europe today, notably the marriage of faith and European identity. In particular it aimed

- to improve participants' understanding of the concepts of peace and the subject of peacemaking in Islam
- to enhance their communication skills in order to channel positive messages about Islam to the wider community, and
- to enhance their self-esteem and confidence in negotiation in order to become successful peacemakers.

Programme Content

The programme was in two parts;

Part 1, a five-day course on Peacemaking in Islam;

Part 2, participation in the annual Tools for Change training programme with people from a wide range of countries and ages.



"I learnt what Islam teaches about peace. I learnt how I can put this into practice i.e. taking examples from the Qur'an and Hadith (traditions of prophet Muhammad). Also I learnt what true unity is all about. I learnt that we can be different as Muslims, but still be united."

*Imran Asif
Nottingham, UK*



"The philosophy and goal of this programme is unique. It helps not only to understand but to internalize the message of love and peace in Islam. We need more of these programmes if we want to live together in peace in Europe, in each country or majority city."

*Hakan Tosuner
Germany*

This report covers part 1.

Part 1

The fundamental teaching of Islam of peaceful co-existence is the key to reconciling many of the dilemmas European Muslims face (citizenship, identity, Islamophobia and social exclusion). When young Muslims grasp this, they are empowered, as agents of peace, to make their full contribution to their communities and countries, and to realise their potential. This fosters better relations between Muslims and non-Muslims through a culture



As I learned more and more of the conflicts that exist in the world and among Muslims which require peace-making, I actually unravelled more and more of the conflicts I had within myself. Even though I always considered myself to be an utmost diplomat, I realised that my inner conflicts actually created barriers in peacemaking. And until I overcome these barriers, there's no hope for me to be a true peacemaker. This course really helped me bring those aspects to light. I always knew that we have to 'Be the Change we wish to see' but this course helped turn that into a 'must' in my life, rather than a 'wish'."

Mazida Khan
Bristol, UK

The course included studying Islamic source material including the Quran, traditions of the Prophet (Sunnah) and the other inductive tools that have been handed down the generations and form part of the Islamic legal framework. The participants were expected to absorb extensive material contained in the course manual.

Lectures were divided into eight topics including the ethics of disagreement, peace and war, Islamic Law and its objectives, overview of peace-building, the treaty of Hudaibiya, violence and extremism, understanding citizenship and exploring loyalties.

The final session explored projects that participants wished to carry out in their home countries, putting the concepts and skills of the course into practice.

After each lecture there were breakout sessions where participants were split into groups and were asked questions in order to explore the concepts and issues discussed in the lectures.

They were then asked to come back together to present their answers. This interactive teaching method was for many, a fun and lively way to engage themselves with the others and to exchange ideas.

The participants received help with teaching along with technical and moral support from the course leaders. The Facilitators were also able to guide and mentor participants through the course. Most found the materials, delivery and teachings provided them with an excellent foundation on the concepts of peacemaking in Islam and gave them the tools to enhance their practical negotiating skills. Indeed a majority of the participants summed up their experiences by praising the over-all programme.

Guest speakers



Mohamed Sahnoun (1st left), distinguished Algerian diplomat and former UN Special Envoy in Africa, shared with the participants his long experience of diplomacy and peacemaking under some of the most difficult circumstances.

Ahtisham Ali (2nd left), the Muslim Advisor to the British Government's Prison Services, spoke on the ethics of disagreement and argued that it is narrow-minded and illogical not to be able to tolerate difference. He recounted examples from his own work and life that demonstrated the importance of knowing how to manage difference.

Dr Barry Hart (3rd left), professor of Trauma, Identity and Conflict Studies, Eastern Mennonite University, USA, gave an overview of the academic study of peace-building with case studies from various conflict areas.

Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra (3rd right), Chair of the Interfaith Relations Committee of the Muslim Council of Britain, gave a lively and informative lecture on the subject of violence and extremism. Indeed, Sheikh Mogra highlighted the necessity and continuity of the programme, stating, "We are duty-bound that peace prevails on this planet and that everyone of God's creation is able to live peacefully with one another..."

Ramez Salamé (2nd right), a lawyer who has been involved in trust-building initiatives between the communities in Lebanon for many years illustrated the approach he has adopted with personal experiences.

Rob Corcoran (1st right), spoke about his work as Director of Hope in the Cities, an NGO in the USA which focuses on promoting dialogue between people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.



"The breakout sessions were great to explore the concepts discussed in our lectures, it was quite interesting to see how diverse people's opinions are. These sessions helped us talk out our issues and made me feel involved with the programme."

Sabina Zahir
UK

Time to reflect and relax

There were fixed time for the five daily prayers and quiet time for reflection.

The evening sessions were less formal and encouraged spiritual reflection. Participants were invited to share their own personal struggles in reconciling their faith and identity as Muslims living in Europe. Many participants found this part of the programme the most challenging, as it called on them to reflect on intensely personal issues. These sessions drew upon the concept of 'honest conversation' which essentially creates a space where people of all backgrounds, gender, age and faith are given a platform to be heard and welcomed. The evening sessions were open to everybody present in the conference centre.

Afternoons were free time for participants to roam the surrounding mountains, lake or play sports, such as volleyball, table-tennis and football. There were two outing days for walks in the mountains or activities around or on the lake, such as walks, cycle-rides or boating.

Below is a set of pictures illustrating various forms activities:



Cultural evening

Participants organised a cultural variety evening to perform their talents on stage; groups from different nations showcased their wonderful singing and musical talents. The evening contained songs from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds sung and presented in variety of languages, poetry, sufi chanting and even the infamous song from Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror". The highlight of the evening was the Indonesian / Dutch group.



Caux Experience

The Caux experience left everyone with a warm feeling in their hearts and a new-found inspiration in challenging pre-conceived ideas on perceptions of Islam and the European Muslim.

Caux provided the best platform for the difficult and challenging journey that the young Muslims along with several non-Muslims were undertaking. Honest conversation required safe, confidential, trusting and respectful space; Caux certainly provided the rock that was needed for people from wide range of experiences and expectations to navigate together.

Caux hospitality, friendly volunteers, selfless team and extremely helpful and communal arrangements was perfect for the success of the programme. Everyone played their part in the Caux community and that is by far the most important learning in this programme.

Future plan

We would like to meet the following three goals in the next five years:

1. To deliver Learning to be a Peacemaker programme across 10 European countries with significant Muslim populations.
2. To set up European Peacemakers Network connecting peacemakers, sharing information and good practice and providing a networking opportunities.
3. To help develop local infrastructures to support the activities of the young Muslim peacemakers.

In order to achieve our goal and deliver across the 10 European countries we need support from statutory and funding bodies. We are currently looking for support and help from interested organisations or individuals who can help create and share a peace culture among young people in Europe. This programme concept is simple, but has the potential to profoundly impact the capacity of young Muslims to contribute towards a shared future.

Conclusion

Five days, seven different countries and seventy participants all came together to learn to be a peacemaker. One of the participants summed up the whole experience most profoundly:

“...At the end of the programme we didn't necessarily become alike: we just valued and respected each other in a deeper manner”



As a non-Muslim I was in the privileged position of learning more than anyone. Whilst my knowledge of Islam, the Qu'ran and Sunnah grew, conversations from friends from France, Sweden or the UK widened my understanding of what it means to be a Muslim today in sometimes a hostile society... the friendships that were formed will be lasting, and more importantly they will be the foundations of a new initiative in Europe to prevent the lack of understanding continuing to be an obstacle of peace.”

Vanessa Lucas

Bristol, UK



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