

27/15 Connection with our Muslim neighbours

(A report from a working group established at the request of Synod.)

Introduction

At its session in 2015, the Synod resolved as follows –

“That a working group be formed in association with Moore College, and chaired by the Head of the Department of Mission, to develop material and an organised and comprehensive approach that will motivate, educate and equip our churches to connect with our Muslim neighbours in culturally appropriate ways in order to commend Christ to them – not from fear but because the love of Christ compels us. That the committee will include the mover and the Reverends John Bales and Bruce Hall.”

The working group formed in response to the above mentioned resolution has been meeting since January 2016 and comprises –

The Rev John Bales
The Rev Stuart Binns
The Rev Moussa Gazzal
The Rev Simon Gillham
The Rev Bruce Hall
The Rev Dr Margaret Powell.

This group includes many who are active in ministry, and training others for ministry, among Muslims and Christian believers from a Muslim background within the Diocese of Sydney. In an effort to ensure that the wishes of Synod are carried out and that the momentum behind addressing this significant ministry context within the Diocese is not lost, the group requests the opportunity to make a 10-minute video presentation to the Synod in October 2016. This presentation would serve to both put forward a model response to our Muslim neighbours, and also to inform the Synod of further resources and opportunities for training for those seeking to commend Christ out of love.

The work so far

Understanding the variety of Christian responses to Islam

There are a variety of responses that have been made by Christians to Islam. The title of a recent book published in Britain captures the extremes, “Between Naivety and Hostility: Uncovering the best Christian response to Islam in Britain”.

We have been asked by Synod (resolution 27/15), to develop material and an organised and comprehensive approach that will motivate, educate and equip our churches to connect with our Muslim neighbours in culturally appropriate ways in order to commend Christ to them – not from fear but because the love of Christ compels us. Both extremes may be prompted by ignorance of and distance from Muslim people.

In our response we hope to encourage understanding and promote engagement with Muslim people that our churches might be involved in sharing Christ with our Muslim neighbours.

Understanding the context of the Diocese

Where we live in Sydney Diocese will often determine our understanding of Islam and our interaction with Muslim people. As with all migration, Muslims from various parts of the world have gathered more in some suburbs than others.

There are 212,014 Muslim People in Sydney, which is 4.7% of the population (2011 Census). Within the Diocese, parishes can be usefully divided into three broad groups. Different ministry strategies and expectations are more appropriate in each of the three groups of churches.

- 119 churches in Sydney would seldom see a Muslim person in their neighbourhood because their parish has less than 1% Muslim people.
- 126 churches are much more likely to have Muslim neighbours (between 1-10%)
- 21 churches have more than 10% Muslim people in their parish.

In broad terms, the suburbs which have higher percentages of Muslim people also tend to be socio-economically disadvantaged. Churches in these areas typically struggle to find the resources needed to sustain ministries.

It is important to understand both elements of this context. Ministry opportunities are spread unevenly between churches, and the availability of resources to support such ministries are also spread unevenly. The Diocesan response to the Syrian Refugees moving to Sydney has begun to provide many positive examples of partnerships in ministry between churches and people in divergent parts of the Diocese.

Motivating, educating and equipping our churches

To share Christ with our Muslim neighbours regardless of the area we live in, each of our churches need –

- To see that Muslim people are lost without Christ
- To see that sharing life and Christ with Muslim people is like sharing with anyone
- To pray for and relate to Muslim people where you are
- For everyone to know some ways to share Christ with Muslim people
- To encourage some to particularly commit themselves to sharing Christ with Muslim people and to train to that end
- To look to partner with churches in areas with more Muslim neighbours but less resources for sharing Christ

The group has collected and evaluated resources which will be useful for the motivation, education and equipping of our churches. A list of recommended training packages and resources specifically designed for the different contexts of churches and individuals has been compiled. The group plans to make information about these resources readily available in as many formats as possible (various website listings as well as print versions).

The list includes a number of training packages that are already being regularly run within the Diocese by members of the Ministry to Muslims group.

The future plans

1. Publication of resource lists and advertising of training programs (September 2016)
2. John Azuma visit (June 2017)
 - (a) Meeting with Diocesan leadership
 - (b) Opportunities for clergy and lay training
 - (c) Specific training for those already in ministry amongst Muslims
 - (d) Saturday Ministry Conference and Public Dinner
3. Production of Moore College on-line course (January 2017) – A course built around ‘The Cross and the Crescent’, by Colin Chapman will be included in the new accredited on-line Diploma in Biblical Theology.

The present need

In the present climate, with renewed fears of Islamist terrorism, calls to ban Muslim immigration and increased tensions surrounding Australian Muslim communities, it is critical that the Diocese continues to commend Christ out of love and not fear. To respond to Islam with neither naivety nor hostility. To love our neighbours well.

This working group feels that a 10-minute slot of the Synod’s time to press the case forward in a positive way would be a great investment. We would undertake to ensure that the presentation winsomely served the intentions of the Synod’s motion from last year by both ‘motivating, educating and equipping’ Synod members to commend Christ, and also informing them of plans to do this more broadly throughout the Diocese.

Thank you for attending this report and considering our request.

For and on behalf of the Working Group.

THE REV SIMON GILLHAM
Convenor

24 August 2016