

The Edge Report

2012

**Exploring Christian and Muslim
Women's Perspectives
Christian Muslim Forum**

"...the global socio-economic conditions have forced us to become more resourceful, more resilient, more determined; whilst remaining hopeful, we must work together to challenge and strive for something better - to this end women are crucial for change..."

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1. Focus group listening exercises
2. The write ups
3. The planning of this residential
4. The report

We hope that you will continue to provide us with your valuable support.

Authors:

Wahida Shaffi (Programme Lead and Editor), Revd Dilly Baker

(Consultant), Zahra Imame (Project Worker), Julian Bond (Director)



Forwards



Elizabeth Carnelley

*Programme Director
Near Neighbours*

The title of the work with women, bringing together those from Christian and Muslim backgrounds, is taken from a poem by Christopher Logue:

*Come to The Edge
Come to the edge.
We might fall.
Come to the edge.
It's too high!
COME TO THE EDGE!
And they came,
And we pushed,
And they flew.*

The experience of women coming together through the Christian Muslim Forum has shown that though we might fear coming to the edge of our comfort zone, our knowledge, our experience, if we push out we can indeed fly.

The meetings of women from the seven towns and cities where Near Neighbours is operating has shown that the relationships women can build of friendship and co-operation are potentially very powerful and can be the source of transformation in our communities and our towns and cities.

A constant theme many participants commented on was the fact of coming together, the talking, discussing and the fun, which can build into a network of hope, which in turn becomes a strategy for tackling issues locally and more widely. We have seen the practical outworking of this in applications from many women as well as men for small grants from Near Neighbours to initiate new work in local areas. We have also seen the strength of women networking together to make changes.

This is vital work in building local relationships of trust which can change society for the better.



Julie Siddiqi
Executive Director
Islamic Society of Britain

It is always interesting to see the debates and discussions that take place within specific communities and then to see how they link to topics of discussion elsewhere.

In the last year I have been moved, inspired, motivated and encouraged by women of all faiths and some who would say they don't belong to a faith. My experience at the Come to the Edge conference has been one of the highlights for me so far this year.

As Muslim women living in Britain our role and place has been under immense scrutiny from everyone and from everywhere! With an overzealous interest in women's dress and how that relates to their 'piety', this scrutiny comes from within the community itself as well, sadly.

Muslim women need to work with women of Christian, Jewish and other backgrounds to gain inspiration and support to take the debates forward. And of course, we must work with men too. Sometimes I feel, controversial as it may be for some to read, that the emphasis on 'gender' amongst Muslims has meant that we have lost the ability to naturally work together as men and women in a way I believe the faith not only 'allows' but positively encourages. Some of the positive working relationships I have developed in the last 5 years have been with men but sadly that is not as common as it needs to be amongst Muslims.

I am an optimist and very much believe in harnessing a positive attitude to life and to never think that things are so hopeless they won't change. Sometimes it is hard to maintain that though! The realities on the ground just don't match the teachings of the faith itself. And studying the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him, we know that he was loved by everyone and had a great, practical and logical approach to women and indeed was instrumental in changing the way women were treated in that society.

The irony is that Muslims are very quick to mention that 'Islam gave women their rights' but the realities on the ground just don't always back that up, sadly.

So the way forward is, no doubt, for Muslim women to work together with women of all backgrounds. Look for common issues, develop our strengths together, work at a national level and enable that to filter down to local women right at the heart of our communities.

Role models, female leadership, strong articulate voices, credible arguments, faith based analysis, inter-connected faith based social action – it is all needed and I would say is crucial and urgent. But it won't happen by accident. Academics, activists, community workers, professionals and teachers need to come together as women and discuss this. Of course we need to work with men but that women-only space is crucial and will make all the difference. The Come to the Edge event has really inspired me to keep on making changes and to strive for more.

I am so happy to be a part of this and will do whatever I can to ensure that the findings don't just remain words written in a document but that positive, pro-active results come from it too.



Tina Beattie

*Professor of Catholic Studies
University of Roehampton*

Women of faith in modern society have much in common, even when we belong to different religions and cultures. Secularists who are hostile to religion often justify their hostility by claiming that religion oppresses women, and we know that is sometimes true. We face a continuing struggle with powerful authority figures to make our voices heard and to ensure that women's interests are properly represented within our religious communities. Yet we also know that our faith traditions offer sustaining wisdom and guidance as we face the complex demands of modern life. For many of us, belonging to a religious community is a vital part of our identity and sense of self-worth.

While we acknowledge that critics of religion are sometimes right, we know that they often fail to recognize the integrity and intelligence with which many modern women understand, study and live their faith and find it a source of strength and inspiration.

That is why this report is a most welcome development in Christian Muslim dialogue, and a vital resource for those interested in what faith means to different women. The key themes and questions that emerge from the focus groups around the country give a rich insight into the shared concerns of women in both faith communities, while helping us to understand our differences and the challenges we face. It enables us to see beyond a homogenous idea of 'the other' to the rich and sometimes painful reality of religious women's lives in modern society. It reminds us that differences occur within as well as between our religious communities, and it shows how regional demographic variations and cultural differences can have a profound impact on community relationships.

The questions that emerge for discussion are focused, pertinent and challenging. While Christian women can sometimes feel like outsiders and 'others' in an increasingly secular culture, and while we still face considerable struggles within our own faith communities, this report shows that Muslim women experience many of these struggles in a more acute way.

This is partly because of widespread prejudice and stereotyping, and partly because of economic, educational and cultural difficulties that affect minority communities. These concerns become even more urgent when considered from the perspective of young people.

While recognising the importance of informal networks and communal activities for women in the focus groups, the report makes clear that participants also identified a need for greater public representation and political empowerment for women of faith. This requires effective role models, education and the cultivation of leadership skills, and it needs women to work together and to support one another in seeking a national platform.

I warmly congratulate those who participated in the focus groups and the authors of the report for producing such a valuable and insightful resource. I highly recommend this study to anyone interested in the vital and challenging question of women's roles, struggles and aspirations as Muslims and Christians in modern Britain.



Aina Khan

*Senior Consultant Solicitor,
Family Law
Russell Jones &
Walker Solicitors*

It is a great pleasure and privilege to write this foreword. We all share a thirst for knowledge and a desire that we learn from each other about the potential and pitfalls of future interactions and especially how these impact on women.

My experience of over 15 years in the niche area of providing Islamic Family Law solutions under English law tells me that the work of the Christian Muslim Forum is timely and important. The Christian Muslim Forum's focus group study is the beginning of discovery amongst this group of women. The report, whilst in anecdotal form, captures consistent answers from attendees to the focus groups. Some themes are familiar to me from my own work:-

Section 1 - '**The Other**' - This is experienced by many of my clients. They sometimes feel that the court will not understand their religious and cultural needs and worry that they may be thought strange for requesting legal solutions that are not mainstream.

Section 2 - '**Private Space/Public Space**' - It is essential that women feel trust and confidence in the Establishment so that they can address their private concerns in the public sphere. For example, the majority of Muslim women are not legally married under English law, having had a Nikah that is not registered in the UK. They need recourse to the law to obtain their rights to finance if the relationship ends. This is a growing problem amongst younger Muslims.

Section 5 - '**Overcoming Obstacles**' - Culture versus religion is a recurrent theme for Muslim women in my legal work.

Only with grassroots level data collection and analysis can answers emerge to some trying questions e.g. how many religious marriages are unregistered? Does this adversely affect women? I welcome further such valuable work from the Christian Muslim Forum.

Introduction



The **Christian Muslim Forum** has been involved in a series of local and national initiatives over the years that have included a number of women's events. We recognise that the role and contribution of women in the private and public realms of society is crucial for the future prosperity of any society, therefore the necessary spaces need to be created to enable these dynamic voices to be heard. Our work has indicated that we have a responsibility as an organisation to ensure that we include the participation of young people and women in our work. We have also learned that local women value the opportunity to get together on a national platform and connect with other women doing similar work. As such the organisation of a Women Leaders Residential is a way of putting what we have heard from women into practice whilst acknowledging that this is only an initial step forward. The Christian Muslim Forum is carrying out this particular strand of the work through the Near Neighbours programme, funded by the Church Urban Fund.

Near Neighbours is focussed on four key areas: the M62 mill towns (Bradford, Burnley, Oldham), Leicester, East London and East Birmingham. These are all diverse, multi-faith neighbourhoods. Each area has an established Presence and Engagement Centre with experience of multi-faith partnership working: **Leicester** - St. Philip's Centre, **Bradford** - Bradford Centre for Dialogue and Diversity (BCDD), **East London** - The Contextual Theology Centre (CTC), and **Birmingham** - Faithful Neighbourhood Centre. These centres are focussed on training and learning about each other, and there is already a network. The idea of Near Neighbours is to bring people together who are near neighbours in communities that are diverse, so they can get to know each other better, build relationships as people and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in. It has two objectives:

- social interaction – to develop positive relationships in multi-faith areas i.e. to help people from different faiths get to know and understand each other better;



- social action – to encourage people of different faiths, or no faith, to come together for initiatives that improve their local neighbourhood.

Focus groups were conducted in the four areas, to inform our March 2012 national conference*. The findings present the Forum with an opportunity to listen to the valuable stories, experiences and issues that are of importance to women locally that may help to inform the Forum's future work.

**More information about background of each city and focus groups can be found in the Appendix.*

Context

The report brings together the key issues identified by the women's focus groups that met in Burnley, Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and London during the Summer and Autumn of 2011. The report was written for the Christian Muslim Forum in preparation for the national Christian Muslim Women's Residential which was held in March 2012.

The themes identified by the women were considered to be the most pertinent to Christian and Muslim women living in Britain today. It is hoped that both the findings of the listening exercises and the residential will help to inform the future work of the Christian Muslim Forum.

The report is broken up into three parts. The first focuses on the key themes that emerged on the back of the series of listening exercises that took place in 2011, the second focuses on the 'Come to the Edge residential' that took place in Northampton in March 2012, and the third offers some concluding remarks



PART ONE: Key themes

1. 'The Other'

This was a thread that wove its way through all the conversations, appearing in different guises as different topics were discussed. There was the 'other' community, which for the northern gatherings was quite clearly defined. It was characterised by lack of trust and at times open hostility. A number of examples were given, such as the woman from the Bradford focus group who knew of 'parents telling kids not to play with kids from other faiths because Islam instructs you not to do so'. Whilst another commented similarly, 'When my son started school he had quite a few white friends. But they (the White parents) did not want their children to play with Muslim children; (they had) heard stories that they would bring them to their religion'.

Someone from the Burnley group spoke of communities 'still living parallel lives' and went on to say, 'I used to live on the edge of the Asian community and you felt a definite demarcation ... there are people like us who make the effort but many don't; how do you get people to cross the divide?'



A number of examples were given from women who had shown courage and perseverance when they met with a hostile reception from 'the other'. Perhaps the most moving account came from a woman in the Burnley focus group who, having moved to a mixed neighbourhood, was dismayed to see BNP posters in houses nearby. She decided to meet the prejudice head on, cooked food and took it round to her new neighbours – an act of generosity that eventually won them round.

It was interesting to note that this sense of 'them and us' was not a defining experience of the women from one of the London groups. The women from the focus group in Greenwich in general made very positive comments about living in the area which they described as having great diversity and lots of contrasting areas, each with a different character. The Christian priest (Anglican) for example had two contrasting parishes next to each other; one being majority and the other being minority Christian.

Indeed, the women had been surprised at what they had seen, for example, in Bradford, following the Bradford disturbances of 2001. As one woman commented, 'The issue raised was of 'parallel communities', with talk about it everywhere. We are completely different down here in London: (I was) amazed when I saw it (in Bradford) - this road for Muslims and the other where White British people live; there was a similar thing in schools. Really it was true; the existence of parallel communities.

We (in London) do mix, we do have mixed schools and housing'. Such a perspective was endorsed by others in the group who were very positive about their children having 'totally mixed friendship groups' and where 'we all look out for each other'. Perhaps the reason for this, someone suggested, was that this particular area of London was familiar with new communities arriving and taking their place – the most recent being that of the Nepalese Gurkha community. As someone from the Walworth Road group commented, 'everyday you meet someone from a culture that you do not recognise'.

Another aspect of 'the other' was to be identified within the faith communities themselves. One woman from the Bradford focus group had this to say, 'I am Pakistani and I am an immigrant here. I find it hard to integrate into my own society and to mix with all the people. It is not just Muslim and Christian, there are different models, it's a challenge for me which mosque should I send my children to? Those who call themselves Wahabi and other Muslims will not integrate'. Similarly, someone from the Greenwich group said, 'coming to this country I was surprised to see how split up different groups of Muslims are'.

The concept of 'the other' was further reinforced after the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in New York and London; after which there was a significant rise in Islamophobia. Defining policy changes such as community cohesion and anti-terror laws continued to raise questions of identity, belonging and discrimination.

2. Private Space/Public Space

It was evident from all the focus groups that women value greatly their informal networks; indeed, these make a real difference to their lives. It is through for example, informal contacts at the school, children's parties, community centre activities, coming together over a meal, that friendships are formed and trust is built. Much positive engagement is achieved through these informal meeting points which, it was felt, contribute to the building of communities.

Beyond the informal networks, the focus groups were all very positive about the inter faith initiatives that happened within their locality e.g. exchange visits between church and mosque, the 'Share Faith Share Food' group in Burnley, and the 'Women of Faith' group in Sparkhill. Women believed that however small such initiatives were they made a real difference to some women's lives. The Birmingham Peace Rally after the riots of the Summer (2011), was singled out as an example of where it was very evident that Muslim and Christian women stood together.



However, whilst building up a picture of women engaged in a whole variety of community activities and networks, there was less evidence of them occupying a more public platform. Whilst the jobs that some of them had required a public platform e.g. Christian priest, nevertheless there was a sense from some women that whilst women were very good at grassroots initiatives and networking, there was a need to push on and up as their voices were rarely heard beyond their immediate context. Someone from the Bradford focus group described this as women sometimes being 'more focused on their 'own space' rather than on the 'public space''. One woman from the Burnley group summed up this line of debate well when she acknowledged that women were now excelling in education, were at the forefront in inter faith action and in feeding information and ideas into their own communities. However as women of faith 'we need', she suggested, 'to be more active in the political arena, take more control in all areas and, above all else, stop being victims'.

Perhaps allied to this was the evident dearth of women role models. Each of the focus groups, when asked directly who their role models were, found it difficult to answer and tended either to give a domestic example of someone involved with their lives at a personal level e.g. 'my grandmother who taught me to count using tamarind seeds' or else public figures far removed from their own context e.g. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh and Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese activist. Harder still was the task of bringing to mind a high profile woman who had something to say about the place of faith.

3. Perceptions/Stereotyping

In all the focus groups issues concerning the stereotyping of Muslim women by the wider communities was discussed. The Burnley focus group used words such as 'downtrodden,' 'second class citizens,' and 'hidden away' (although it was not clear whether this was the Christian women speaking or whether it was the Muslim women expressing how they felt themselves to be perceived by the White community). It was also suggested that the issue of dress reinforced prejudice against the British Asian community. One Muslim woman in the Leicester focus group said she felt opportunities for her were greater in Leicester than in Blackburn (where she came from) saying: 'being Muslim and hijabi in Leicester doesn't hold one back as opposed to Blackburn which is more cultural and this creates more barriers'.existence of parallel communities.

In addition, it was thought that within the Muslim community, more traditional attitudes, especially from the older generation, (many of whom were first generation immigrants) had contributed to an erroneous picture of Muslim women, an image that was far removed from the reality of life for the younger, professional Muslim women. Whilst this intergenerational gulf is no doubt a characteristic of many cultures, it nevertheless acted as a double bind for some younger Muslim women, who had to contend both with negative attitudes from those outside their communities and misunderstanding from within their own communities.



The Walworth focus group commented particularly on the poverty of opportunity for women with low education and a limited understanding of the culture in which they lived. This they felt, led to prejudice and hostility against them from those who did not understand or were unwilling to recognise their particular circumstances.

4. Young People

An area of concern for all the groups was the extent to which a hospitable and nurturing environment was being created for children and young people. Those who commented on the recent riots across the country suggested they were partly a symptom of an anger that is simmering beneath the surface for many young people and a concern that this was not being fully recognised or addressed. Allied to this was the poverty of many young people – a poverty that extended beyond materialism to a poverty of experience and opportunity. This was identified in a number of ways: the Walworth focus group expressed an anxiety that if young people did not have opportunities in life, they were more likely to become radicalised and get into trouble with the law.

Someone from the Bradford group spoke of separate faith assemblies being a missed opportunity as it meant that some children never heard an authentic expression of another faith nor had the opportunity to discover commonalities. Alongside this, however, was the recognition that there was a concern amongst parents in both communities that children could be converted to the 'other' religion.

Also, the Bradford women spoke of the struggle that Muslim young people had between their own traditions, including cultural expectations and their own developing ideas. Yet there were too few safe spaces where such dilemmas could be expressed and explored. Linked to this was an awareness that many young people, from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds were seeking a spirituality but did not have the religious context or vocabulary to make sense of this in order to develop their personal and spiritual lives.

5. Overcoming Obstacles

For Muslim women in all of the focus groups there were specific issues identified by many as 'cultural' rather than 'spiritual' which they felt needed urgent address.



One woman from the group in Greenwich spoke about female genital mutilation and how this continued to blight the lives of some girls. She spoke of her own suffering as a result of this practice and stated how women were in some cases, having to say to their own parents, 'do not do this to our girls if they come and stay with you, we do not want it'. Whilst acknowledging that many women now stand up and speak out against this practice, she suggested there were many others who still needed support and education in this area.

Forced marriage amongst the Muslim community was also mentioned by one group as an area where girls and young women needed more support to resist.

Another area of concern was the place of women in the mosques, both within the official structures and amongst the less formal roles. As one woman commented, 'in some mosques they say there are no facilities for women and where there is, the room available is really small and facilities are not clean'.

Another said, 'when we first moved and I came to pray at the mosque, there were no women there, so I started to speak to them on the street and tell them. It was very challenging but by the time I left, there were 60 women attending the mosque!'

One very particular problem emerged, expressed by someone from the Leicester group, 'in our mosque we women are supported and we work a lot as volunteers but we are not part of the official structure, we are totally separate and this is becoming a problem – who will wash the female bodies when people die if I move away? If people leave it will all disappear, we need to become part of the structure'.

6. Impact of Global Issues

Some of the groups touched on the impact of global issues upon their own communities. Here the Muslim women recognised the vulnerability of their faith communities insofar as what happens on the other side of the globe can have an immediate effect upon their own communities here. The problem, as one group identified it, was that a conflict situation elsewhere could impact negatively here long before any opportunity for debate within the community could be mobilised. This left the community feeling vulnerable and open to suspicion, for such a dynamic fanned the flames of prejudice and was of concern to both Christian and Muslim women.

Another specific area of concern was the exploitation of economic migrants who, it was recognised, worked very hard in this country but who were all too easily exploited through not having enough knowledge of the way 'the system' worked in this country.

Summary

The themes identified above represent the topics that formed a significant area of discussion for all the focus groups. Whilst such themes were framed in different ways according to the perceptions and experiences of the group members, nevertheless, there was a consistency around the areas of concern. Inevitably many of the discussions were very anecdotal and there is perhaps now a need to capture something of these individual stories and move forward to a more analytical and systematic response so that women are able to map the next steps for themselves and their communities.



PART TWO:

'Come to the Edge' Residential Report

Introduction

This residential was planned on the back of the listening exercises that took place in 2011. The residential took place in Northampton, on 19/20 March 2012, providing an opportunity for women to engage one another through different processes. The residential incorporated speeches by academics, theologians, activists and other professionals. Participants watched a theatrical performance, took part in workshops, discussions, a 'sharing circle' and much more.

Context

Over 60 Christian and Muslim women took part. The women were of different age ranges backgrounds, professions and for some it was their very first residential.

Participants were welcomed to the residential and introduced to the themes for the event which were identified via the focus groups conducted in the Near Neighbours areas. The six key themes were: issues of 'the other,' private and public spaces, perceptions and stereotypes, young people, overcoming obstacles and impact of global issues.

As with other events run by the Christian Muslim Forum, we began the residential with Christian and Muslim prayers, led by Presidents of the Forum, Revd Alison Tomlin and Anjum Anwar MBE.



1. Theatrical Performance

The event opened with a theatrical performance - 'Women are on to something', a short theatre piece devised and performed by three women to highlight issues of social change and overcoming prejudice. Based on the report commissioned by the Forum, the theatre piece explored the key issues identified by the focus groups that met in Burnley, Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and London during the Summer and Autumn of 2011

The play portrayed a series of female characters wrestling with the difficulties posed by different approaches to issues such as the 'other,' women's role in society, perceptions of themselves and others, attitudes to young people and stereotypes.

Following the performance, participants were split into groups to discuss their thoughts and reactions to the play and their responses to the way in which the issues were raised.

Some participants fed back about the significance of the boxes used in the play, i.e. women being constrained by the 'boxes' into which they had placed themselves or been placed in by society. Some participants highlighted particular labels/boxes as more important than others, especially where these are being imposed from outside without women having a say, or being allowed to choose for themselves, where they are placed. Participants said that being 'boxed in' can be very difficult for young people, as illustrated by the play (in the play the mother pulls her daughter away from playing with her Muslim friend, the grandfather refuses to talk to the granddaughter's non-Muslim friend who is visiting), as they can be caught between two parallel cultures and communities.

Others thought that being in a 'box', whether of one's own choosing or otherwise, could be safe and make people feel secure. The play challenged the feeling that women might feel safe only within their boxes by exploring what can happen when one steps outside of the box and begins to engage with others. The group suggested that people could be helped to look beyond their boxes by this motto: 'Ask what's your story, not what's your box!'

Some said that having a label or being in a box was part of one's identity; however others suggested that giving labels to others is not helpful for anyone, as it creates misconceptions and prejudices. Dialogue is a better way to really find out about others rather than making assumptions.

One participant explained that religion played less of a role in shaping the identity of the older generations, referring to her own Bangladeshi background. She compared this to the identities of her children growing up in Britain, for whom religious identity played a much bigger part in their lives. She also said that they seemed to believe that religious identity was more important to them than the country of their family's origin. Thus they were more concerned with issues in the wider Muslim world such as Israel/Palestine, than issues in Bangladesh.

One group explored why, if women are passionate about social justice, only a few women's voices are heard in the public sphere. A range of answers were given, such as:

- women's voices not being given air-time in the media
- lack of encouragement from own family or community, lack of knowledge and barriers being placed in their way
- competition with men's voices
- lack of role models showing how to balance family, career and public presence
- women taking on more childcare duties than men
- lack of groups where women can support to encourage more public engagement
- lack of equal opportunities at multiple levels within the family, community and work
- the need to overcome prejudice towards the other amongst older generations.

The main feedback about the play taken from the feedback forms were:

- all participants found the play to be excellent
- 'inspirational' and 'thought-provoking'
- 'an excellent, stimulating way to begin [the residential], provoking thoughts and conversations'
- 'both enjoyable and pointedly displaying many flaws in relationships across faiths, with an encouraging conclusion. Could be more widely used'.

2. Conversations for the Soul

The first workshop entitled 'Conversations for the Soul' was facilitated by St Ethelburga's and Forum staff, and set a comfortable and trusting environment for the two days of the residential by building an understanding of inter faith etiquette, developing listening skills, exploring fears and barriers and the art of conversation, and giving an opportunity for 'tandem' conversation between two people of different faiths.



The facilitator found that participants had a well-defined and intense sense of understanding of the topic. The ice-breaking activities helped to achieve trust and honesty between participants, by first discussing with each other topics such as inter faith etiquette and fears and barriers.

Ideas for **inter faith etiquette** included: sharing a passion for justice, avoiding preconceptions, asking permission, not judging, appreciating differences and similarities, being open and honest.

Fears and barriers in faith and cultural relationships that need to be overcome were discussed, these included misunderstandings, fear of missing out socially, lack of knowledge, prejudices, and fear of offending.

The participants had a short conversation about how they first became aware of other faiths, what kind of memories they held and how they felt about it. This starter was designed to introduce the concept of the conversations, and to allow participants to identify their conversation style, how they like to be listened to and to listen to the person speaking without the need to interrupt.



The main conversation, lasting half an hour, involved Christian-Muslim pairs choosing a topic from 'Conversations for the Soul' booklet. Participants found this activity to be useful and informative, with many pairs continuing their conversations outside the initial session and opening up other areas for dialogue.

The majority of participants were very positive about this workshop, finding the approach useful and insightful, and wishing that more time had been made available:

- 'I loved it but I wished we had more time. Could CMF stump up some intensive training for those of us engaged in creating space for inter faith dialogue to better our skills and ideas?'
- 'Really useful, given me ideas to take back to work in Burnley'.
- 'I found this useful being given permission to talk about faith in a structural way with someone of a different faith to me'.

Rest breaks were particularly dynamic and lively times, as participants were able to socialise, talk to speakers and the organisers, give feedback to each other, and relate their own experiences and stories.

3. Sharing Circle

Before arriving at the residential, participants had been asked to prepare a short personal contribution during the 'Sharing Circle' session, either a personal reflection, a poem, a reading or sharing an object which meant a lot to them. Sharing was appreciated by the participants, building a stronger sense of trust as something personal was shared, as well as giving the opportunity to listen to others and be listened to. The Sharing Circle was mentioned as one of the most useful parts by some participants, 'it helped me to reflect about myself and to learn from other people's opinions and experiences'.

4. Workshops

Participants were divided into four groups and were asked to discuss the following questions that derived from both the findings of the report and those raised by women during other events organised by the Christian Muslim Forum..



Question 1:

What makes us British?

There are many layers to being British, it is not just about being born to British parents but goes deeper. One participant gave the example of a school with 40 nationalities and languages, a glorious celebration to the diversity of Britain.

One group fed back that they had 'a very hard time defining what exactly makes us British'. Many concepts such as identity and culture are very fluid and hard to define, it was observed that there is no one culture or one identity that fits all. The group agreed on some core values, such as fairness and equality. However this posed another problem in that these values are not just British but universal human values.

Another factor making it difficult to pin down 'what makes us British' was the diversity of opinions and experiences, which differ greatly according to where people live, how they grew up and generational differences. Some areas of Britain are very diverse, while others are homogenous. Part of modern British experience is that some places change over time, e.g. 'white flight' where people of White British origin move out of an area as immigrants and people of other backgrounds move in. It was suggested, in the light of this, that to be British is to openly embrace multiculturalism. Cities tend to embrace diversity but smaller towns less so, identities change with mass-immigration, hence this comment, 'Britishness is being diverse'.



Question 2:

What does the Arab Spring tell us about the role of women?

Egypt was seen as a positive example of the way in which women organised and campaigned for justice. It was also an example of the way in which women were side-lined by men too.

One group focused on the example of Bahrain, men have been arrested there, and it is harder for the authorities to justify arresting women, so women are allowed to continue protesting. The example of Maryam al-Khawaja, a Bahraini human rights activist was cited, as someone in the public sphere and a leadership role. She went on hunger strike to highlight the situation in her country during the Arab Spring. Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets were all highlighted as tools which could enable women to continue to spread news of the protests and critical issues.

Women's involvement in the Arab Spring raised the question of equality. Some participants argued that women have to act like men in order to be counted as equals, and to have their actions validated and recognised in the same way. This led to a discussion of what might happen when the riots settle down, will women then lose the important platform they have gained? This was compared to the roles of women during World War II, when men went off to fight, and women took over 'manly' roles such as labourer and factory worker. When the men returned many of the women returned to their positions as housewives, although there was a slight change in the balance of male-female relations. The group expressed a hope that this re-balancing might also happen through the Arab Spring.

Some countries were described as patriarchal. One participant said that in the past, men and women had worked well together, however in some countries women were less present in the workplace and tended to be constrained by roles within the home. Another participant highlighted both the need for different approaches to achieving women's rights which were relevant to their personal lives and communities, and for patriarchy to be addressed in society at large. She emphasised that grandparents, parents and organisations in contact with children, particularly mosques and churches, must open up for dialogue, adding that children are not prejudiced at birth, but are educated to have prejudices.

One of the groups shared that the media does not highlight the role of women; beneath the surface, a lot of women are protesting and do not fit stereotypical views. There was discussion on the need to develop media awareness amongst women and promote female spokespeople as this would not happen by itself.

Question 3:

Are community relations becoming more difficult?

One of the main obstacles to community relations and cohesion described by one group was the rise of individualism in modern culture, suggesting that individuals tend to focus more on their own needs, wants and desires than those of the community. It also became clear that there were huge divides within seemingly homogenous communities. For example a community that may seem tight from the outside, e.g. a mostly White community in rural England, was actually strictly divided along class lines, which school one went to or how much money the family had, which leads to little mixing between the classes.



Many in the group agreed that modern consumerist society was driving everyone to concentrate on the accumulation of wealth and possessions rather than enhancing a community or looking out for others.

In one group, one of the main observations was agreement that communities need strong leaders, who can help people come together and organise communities in such a way that people become aware of others that may need their help. In the wake of the Summer 2011 riots, participants felt that certain communities were better at dealing with rioting and the subsequent fallout than others, precisely because there were strong leaders within the communities and that they were able to mobilise and organise a good response. This group also felt that groundwork had to be carried out in advance to enable good responses, and that this had to be done with strong leadership and raising awareness of community spirit and local projects.

Another group discussed loyalty and being different, concluding that this is complex and does not have an easy answer. At times the loyalty of those who are different is questioned, the example of Catholic and Irish experiences in England was cited.

'I am from Burnley and if you organise something to promote community relations then the same people turn up time and time again.

How do you engage with the people that need to be engaged with, but who do not want to be engaged with, some of which have BNP tendencies? I have taught at the school for four years now. I may be the only Muslim person that they encounter'.

One participant observed that inter-community relations are harder now than before 9/11, labelling of Muslims as extremists has made it very difficult for some young people, in addition to the media highlighting certain events and being less interested in others.

'The BNP has hijacked the [Union] flag so that when you see the flag now, is this genuinely something to do with UK or Commonwealth or linked with the BNP or other extremist groups?'

One participant said that Near Neighbours 'is the best thing done for the established churches, getting them out of comfortable zones, mostly driven by women. There is the business of how do we do community relations? We don't have the history; one of the questions is about standing up and being counted and doing the neighbourly thing. If people will not listen to the Muslim community ... maybe it is the Christians' job'.

Question 4:

Are young people the focus of conversation?

In one group, many participants asserted that it was very hard to recruit young people into inter faith organisations and projects. One Muslim woman recounted how she was forcefully turned away from many Christian organisations which refused to let her have access to any of the Churches when she wanted to share news of the inter faith projects she was working on. Another young Christian in the group said that she had to struggle to get permission from her church group to be allowed to take part in inter faith work.

Many in this group said that within their own faith communities, many were ignorant of the inter faith work being undertaken within their communities. This group found that they had to actively seek out opportunities for themselves and that they were very hard to come by if they did not take the initiative themselves. Some felt that it was important to educate the leaders of faith groups, mosques and churches to see the usefulness of inter faith, and the need for it to be more widely preached and practiced. 'Women are waiting for leaders to spread the message that inter faith work is constructive and valuable and endorsed by faith leaders themselves'.



Question 5:

How does faith contribute to a woman's identity?

The groups were unable to answer this final question due to lack of time, it was felt that insufficient time was given to discuss all the questions thoroughly.

At the end of the session, it was fed back that groups could have been given only one theme for discussion and indeed to the whole event. Participants felt that the questions were many and varied and it was impossible to discuss in great depth any of them.

5. Future Work of the Christian Muslim Forum / Regional Groups

Participants split up into regional groups to discuss what was happening locally, and their ideas for future initiatives. These were split up into various subheadings, such as education, inequality, wellbeing, perceptions/stereotypes, young people and global issues. Future work for the Forum mentioned is shown in *italics*.

BURNLEY

Education: To raise awareness and education level, the suggestions were: making friends of different faiths, pairing schools of different ethnicities through the Bridge Project Faith Centre, working with communities and schools and visiting places of worship.

Inequality: To tackle inequality, women agreed that there is need for more female scholars to be more aware and educated about Shariah Law, gender issues and the sexualisation of children. Encouraging face to face meetings between Christian and Muslim women would help in addressing inequality, through dialogue and understanding.

Wellbeing: The Women's Centre and Community Centre in Burnley were mentioned as places which add to the wellbeing of those attending, as well as enabling them to learn about each other in different settings.

Perceptions/stereotypes: Building Bridges Road Show and Community Feasts were examples given of projects helping to deal with perceptions and stereotypes and being a platform for holding conversations about these topics.

Young People: Having faith friends in schools is an organic and friendly way to interact with people of other faiths and backgrounds. Schools are good platforms for young people. Lessons to tackle issues faced by young people is also necessary to understand their concerns and be listened to.

The Christian Muslim Forum could support this area, by creating a 'hype' and helping young people to understand these issues.

Media: Contributions to newspapers/publications about inter faith issues, community, intergenerational, identity and other topics could be an answer to what is happening locally. There is a real importance in identifying and sharing best practices.

Global Issues: Israel/Palestine, recent events in Syria and Iran were mentioned, participants were concerned about the impact of international events to their localities.

BRADFORD

Education: There is a need for an equal access for all, taking spirituality seriously, and linking schools to promote better understanding.

Wellbeing: Developing community support and having a sense of ownership and participation in community relations is a good way of enhancing wellbeing of individuals and community



Perceptions/Stereotypes & Young People: Stereotyping of young people needs to be addressed by developing awareness and education about it. How the media influences young people needs to be understood and also tackled where necessary.

Global Issues: Tackling child labour and poverty.

BIRMINGHAM

Education: Many aspects were discussed such as inter faith plays in schools, literacy for adults and children, school partnerships, parent forums, informal open discussions, SACRE: 24 objectives learning, and building understanding of younger children from an early age.

The Forum could help with providing more resources and parenting programmes in schools and churches.

Inequality: Empowering young people will have a very good impact to counteract inequality. Near Neighbours was cited as a good programme to help with inequality. Institutional racism needs to be tackled.



The Forum could provide 'sharing circles' and build local connections.

Wellbeing: Dealing with different aspects to achieve well-being, e.g. mental health issues and isolation, and providing access to support services. The 'Well' and 'Lateef' were mentioned as good projects taking place in this respect.

Perceptions/Stereotypes: The group suggested that the Forum could help with myth-busting activities focusing on Islam and Christianity, raising awareness and providing case studies, including through drama.

Young people: Birmingham Big Sisters is a good project. The Forum could provide role modelling in this area.

Global Issues: A few organisations and projects were mentioned as a good example on how to deal with global issues: Musawah, WISE, Jubilee Debt Campaign, Feed the Poor: ISRA, Islamic Help, Sisters of Mercy.

MIXED GROUP

Education: Increased collaboration between different organisations and parents is needed to encourage children to attend university

Perceptions/Stereotypes: More work needs to be done at schools. The mentoring programme by Mosaic is a good project to follow.

Young People: Addressing the issue of 'the other', reaching out through mainstream media, enhancing women's radio programmes and providing spaces for women and young people to meet.

Social interactions: This group mentioned that social interactions is a good way leading to better education, such as meetings taking place between people in their homes (in Corby), introducing women to the English language in different ways through beauty treatments, baking, IT and others. This would build better relationships and interactions between people.

6. Gratitude Wall

A gratitude wall was set up, where participants could freely write thoughts or ideas that came up throughout the residential. Participants appreciated the creativity in how they can express their feelings and thoughts



7. Feedback Analysis

This is an analysis of the pre and post residential feedback forms from 'Come to the Edge'.

Pre-residential Feedback

Participants were asked '*What do you want to get out of this event?*'. The three main answers were:

Learning: to learn about other projects taking place, to learn about and from each other, especially sharing experiences, differences and similarities, ways of working together and to gain knowledge and more understanding of others and themselves

Meeting other people/ creating relationships: Most participants said they came to meet other people, to make new friends, to support each other, to network and broaden their relationships

To be inspired: Many mentioned that they came for inspiration. One participant said she wanted to 'find my creative side'.

'To enjoy the relationship with a purpose to listen, learn and share and contribute to our joint understanding.'

'I would like to learn about other religions. To hear about different people's experience and share our thoughts and beliefs.'

'I'd like to be more at ease in the future in discussing multi-faith groups.'

44% of respondents said that they had a lot of contact with women of different faiths. 3% said that they had some contact and 44% said they had very little contact with women of different faiths.

'It is challenging to meet women of different faiths due to lack of space/time/trust so this was really special for me.'

When asked how confident they were that Christian and Muslim women working together could achieve positive result, 70% of respondents said that they were very confident, 26% said they were somewhat confident and 4% said they were a little confident.

'I have seen positive results achieved when Christian and Muslim women work together.'

Regarding the areas on which Christian and Muslim women can work together to achieve positive results, the main theme across all responses was education: to educate young people, issues affecting the community, community and social groups, families, mental health and others. Other feedback was about sharing faith, food, centres and creativity.

'Through education, learning first about our beliefs and understanding each other. Helping each other through play, education, isolation, mental health.'



Post-residential Feedback

56% of respondents said that the residential fully met their expectations and 26% said it somewhat met their expectations. 9% said they had a neutral view, 6% said the residential did not meet their expectations and 3% did not answer.

Participants appreciated the opportunity to be at the residential and meet with other women. For some Come to the Edge was their first residential and they were happy to meet everyone and spend time with them. Many said the residential made them think and inspired and motivated them.

Participants enjoyed all or most parts of the residential. The three most valued parts of the residential were meeting, networking with others and sharing experiences, hearing from different speakers, and the Conversations for the Soul workshop.

'It was excellent. The opportunity to meet others and to make new friends was invaluable. Being able to come away and focus and fully participate in the conference was a fabulous experience.'

Participants were asked what they would change about the residential. A few said they would not change anything. Others suggested making the residential more focused, having interactive sessions, organising similar residential around the country and more opportunities to share the work.

'Would be really useful to be able to have a follow up session so the delegates could meet up and again in the future to see what is happening in their communities.'

The majority of respondents agreed that the residential had given them the tools to be able to engage locally, such as through the workshops, networking and new contacts made.

'I would love to go back home and carry on the work with support from various organisations we can get there slowly.'

In general participants mentioned they wanted more time for the sessions. The speeches were valued for being diverse and informative. Conversations for the Soul was found to be useful in its tips and skills-based approach, however many mentioned that more time was needed for this workshop. Most participants enjoyed the workshops for putting them in contact with local people, developing ideas together, and being able to discuss and share ideas in smaller circles.

All participants enjoyed the theatrical performance, which was thought-provoking and insightful. Some said it was a good way to start the residential and the conversations, and the way in which the topics were approached.

'An excellent, stimulating way to begin, provoking thoughts and conversations.'

Summary and Next Steps

The workshops and discussions inspired by the report have provided many ideas and topics for further work. The future work of the Christian Muslim Forum will be informed by the issues identified in the report, DVD film and the residential.

In terms of next steps, Phase Two of the women's programme will take place between August 2012 and March 2013 and will work towards promoting and relaying the findings of the report and showcasing the film through more localised events. This will be known as 'The Come to the Edge Road Show'. It is hoped that the Come to the Edge Road Show will take place during Inter Faith Week 2012 in all the Near Neighbours areas that participated in Phase One of the programme. An online Christian Muslim Forum national network of trust for Christian and Muslim women will be created so that conversations that have taken place during the residential through the listening exercises and the local events can continue to take place. Phase Three will commence from April 2013 where we will see the planning of another event that will bring women together on a national platform.

PART THREE:

Concluding Remarks

The issues raised in both of these reports have serious policy implications and challenge us to redefine our understanding of what it means to be a 'Christian' or a 'Muslim' in a society that is seen to espouse predominantly secular values. 'Fear' is a commonly talked about emotion and one that is shown to increase uncertainty and insecurity – add this against a rising tide of far right extremism, transnational politics, and public sector cuts, it poses a series of challenges for those operating in the field of 'inter faith'. How can we deepen our understanding of 'the other' and forge long lasting relationships of trust – where we can feel safe to question, raise issues and truly work together?

Whilst the findings recognise the complexity of the issues raised, they also reveal a general feeling of hopefulness and resilience. Women speak passionately about concepts of equality, peace and justice, education, patriarchy, citizenship, marriage, governance, exploitations and motherhood and recognise the crucial role women must play within their own homes and communities.

We also learned of a myriad of creative strategies that are in place in the different cities that took part in the listening exercises.



Some more rooted and developed compared to others but each one trying to bring about some sort of change within their localities. It is comforting to know that we have seen a significant rise in the emergence of inter faith women's groups in the UK – both formal and informal. But without the relevant support and the recognition of the structural inequality that exists between communities, the longevity and rootedness required to continue with this vital and challenging work will not be sustainable in the future.

Wahida Shaffi

Programme Lead, Christian Muslim Forum

Appendices

The Focus Groups

BURNLEY

The Focus group met at St Peter's Anglican church.

The majority of the women who made up this focus group were members of the 'Share Faith Share Food' group – an off-shoot of the 'Building Bridges' project, designed to promote understanding of and co-operation between Christian and Muslim communities. Twelve women met – an equal number of Christians and Muslims representing a spread of age groups and life styles - some were retired professional women, some were younger women who had given up paid employment to care for young families; some were combining care for families with careers

Background information to the city:

Burnley is a former mill town situated in East Lancashire. The historical industries of cotton and coal mining have largely disappeared. Several larger manufacturing companies have also ceased to trade, leaving jobs a major issue. Some areas of the town are now being redeveloped having experienced urban deprivation over several decades. The town is, however, surrounded by areas of great natural beauty and has several large, well maintained parks. The establishment of a U.C.L.A.N. site in the town has attracted more of the young people to stay in the area to complete their further education. Recent available figures indicate a falling population in the town.

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BIRMINGHAM

Recent available figures indicate a falling population in the town. In 2008 the population had fallen to 87,300 from 89,500 in 2001. 33.6% of those being under 25, lower than the national average. Approximately 89.3% were of White ethnicity with 9.8% from minority ethnic groups, mainly Pakistani. The vast majority of the minority ethnic groups are concentrated in just two wards of the town.

One Birmingham Focus Group met at The Springfield Centre (a hub for inter faith activity for the last 7 years). There were eight women present including two members of the Christian Muslim Forum. The group was made up of an equal number of Muslims and Christians with the majority already knowing each other through regular attendance at the Springfield Centre. Most had lived in different cities before coming to Birmingham and had varying responsibilities including teacher, full-time carer, and childminder.

The second Birmingham Focus Group met at The Faithful Neighbourhoods Centre

(a brand-new centre for Presence and Engagement). The group was made up of four Muslim women and four Christian women, with a broad spectrum of ages, ranging from a Muslim woman under 20 who worked at the Springfield Centre to a retired doctor (Christian).

BRADFORD

The Focus Group met at Touchstone

(a Christian Methodist presence in the City).

The group consisted of 12 women, including one from the Forum. Whilst they had not met as a group before there were pre-existing friendships between some individuals. There was a wide range of jobs represented by the women, including a Christian youth worker, and a Muslim teaching assistant. One woman was an American convert to Islam who had recently settled in Britain.

Background information to the city:

Bradford is one of the most diverse Metropolitan Districts in the UK, where people have come from overseas for generations seeking work in the former industries of textiles and engineering. That industrial heritage has been in decline for the last three decades and as well as having to cope with the economic and social effects that unemployment causes, Bradford is faced with the challenge of making a multi-cultural, multi-faith city work.

People living here have common concerns but, for the most part, live in segregated communities. Although civil disturbances relating to poverty, ethnicity and faith are well documented, there is a growing civic confidence, endorsed recently by the community's ability to handle last year's English Defence League protest in the city centre.

LEICESTER

The Focus group met at Aisha's Restaurant in Leicester.

The group was made up of six Muslims and five Christians, including two women from the Christian Muslim Forum. The majority of women knew each other through their work or through working in the same field. Most had a background in some form of community or voluntary work, such as priest, homeless-project coordinator, Arabic/Quranic teacher, and inter faith worker.

Background information to the city:

In the 20th Century Leicester was once one of the wealthiest cities in the country, dominated by the manufacturing industry with good employment opportunities. It was one of the cities on the route of the Jarrow marches and many of those unemployed from the North found work here. It has long been home to a diverse community with each of the major religions being significantly represented (14 faith communities in all). It has the largest Indian population in the UK (the majority of Indians originating from Gujarat). Today there are also significant numbers of people from Somalia and Eastern Europe.

LONDON (Borough of Greenwich)

The Focus Group met at the Greenwich Islamic Centre.

The group was made up of 10 women, mainly Sunni Muslims and Anglican Christians aged from mid-twenties to fifties. They include two local priests – including one who is a University chaplain – a trainee accountant, a carer, and a beautician. Only one woman was born locally – others have lived in one, two or three other countries including Kenya, Somalia, Pakistan, South Africa, and Uganda. Others came from Manchester, Smallheath, Birmingham and Scotland.

Background information to the city:

Greenwich is one of the fastest growing Boroughs in the UK with an increasingly diverse population. Nearly one third of residents come from minority ethnic groups with the largest ethnic groups other than White being Black African (13%) and Indian (5%). The population of Greenwich is relatively young with over 42% of the Borough's residents aged under 29 years. There is particular diversity within this age group, with 35% of under-16s being non-White. Greenwich ranks as the 26th most deprived local authority in England and the 9th most deprived borough in London in terms of 'extent' of deprivation. Several of the Borough's 17 wards, primarily in the north of the Borough are in the most deprived 10% of wards in England.

LONDON (Elephant and Castle, Borough of Southwark)

The Focus Group met at The Crypt, St George the Martyr.

It consisted of six women ranging in age from early twenties to sixties. They were from Sunni Muslim and Anglican Christian traditions and included a teacher, an Anglican priest, a community development worker, a family support worker and a student.

Background information to the city:

Southwark was ranked the 17th most deprived area out of 354 local authorities and districts in England. Nearly half of the borough's population is from a minority ethnic community. The largest BAME groups are black or black British (25.9%). Eight percent are black Caribbeans and 16.1% black Africans – the largest black African community nationally. The fastest growing Asian communities are Bangladeshis and Indians, mainly located in Elephant & Castle and Newington.

Notes:



'Quarternary' by Diane George