

Building Circles of Peace and Bridges of Understanding and Respect in West Australia

By Marg Finlay ibvm

Our Circle of Peace was formed about seven years ago. We met in our community house. Initially, we read, reflected and shared our thoughts and understandings on a variety of texts that related to our lives as Catholic women. These we found both stimulating and challenging. It was from our circle conversations that we found ourselves drawn to explore ways to engage in interfaith dialogue.

We invited to our monthly gathering, two young women from the Muslim Women's Support Centre. These women were university students and one was a teacher at the local Islamic College. They shared with us 'A Day In The Life Of a Muslim Woman'. We were delighted with the evening and decided to continue our interfaith conversations.



In Perth, there is a group called the Abrahamic Alliances. It is a coming together of the Abrahamic Family and like all families, it shares a story. Like all families, each tells the story from their own perspective. So each family needs to listen carefully to each ones' story.

Their Vision Statement says they aim:

TO FACILITATE IN BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT BETWEEN THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS, (CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM and JUDIAISM)

The Abrahamic Alliances arrange a variety of occasions and invite people to participate. Through attending days where we shared our basic life values and engaged in social events like picnics, we came to know some of the Islamic women quite well. One of these women has become a very good friend. She is very enthusiastic about bringing Christian women and Muslim women together for conversations which really engage both groups in sharing together what is of the essence of our lives.

And so together, we chose for our first topic, PRAYER as prayer is fundamental to the lives of CHRISTIANS and MUSLIMS. We invited the women to consider two questions:

WHAT IS PRAYER FOR YOU AND HOW DOES IT BECOME PART OF YOUR DAILY LIFE?

That Circle gathering was a wonderful success. We had equal numbers of Muslim and Christian women. We worked in small groups where we shared our thoughts and listened to each other. We came together later for comments and some shared prayer forms. Both groups were excited by the outcome and requested that we continue this type of conversation. It was taking us into a deeper place within ourselves. We were finding we had so much in common with each other.

The next month, we chose to share some of our experiences of forgiveness. This too, was a rich and meaningful gathering. We shared stories from our lives, and from our scriptures and sacred writings. By the end of the evening, I am sure we had come to a deeper understanding of what is at the heart of both Muslim and Christian forgiveness.

Perhaps the best outcome of these circles of peace is we set out to build bridges of understanding and respect and we have become friends.

There are so many other topics that we hope to explore together. Some of these are

- bringing up children - family values
- the role of women
- fasting – ramadam and lent
- holy books.
- Mystics... rumi....sufi....christian mystics.

The circle is not a traditional meeting. Our circle of peace is a gathering of women in a non-hierarchical circle where everyone's place is equal. It becomes a sacred space where the truth is spoken, communication is in the spirit of dialogue, leadership is shared, and a person speaks and listens from the heart. Some call this spirituality, prayer or faith. Circle members witness, model and experience spirit and soul connections with each other that lead to possibilities beyond our expectations.

Can the simple act of people gathering in a certain shape really heal the world?