

DIALOGUE



Cathy Limebear reports on an exciting encounter between a group of young Christians and Muslims who met last November in a mosque in Birmingham to share what it means to have a faith in 21st century Britain.



Being 'young and different' in 21st century Britain



Photos (6); courtesy of Cathy Limebear

For the past two years there has been a 'part time' Focolare in Birmingham, a large multicultural and ethnically diverse city in the middle of GB. Through our contact with Dr Mohammed Shomali (director of the Islamic Centre of England), we have got to know a vibrant Muslim community in the city and our friendship with them has been growing. A couple of months ago we were asked by the mosque if we could bring a group of Christian young people to come and spend time and share their lives and faith with some of the Muslim youth at the madrassa (a religious school attached to the Mosque for the study of Islam).

After the Hombremundo event, in Serbia and Romania in July (New City October 2017) the young people had been looking for opportuni-

ties to go out and build unity in our local communities and so when we told them about the invitation they were very enthusiastic and wanted to participate, even though some of them lived a three hour train journey away from Birmingham.

Preparing the day together

We had an initial meeting with some of the Muslim young people to prepare the main event by showing us around the mosque and getting to know one another. By the end of the morning the young people had already set up a WhatsApp group amongst themselves!

This group prepared games and activities together for the main event, so that it was really in their hands. On the actual day we played games; shared our experiences as Christian and Muslim young people with each other, including both the difficulties and the joys and shared a meal together. At the end of the day nobody wanted to go home. It was as if the young people had known each other for ever – they were like brothers and sisters. One of the Muslim boys said he really enjoyed the day because: ‘we were able to share our lives in a way that he could never do at school.’

Joe and Antonia prepared experiences to share at the event and here is what they shared:

Antonia Wajero: ‘I am a Catholic but also with Muslim family members. This means that we learn from each other about the similarities within both religions. For example: almsgiving, fasting, regular prayer is at the centre of both religions. Both have annual festive events such as Eid, Christmas etc. We have a sense of unity in diversity and we are both under attack from bad press (eg the media suggests that all Muslims are terrorists and focuses on child abuse in the Christian Churches), but we both support each other during our trials and tribulations.

Being a Christian to me means doing little things each day that sometimes creates a huge impact in other peoples’ lives. For example I was on the bus one day and I saw a young couple who spoke Yoruba (a native language spoken in Nigeria which is my place of origin). They were having trouble communicating with the bus driver so I got up and translated what the bus driver was saying in a way they could understand. They were soon able to navigate their bus route to where they needed to go thanks to my help. This probably helped them immensely but I didn’t think anything of it. Another example was again on the bus when a young Muslim



mother entered the bus unable to console her eldest child who looked about five or six. He wanted to play around the bus while it was moving, I greeted the mum in Arabic and waved at the boy and he soon settled down in his seat waving and laughing. I looked at the mother and she was overcome with relief and gratitude.’

Joe Rawcliffe: ‘Although Christianity is the majority religion in the area where I’m from, I think the normal viewpoint is to be either an agnostic or an atheist. Therefore, as a Christian you are singled out quite quickly. People tend to tell you about parts of your religion they disagree with, often shaming you for believing it. They laugh at views close to your heart. They try to make you an atheist and prove what you believe is lies. They shame you for simple things like going to church on a Sunday. Just last week my teacher called my religion mad saying it believed in ‘wishful imaginary things’. Until last year when I came to Focolare events I’d always tell my friends back home that I was meeting up with mates. They still don’t know what the Focolare is about as I know they would only laugh at what I say. However I feel this persecution, as the bible would call it, comes from being different in a way, and if you can get through that, it makes your faith stronger and people begin to respect your views more.’

