

DIALOGUE

Touchstone

Paul Gateshill reports on a Bradford based project: 'Touchstone', which has been bringing people of different faiths together, for the last twenty five years.

Bradford in West Yorkshire has the largest percentage population of Pakistani ethnic origin in England and Wales at just over 20%. In 2017 figures released by the Office of National Statistics revealed that 46% of the

population in Bradford declared itself to be Christian and 25% Muslim. Recently Bradford was given extra funding by the Government for projects to aid better integration between different ethnic groups. The media is often very swift in labelling

places like Bradford as 'problem areas' but seems reluctant to focus on all the positive projects which take place there. One of these is Touchstone.

Touchstone is based in the heart of Bradford and has worked alongside and with diverse communities for over twenty-five years. One of Touchstone's primary aims is to enable people of different faith and cultural backgrounds to come together in order to understand each other, to share stories, to form friendships, and to work together to build peaceful and just communities. Touchstone is a Methodist sponsored project, open to all. Here's what Touchstone says about its work:

Action for Peace

Like many people, Touchstone has felt motivated to action following the challenging and heart-breaking events nationally and worldwide. Here are a few examples:

The 'Bridges not Walls' campaign garnered momentum at the time of President Trump's inauguration, and the message from the campaign chimes well with all that Touchstone seeks to achieve. We unfurled our banner declaring 'Bridges not walls' in the centre of Bradford, and it was heartening to see this message being reflected simultaneously around the world.

Only a few days later, the US travel ban, prohibiting travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US was announced. Again, we took to the streets in both Leeds and Bradford, in solidarity with our Muslim friends, to declare the biblical prerogative 'Welcome the stranger'.

To find an appropriate response to the numerous terrorist attacks in the UK and abroad this year has been challenging for many people of faith, so we invited friends of Touchstone to join us for 15 minutes of 'Peace for Peace' either in person or wherever they were. To come together to pray and keep silence, express our unity in the face of actions deliberately seeking to divide us.

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Peace is built slowly, by small blocks at a time, and Touchstone's work is often about these small, incremental steps.

Peace

'Peace is a verb, a doing word, an activity rather than a thing. Peace building requires long-term commitment, the ability to dig in, and the ability to laugh out loud even when things are tough. This is Touchstone's work, day by day forging good relationships, one friendship at a time. The year has been a perplexing one, both locally and internationally. The seismic shifts in our political landscape, along with acts of violence across the world and in our own neighbourhoods, means that we have had to find deep reserves of resilience.'

Photos: @touchstone-bradford



Abseiling for Peace

In November, Touchstone organised a Women's Interfaith Charity Abseil. Utterly horrified by the ongoing conflict in Syria, we gathered together a group of fifteen Muslim and Christian women to take part, in order to raise money for the White Helmets, a group of unarmed civilian volunteers in Syria who risk their lives to deal with the immediate aftermath of bomb attacks to help anyone in need – regardless of their religion or politics. One of the group wrote: 'Many of us were actually afraid of heights, but we figured our sponsored action needed to be something significant. We were quite petrified, but we knew our fears would be short lived and the end clearly in sight, something the Syrian people to do not have, sadly.'

The abseil took place down the bell tower of Keighley Shared Church. It was a wonderful (if utterly terrifying) day. Before the abseil began all fifteen of us gathered in a circle to hold hands and keep a minute's silence for those affected by the Syrian conflict, which was a moving moment and provided a powerful image for those observing. In fact, many people walking past the Shared Church stopped to watch the unexpected sight of fifteen women, some in dog collars and some in hijabs, abseiling down its bell tower, and to ask what was going on! Thus the event became as much about demonstrating how women from different faiths can come together to engage positively in social action as it did about raising money, although we were definitely thrilled that in total we managed to raise over £6,000!

Discussions for Peace

This year we were part of a fascinating project run by the Muslim Women's Council which culminated in a published book, *'Shared Heritage of Daughters of Eve: Head Coverings-Reflections from Women of Faith'*. Nuzhat Ali explains the background to the project: 'The banning of the hijab in certain places led us at the Muslim Women's Council to think about how we could reclaim the narrative from the media and the politicians. Why are we obsessed about what women wear? And who should decide what we wear, when we should wear it? We wanted to give women the chance to tell us how they feel about it. But not just Muslim women – the aim was to show how head coverings are a shared heritage between faiths and not just something peculiar to Islam.'

And so the project brought together fifteen women from the Abrahamic faiths, and whilst the conversations started off about head coverings, these led on to wider discussions about the shared joys of being women of faith, along with the shared struggles we face as women within our own faith and within wider society. These conversations, along with interviews with each of the participants, form the book mentioned above. 🍀