

GRACIOUS CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN TODAY

Background and Introduction

In July 2008 a group of people involved in ministry to Muslims in the UK met at All Nations Christian College (ANCC). The group was called by a few individuals to consider the training of evangelical Christians in Islamics. The group recognised that often Christians in the UK respond to the presence of Muslims out of fear and wanted to encourage Christians to learn more about Islam, to relate to Muslims with genuine respect and friendship, to recognise the many different kinds of Muslims and Islam in Britain today, and to wrestle with the complexities of the political and social issues raised by the presence of Muslim communities.

There were several outcomes from the meeting including:

- *The Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies in Oxford would begin monitoring the training in Islamics at the highest academic levels*
- *The Faith to Faith Forum of Global Connections would encourage, monitor and support the training of Islamics at the church level*
- *A working group was set up to producing a draft statement which eventually adopted the title 'Gracious Christian Responses to Muslims in Britain today'*

As the group was not officially linked to any representative body, it was agreed to see whether this statement could be adopted by CRIB (Christian Responses to Islam in Britain). This has now proved not to be the case.

There will be no public release of this statement, but those who were at the July meeting are free to use it and distribute it if they think it will be helpful. The statement is not officially endorsed by any group and while it reflects the views of most of those at the July meeting, it should not be assumed that everyone who attended will want to be associated with it. It is laid out as a set of Christian principles to help inform our relationships with Muslims, while recognising that this is part of a wider debate as to how people of all faiths and none relate to each other in Britain today.

The Statement

'Let your speech always be gracious ... so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone ...' (Colossians 4:6)

1. CONCERN FOR TOTAL HUMAN WELL-BEING AND FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY. *We see all human beings as created in the image of God, and are concerned for the well-being of the whole person and the whole community. We are committed to love our neighbours as ourselves, and see personal relationships with our Muslim neighbours as foundational to such a holistic vision.*

2. HOSPITALITY, INCLUSIVENESS, LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT. *We want to welcome people of all kinds into the community and into our churches; we want to listen to one another with genuine respect, even when we don't agree. It is important to try to understand the faith and practice of others, and we are open to be challenged and learn.*

3. AWARENESS OF HISTORY – THEIRS AND OURS. *We cannot deny our history – in Britain, Europe and the West - any more than Muslims can deny the history of Islamic countries. These histories contain not only examples to follow but also episodes to remind both faiths to be humble and penitent. We trust that Muslims in our society will recognise the significant contribution of Christianity to our history and culture.*

4. A VISION FOR SOCIETY. *While we no longer live in Christendom and do not seek to build a Christian state, we have a vision for a society in which the values of the kingdom of God are upheld and honoured. We believe that such a society will safeguard expression of faith in the public sphere without its imposition, the exercise of free speech without unreasonable giving or*

taking of offence, and the uniform rule of public law without this being unnecessarily intrusive on private conscience. In seeking the common good of the whole society, we work together with Muslims within these broad parameters, seeking justice and peaceful co-existence.

5. A VOCATION TO BOTH SUPPORT AND CRITIQUE THE STATE. *Whatever the current and future relations between the church and the state, Christians have a duty both to affirm what is of God and to challenge what is sinful in free obedience to every legitimate authority. Where we have concerns about the aims of some Muslims in Britain, we work with transparency within the democratic processes, recognising that, while the majority of the population claim to be 'Christian' in some sense, we operate in a largely secularised society and that Christians should not seek to work from a position of power and privilege.*

6. FREEDOM OF RELIGION. *We affirm the right of every person and community to freedom of speech and worship. According to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, this includes the freedom to practise, propagate and change one's religion. We therefore feel obliged to draw attention to the difficulties experienced by Muslims in different contexts who have sought to become disciples of Jesus and seek to support them in whatever way we can.*

7. RECIPROCITY. *We hope that both Muslims and Christians will seek to follow the Golden Rule in their relations with each other, treating those of the other community as they would themselves wish to be treated. For our part, we endeavour to speak about Muslims truthfully, to allow Muslims to interpret themselves and not to compare the best expressions of Christianity with the worst of Islam.*

8. DIALOGUE. *We want to engage in the 'dialogue of life', dialogue about social and political issues, and theological dialogue. We seek to develop genuine honesty and openness; we rejoice in all the areas of common ground where we can agree, and address honestly areas where we disagree. As we seek to establish relationships of trust and respect, Christians and Muslims can and must have the freedom to challenge and critique each other's beliefs and practices.*

9. MISSION. *Because of our understanding of God's mission to the world, we want him to be known as he has revealed himself in Christ, and want others to have an opportunity to know about Christ. The Great Commission ('Go and make disciples of all nations ...' Matthew 28:19) stands as our mandate. We therefore believe that we are called to proclaim the good news about Jesus both in word and deed; and the outcome of our mission and witness is entirely in the hands of God. We recognize that Islam is as much a missionary religion as Christianity, and in neither can there be any place for pressure to encourage people to convert.*

10. AWARENESS OF THE WORLD DIMENSION. *We see our relationships here in the light of relationships between Christians, Muslims, other faith communities and people of no religious faith in other parts of the world and in the light of local and international political issues. We are therefore aware both of situations where Muslims experience prejudice, discrimination or persecution from Christians and of situations where Christians experience the same from Muslims.*

We believe that this is an appropriate Christian response to Muslims and Islam in Britain today, and that it is well summed up in these words of the Apostle Paul:

'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.' (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, New International Version)

All enquiries should be addressed to Global Connections. Caswell Road, Sydenham Industrial Estate, Leamington Spa, CV31 1QF www.globalconnections.co.uk