

# Inspiring Hope, Igniting Action Through Dialogue: The Women's Interfaith Exchange (WIE) and the Philadelphia Multi-Faith Women's Dialogue (PMWD) Partnership

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*Amidst the news of war, and conflict, the experience of connection between a diverse group of women in our local dialogue and a diverse group of women in Jerusalem is an inspiring source of hope and strength. After months of exchanging e-mails and sharing notes from our discussions, the two groups met face-to-face thanks to the wires of technology and the support of the United States State Department.*

*This article provides a window into the relationships that are fostered when social worlds that otherwise might not meet, come together for meaningful dialogue. The voices of the women themselves bring to life what can and is happening across our globe among small groups of courageous and committed people.*

## **The Forming of the Partnership: The Power of Discovery**

In the fall of 2003, members of the Women's Interfaith Exchange (WIE) and the Philadelphia Multi-Faith Women's Dialogue (PMWD) met at a pre-conference gathering of the Parliament of World Religions. Inspired by their common commitments, the two groups began to pursue a partnership sponsored by the Parliament. After months of exchanging e-mails describing our respective group's conversations, we scheduled a videoconference to meet face-to-face and explore what more we could do together.

The practice of interfaith dialogue in Israel was established in the late 1950's. The Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) was formed in recent years with the vision of "a society in which the "otherness" of the other is not only accepted, but truly understood and respected."<sup>1</sup> The IEA is committed to co-existence in the Middle East through cross-cultural study and inter-religious dialogue. "We believe that, rather than being the cause of the problem, religion can and should be a source of solution for the conflicts that exist in the region and beyond." The Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE) is a subgroup of the Interfaith Encounter Association in Jerusalem.

Women come to the dialogue in Jerusalem at great risk to themselves personally at times subject to the disapproval from their groups. Despite concerns, there are some glimmers of light and hope that shine on others who observe. An Orthodox Jewish woman said she usually has to sneak out of her ultra-orthodox neighborhood to come to our meetings — but today a friend had been at her house when she needed to leave and she told her where she was going and explained her belief that we have to respect everyone in our country. She said "We're creating a space to be together — even if we're only a small group, it makes a difference".

The WIE shared with us their reflections on a 3-day interfaith conference on monotheism. In the second evening we had again a social evening of joint singing and dancing of a variety of musical types from the different cultures. These joint musical experiences added

significantly to the unification of the group... the rhythm was stepped up and the volume was rising, with nearly all in the ring, or sometimes two rings, one inside the other, always mixed with Palestinians and Israelis in-between. With the rhythm of the drums, laughter and happiness were added to the jolly atmosphere of togetherness of the whole crowd. These two social evenings proved of value, showing the feasibility of simple cultural cooperation, reaching beyond religions and ethnical groups into an atmosphere of happy togetherness.

While diversity has been both a topic of conversation in the media and an agenda of many U.S. based organizations in recent decades, the popularized discussion has, until recently, focused on race, gender and sexual orientation. Interfaith dialogue groups, while in existence, were low on the radar screen. In the wake of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, global conflicts were brought closer to home. Many have turned their attention to this broader dimension of cultural diversity that multifaith dialogue brings to the fore. Multifaith dialogues have sprouted up in most metropolitan areas drawing people from many Jewish and Christian denominations and Muslims in an effort to understand and build bridges with each other.

Philadelphia's Multi-faith Women's Dialogue has 27 members, with a core of 18 consistent attendees, representing 20 faith communities in the Philadelphia area, including Baha'i, Catholic, Protestant, Unitarian, Jewish, and Muslim. The major purpose of the dialogue group is to "expand our understanding of spirituality by creating a supportive environment where different religions and beliefs can be explored, valued and celebrated through exchanges of personal faith journeys and religious observances and practices."

### **Fostering Hope through Reflective Moments of Meeting**

In a collaborative design effort, we decided to focus our conversation on hope — particularly, what inspires hope for us in these times. The PMWD decided to send some thoughts about this in advance of the meeting to better bridge the language differences we faced. Some met in pairs in advance and interviewed each other as a way to find the words to introduce themselves, and articulate their source of hope in these times. Some quotes from the women's introductions included:

- ◆ After 9/11 (September 11, 2001), the women's group became even more important to me... Being in this group has changed some prejudices I held and has given me hope that someday, one by one, we will all be able to live together in this world.
- ◆ The events of the Middle East are a source of deep disappointment and hopelessness, but reading about your group is a ray of hope. My hope is that the "candle" will become the means of spreading the light of tolerance and understanding in our world.
- ◆ Being part of this multi-faith group has been an opportunity to enlarge my awareness of the many ways to practice one's faith and about the rituals and beliefs of other religions. The flood of deep emotions during the telling of each individual's faith journey has been a rare gift to each of us.
- ◆ I have long believed: through personal connections we can overcome stereotypes and prejudice and eventually, help to eliminate so much suffering in the world
- ◆ I strongly believe in the tremendous impact our individual, foundational stories have on

each of us, and how we operate in the world. Being connected with this group has deepened my understanding of the many ways our stories are created and reform in relationship with each other.

- ◆ I believe that building bridges between the different faith traditions can lead us to a future in which peace is a reality and a foundation. The times we are living in are very scary but participation in this dialogue has been a source of hope for me.

- ◆ Despite the atrocities that my parents witnessed (as Holocaust survivors), one of the key lessons that nonetheless prevailed in my household when I was growing up was “Love thy neighbor as thyself”, a universal message to all faiths. Yet the differences in language and concepts make others harder to understand and we all struggle to bridge the gaps. I believe that real prejudice cannot exist in the face of knowledge and familiarity.

- ◆ What gives me hope is that when we are in relationship, our hearts and minds are open and love, not fear prevails.

- ◆ I find that the more deeply I meet a woman of another faith, the more deeply my own faith is enriched. And I have a hope that when we confront and lay to rest our own prejudices and hates and misunderstandings, even in a small group such as ours, we add at least.

When we met together, each of the 32 women present introduced herself and shared her source of hope in these times:

- ◆ Whenever my daughter rises up in the morning and says, (in Arabic, “good morning — everything is fine!!”), I know that everything is going to be fine — that is what gives me energy to go on.

- ◆ What gives me hope is when I see such groups like this group and we can communicate, I believe everyone can communicate and we can solve our problems

- ◆ It gives me tremendous empowerment to come here and break through our stereotypes.

- ◆ Now to be able to connect with a whole room of women in the US and expand our horizons in such a dramatic way just fills me with hope

- ◆ What gives me hope and keeps me going is the very fact that no matter what happens in this country we keep to our meeting together and talk about whatever is happening at that moment

- ◆ What gives me hope is this group and the school my children are in. They are in a Jewish Arab elementary school and that gives me hope — not for our generation but for theirs.

- ◆ What gives me hope in this group is that I see us as people that have come to the boundaries of history and we are expanding all our boundaries and we are challenging history by doing this. Some people might think that we are not realistic but we are and we are going to do this people!

- ◆ I am very aware that you are 18 and we are 14 and together that is 32. And the Hebrew letters that corresponds with 32 is laib, which is heart, which gives me hope

- ◆ This is an exact acting out of my convictions that through interacting with people with differences, stereotypes are overcome and friendships can wipe out misconceptions and can pave the way toward peace and real love and justice in the world

- ◆ Our only hope for the future that we can learn to talk and to listen.

◆ I find that listening to women from different faiths that my own faith has been strengthened. . But I also found the hope that in our small group getting rid of misunderstandings and prejudices somehow — I have a faith that this adds to the cosmos of love and understanding and in the world. And what you are doing gives me great hope more than anything that is around me or in the world.

◆ The magic that comes from the stories coming together and people knowing themselves in a new way from the meeting of their stories.

### **Sustaining the Connection**

After our meeting, we were all deeply touched and inspired. The light that was sparked by our connection was visible to those we encountered moments following our meeting. The technologists who assisted us shared: there was something magical that was created in that room.

Some of the comments women made following our meeting included:

The one overwhelming thought that I kept walking around with all day was how incredibly courageous the women in Jerusalem were. We come to the table with hypothetical issues, differences and questions that trouble us, but do not, by and large, materially change our lives. They told us that they met monthly regardless...that means to me regardless of who was killed by whom in which incident and for what reason. That is a real commitment to dialogue and I am in awe.

I, too, have been moved, awed, and humbled by our experience last week. We are able to tune out the events in the Middle East when our feelings of frustration and helplessness become overwhelming, but not so for the women in Jerusalem, who spoke to us of their love of one another from different faiths and the hope and strength that is generated within this group. As one clearly said, this is the only place where I feel safe. Hope in the unseen, visions of what could be help me create a picture of the possible. Our connection with the Jerusalem women is a bright place on my canvass.

I was deeply touched by your groups' message this week. You so authentically expressed the challenge of holding the space for hope and peace amidst the violence that can make the most hopeful among us — wonder. I feel deeply inspired when I read your messages.

Inspired by our connections, we are pursuing the partnership including activities that foster ongoing exchanges with our groups. On July 7th representatives from each group will meet in Barcelona, Spain at the Parliament of World Religions Conference. From there we are planning to pursue a Citizen's Exchange which will include cultural, artistic exchanges and fostering skill building such as conflict and mediation. It is our hope that our small encounters can expand, multiple and amplify the forces of peace and reconciliation in our world.

<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from the IEA website: [www.interfaithcounter.org/history.htm](http://www.interfaithcounter.org/history.htm)