

Welcoming Strangers: East Meets West

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to trace the development of a community group, 'East Meets West – Women together in Lancaster', and to explore the human and theological motivation of those involved. In doing so, I will also explore themes such as empowerment, solidarity, community, and equality. Towards the end I consider what it is that attracts and then retains the interest and commitment of the group members? Is there a distinctive 'magnet and glue' about this group and how might it be a beacon for others?

The first ten years

I should start by explaining how I became involved with this group. Sometime in 2007, I heard about a new initiative called 'East Meets West' (EMW) at Lancaster Priory.¹ The name intrigued me as I had recently started a new international pupil exchange between the girls' school where I was working and a girls' boarding school in Northern India. I went along to a get together and was awestruck by the convivial atmosphere and the 'buzz' in the room. Perhaps thirty or so women had gathered, drawn from two very different settled communities in Lancaster: Asian Muslim, and White British Christian. I hunted for the organiser, a recently retired primary school teacher called Liz Bagley who had a quiet presence and shining eyes. She appeared to know everyone who was there and was busy circulating and ensuring that everyone had something to eat and drink. I did not want to take much of her time so just introduced myself and said 'I am with you. This is fantastic!' Our eyes met, and we both sensed an immediate connection. Later I was to hear how this group had started.

Following her retirement in 2005, and in the wake of the 9/11, and 7/7 bombings, Liz had become aware of the visibly Muslim women who tended to live in certain neighbourhoods, alongside other family members. She wondered if they were being ostracised in the new climate of islamophobia that was pervading Western countries. Her concern and compassion led her to contact Dallas Road County Primary School, which is situated in one such neighbourhood of Lancaster. She spoke to the Head Teacher and asked to be introduced to a Muslim Mum. Shortly after she met Ruqsana, a mother of five, and the two immediately hit it off. They decided that it would be good to try and bring women together from 'East' and 'West'. Thus it was that 'East Meets West' was born in 2006. The first project was to gather in the kitchen at the Priory Hall to cook together. One week the Asian heritage ladies (mostly from Gujarat, India) would teach the White British ladies how to make an Indian dish, such as curry, and the following week it would be the turn of the White British ladies to demonstrate a typical English dish such as a Victoria sponge cake.

More women joined as time went by and after a few months, they decided to set up a table in the

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/eastmeetswestlancaster>

city centre with examples of the food they had learned to cook and offer it to passers-by. This was probably the first time that there had been such a visible and public collaboration of mostly middle aged or older women from different heritages in a central location. There was now no going back. In 2008, Liz invited some of those who had expressed a strong interest and commitment to the group to form a committee, with two Co-Chairs representing 'East' and 'West', a Treasurer and a Secretary. The composition of the committee was mixed; to represent both 'East' and 'West', and a constitution was drawn up. The aims of the Group were 'to enable women from the different faith groups in Lancaster to come together to learn from and about each other in a spirit of friendship, equality and mutual respect.' After making it clear that 'voting membership shall be open to all who participate in East Meets West activities', the constitution document further states that 'the committee shall have the power to approve or reject nominations for membership of the committee of any member who does not comply with the aims and ethos of the group.' Regarding the group's management, it states that 'A minimum of five committee members representing more than one part of the community shall enable the business of the group to be carried out' and that 'we will aim at achieving a representative balance of committee membership.'

I attended all the events I could, after my first engagement with the group, and was then invited to join the committee. I was increasingly interested in the aims and ethos of the group as I was seeing so much transformation of perceptions and development of cross cultural relationships during the international school exchanges I was organising in my role as 'International Links Coordinator'. When the time came for me to retire in July 2012, I wondered what my life would be like after full time teaching and managing a large Modern Languages department. A month before I finished work Liz came to see me. It was clear she had something important to tell me. To my surprise, she said that she felt it was the right time for her to step down as Co Chair of 'East Meets West' and would I consider taking over that role? She expected me to want to consider this carefully for a few weeks but I found myself agreeing immediately. I was already 'hooked' on this project and could see that this was what I would focus on after my retirement.

Once I took over as Co-Chair, I applied for funding to carry out several projects². The first was a 'Faith Communities Project' in 2013 where we reached out to women of different faiths in the district. We visited a Hindu temple and a Sikh Gurdwara in Preston as well as a Buddhist Temple in Ulverston. This project raised awareness amongst the group about other faiths and was of particular interest to the

² Since 2013 we have received nine grants in total:

Co-operative Fund (2013 for Faith Communities Project); Galbraith Trust (2014 for swimming and Lakes outing); Awards for All (2014 for Healthy Living Project); Community Foundation Trust (2016 for 10th anniversary events); Lancaster Community Fund (2016/17 Embroidery project); Lancaster Integration Fund (2019/20 and 2020/21 for drop in lunches); Lancashire County Council (2019-2021 Across the Generations Project); Lancaster District Community Wellbeing Fund (2020 for summer outing postponed to 2021).
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children who came with us on our visits. Their questions were often very perceptive and reminded us of the role we had in educating young minds and modelling mutual respect and openness. At the same time we embarked on another embroidery project following on from two that had been completed over the previous five years. This project was called 'Hidden Lancaster'. It involved a tour of historic Lancaster, with cameras at the ready to take shots of artwork and architecture we liked. The images were then embroidered on to a cloth with a fine piece of gauze shimmering and gently moving in front of it. A group met in the library every week to design and stitch the embroidery, and as well as getting to know one another better. We also attracted attention and gained new members to the group. Soon after, we were awarded funding from Awards for All to run a Healthy Living project in 2014 and 2015.³ We were able to take those members who longed to learn to swim to a friendly swimming pool in Garstang by coach once a fortnight. The swimmers taught the non-swimmers and by the end of the project eight had learned to swim. The sessions were private to ensure that conditions were met for the Muslim women to feel safe and secure. We also had healthy eating sessions where various dishes were demonstrated and then the results consumed around the table in our usual convivial fashion. The climax to the project was an away day in a village hall where more healthy food was prepared in groups, the children learned to make bread, and we all enjoyed a delicious and sustaining lunch. In the afternoon, we went for a country walk, some of us negotiating cow pats and stiles in traditional Indian dress, accompanied by much laughter and merriment.

The regular events that had characterised the group for the first six years continued: meals out in Indian restaurants, outings to ten pin bowling alleys or to places of interest in the region, parties to celebrate religious festivals such as Eid and Epiphany or just because we enjoyed parties and did not need to find an excuse! Earlier outings had been to Blackburn where our Asian friends helped us to overcome any sense of 'otherness' by shopping in Asian food markets and buying material for Asian heritage clothes. We also visited the Anglican cathedral together. One day we went to a local town about 20 miles away, where we ended our visit with fish and chips in a restaurant. Liz had made the booking for all of us, and had asked that the food be cooked according to halal requirements. On arrival we sensed that the restaurant staff were nervous and expecting trouble despite the efforts of the previous co chair to carefully liaise with them in advance. This affected their welcome and our enjoyment, and on the way home we asked our Asian friends if they had noticed anything in the way we had been received. Their answer was shocking: yes, they had noticed the passive aggressive way in which we had been received but this was quite normal for them and they would not expect anything different. The matter was followed up with a letter to the restaurant and their response was to apologise and to send us a cheque so that we could buy everyone an ice cream on our next outing. Nevertheless, it was a salutary experience for those of us who

³ The Big Lottery 'Awards for All' fund enabled us to carry out the project described. We dreamed up the project ideas and gave it the title "Healthy Living".

had never in our lives felt unwelcome when we had gone into a restaurant in the UK and it reinforced the solidarity between us.

Whenever we all go out anywhere we attract attention because of our diverse appearance. Whether picnicking in the local park or surprising the staff at the bowling alley with a request for somewhere to pray, our arrival is noticed! If there has been an Islamist terrorist attack somewhere we are especially conscious of the attention we attract and delight in making a display of our warm feelings for one another. This is partly to model how very attractive integration and cohesion can be and to demonstrate that these are more than words used by politicians and academics.

In 2016, East Meets West celebrated ten years together. We held an open day in a large room at the library, and welcomed about 100 people. We offered home cooked Indian food, henna tattoos, jewellery, and had displays about our activities during the decade. There were also craft and wellbeing demonstrations, and a treasure hunt and colouring competition for children. We invited Sisters4Sisters, a Muslim women's group based in Preston to offer the opportunity to try on a headscarf and have a selfie, and Maryam Golubeva, an Islamic artist living locally but born and raised in Russia, created an art installation using paper and scissors. We had got to know this group through attending the 'Experiencing Ramadan' event they organised each year, which offered non-Muslims the chance to fast and then break the fast in the traditional way with new and old Muslim friends. Two lecturers from the Politics, Philosophy and Religious Studies department at Lancaster University spoke about recent and current conflicts in the Middle East and led a round table discussion where anyone could ask a question. The following Saturday we had a coach outing to Morecambe and Heysham for around 56 women and children, with lunch in Happy Mount Park, ice cream on the prom, and a guided visit to the Eric Morecambe Statue and the display identifying the Lakeland fells. The day ended with a visit to the ruins of St Patrick's Chapel, and the Viking graves hewn into the rock as well as the ancient church of St Peter. Although our outing was to a town some three miles away many of the Asian community had never been there before and were soon asking how they could travel there again. This showed us how isolated minority communities can be and how many assumptions the primarily Western women in our group make about our fellow citizens and residents that are never questioned. I personally have also learned to appreciate the courage of our second Co Chair, Banu Patel, an unofficial community leader, in enabling and encouraging the Muslim women in her community to play a full part in our activities. It took me far too long to understand this.

Welcoming asylum seekers

By this time we could reflect on a decade of friendships begun and continued, which would never have happened without East Meets West. We had strong bonds with one another which we could now build on. It was time to look outside our own group to see what we, together, could offer the community.

We were aware that Lancaster was becoming a City of Sanctuary⁴ and that there were eight male asylum seekers who had already been welcomed by a small group of local people. Could our new role be to welcome any female asylum seekers, or the wives and families of the men who were already here if they were given permission to join them? A group of 19 women met on the 25th January 2016 to discuss how we could respond: 10 Muslim and 9 Christian or of Christian heritage. We decided to start collecting groceries, and toiletries as well as a few toys and a bilingual postcard with a message of welcome, in English and Arabic. These were stored in our homes as we waited. Months elapsed and then, out of the blue, we were told that the first female asylum seekers had arrived and were being housed in random groups of five in private rental housing in the city centre. We hastily gathered to make up the welcome boxes, and offered a weekly drop in for tea and biscuits in the refectory of Lancaster Priory. We also collected second hand clothes and organised two events where the asylum seekers could come and take what they needed. We had heard that some only had the clothes they were wearing when they had first arrived in the country. Not many came. Some were still too traumatised to go out.

One day, however, eight women and their children came to the drop in and there was great rejoicing. One advantage of the small numbers was that we could really get to know the women who did make it up the hill to the Priory. One day, however, I met a Mum carrying her toddler up the hill because she had no pushchair for him. It was time to review our welcome, and in particular the venue. I arranged to meet the minister from the Methodist Church in the city centre to see if they could accommodate us. Although very warm and sympathetic, he told me that they did not have any space in their weekly programme. As I left I spotted a woman I knew who worked the Baptist Church, only a few minutes away. I asked her if she had any time to see me. She did, because, although she was not working that day, she had decided to go to the church. We sat down together in an unhurried way, therefore, and I explained what I was looking for. She got out the diary and said there was just one slot we could have. I took it. And so it was that on March 17th 2017 the new East Meets West drop in was born. Letters of invitation were beautifully handwritten in the language of the recipient and delivered. We were offering a free lunch, toys for children, but above all a warm welcome. Our team of volunteers had no training, but all knew how to offer a welcome from the heart. Some were retired, some were committee members, and some had recently joined us or decided to become more active in the group.

So what is the situation of asylum seekers and refugees? Asylum seekers feel they had no alternative but to leave their homeland, family and work or studies. They arrive not knowing the language and culture of the country in which they are seeking asylum. Serco, a private agency paid by the Home Office to manage the reception of asylum seekers, sends them to another part of the country. They have little or no choice about which law firm might represent them; which town or city they end up in or the

⁴ <https://lancasterandmorecambe.cityofsanctuary.org/>
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house they are sent to live in. They also have no choice about their housemates, or furniture, or as being identified as asylum seekers. They have to survive on a very small subsistence of just over £5 a day, and meet a requirement to report to a police station some distance away. All this leads to an increasing lack of agency with a consequent impact on their level of morale, confidence and mental and physical health. They experience not only food poverty, but also a lack of resources to communicate with family, friends, and solicitor because of a variable or non-existent Wi-Fi signal, and the cost of phone top ups. They experience a poverty of opportunity to travel; to be independent; to make friends (often because of inadequate language skills), to express themselves through the clothes they wear, through the arts. They are not allowed to work and therefore forced into dependency as well as not being able to keep up their work related skills. They experience loss of identity, family, friends, country, culture, familiar landmarks and reference points, confidence, and networks.⁵

It was therefore the situation that East Meets West, a group that was started to bring women together from a range of faiths and cultures, now found itself addressing. What would be our role within the Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary? Global Link, a Lancaster based charity, received significant funding which enabled them to offer a range of support services. RAIS or Refugee and Asylum Seeker Information and Support established itself to offer signposting, legal, housing and benefits information, and support from volunteers. ESOL, or English as a Second Language classes were organised by City of Sanctuary and the local College of Further Education. Our role was and remains clear; to offer a welcome to women in a safe place. For many women the safety was ensured and defined by being a single sex group. What was our particular welcome to consist of? We have kept it simple: those who come are welcomed with the offer of a warm embrace, an opportunity to meet local volunteers, international local residents, and fellow asylum seekers and refugees. No difference is made between those who attend. We generally are not aware of who is who, and all are welcomed as equals regardless of faith, heritage, and status, level of education, race, skin colour or language including the ability to speak English. A hot drink is offered, and any children welcomed with toys in an enclosed area. There is a room leading off the main room where women can go to pray or to have a private conversation.

There are two main activities each week: a hot lunch, prepared by anyone who is willing to shop and cook, with a cash allowance of £30, supplied at first by volunteers and more recently by grants, and a meeting in a circle where we toss a soft ball to one another giving our name and the country we are from. The ball game starts at a simple level, and then progresses to naming the person to whom you toss the ball, and her country. When there are 25 women from 10 different countries with names that are hard to pronounce or remember, then this becomes a challenge! The exercise places us all on a level, however, and frequently provokes laughter, if not tears of laughter as balls are dropped, and memories tested. Sometimes

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-in-the-uk.html>

the children like to join in. After this game there are notices given with translations into Arabic, Farsi or Spanish depending on who is present and who is able to translate. The notices are generally about events coming up. Sometimes we have a guest who wants to promote a particular event they are organising. We have sometimes had printed notices to help everyone remember, but now that the drop in WhatsApp group is so central to our functioning this is no longer necessary. From March 2020, we were not able to meet as usual because of the pandemic but we stayed closely in touch. A small executive group from the committee has held weekly Zoom meetings to coordinate efforts. Priorities have ranged from ensuring food supplies from the City Council to asylum seekers and the translation of public health information using our WhatsApp group to a weekly giveaway of donated goods, picnics, coffee groups, and one to one walks. Each volunteer was asked to check in on up to five asylum seekers and refugees from the outset and these contacts have been mutually supportive.

Motivation

A typical week as Chair of East Meets West will mean spending up to seven days each week on contacts within the group. These can be fellow committee members and asylum seekers or refugees. It will also include responding to emails, WhatsApp messages, and delivering donated goods or groceries to one particular French speaking asylum seeker I support. What is it that motivates me? This is a complex question. I want to deal with it by being honest and authentic and avoiding saying what I feel I ought to say as though following a script. I feel a passion for East Meets West, so where does it come from?

1. Events

I have to go back a long way to find the first beginnings. Before I was born my parents served for nearly four years with the Church Mission Society in Iran, at a time when relations with the UK were very tense. My godmother, Betty Gaukroger, a friend and fellow missionary with CMS recounted this time in her memoirs:-

“The writing was already on the wall. A small missionary family, Gordon and Gladys Newsom, and a young baby with another expected were declared ‘persona non grata’ and ordered to leave the country within 36 hours. They lived a day’s journey away so packed up and left their home with everything they could carry in a hired taxi to cross 200 miles of desert to Isfahan. On the way, two tyres blew and they were stranded – no roads in the desert only commonly used tracks, and 100 degrees or so of heat. It so happened that a bulk oil carrier came their way (what an unusual Good Samaritan!) driven by an Armenian who had attended communion at their house in Yazd. He saw them, stopped and loaded them and their belongings and delivered them safely to the Bishop’s House in Isfahan.”⁶

⁶Betty Gaukroger typed up her memoirs and sent them to her three godchildren. I have one of the three hard copies. The Kenarchy Journal (2021), 2, 24-43 Copyright © 2021

I clearly remember the fervour and tears of my mother whenever she talked about the plight of refugees. This had been a traumatic experience and before she reached the safety of the UK, she had to travel on her own with my older sister, then a toddler, in three planes, one of which caught fire. My father was relocated to India to continue his CMS service as Bishop's Chaplain and so was not there for my birth that took place a month or so later. In fact I did not meet him until I was over a year old. When he returned he became the vicar of a parish in Maidstone, Kent. My earliest memories are of hospitality and the welcome of strangers from a wide range of countries. We often had friends and contacts to stay with us. The family photo albums are full of me posing in the garden with them. I look extremely pleased, and certainly remember having no shortage of visitors to show off to! When my father then moved to a completely different parish in Brixton, London we had a vast vicarage, which could offer accommodation to an even greater number of guests. These were mostly from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. This was partly because my father was given the extra job of chaplain to foreign students in the south east of England. The other reasons were the number of friends they had made in India and Iran, and the presence of those arriving from the Caribbean, or what is now known as the 'Windrush Generation.' My parents delighted in offering hospitality and the warmest of welcomes, and I remember arms being flung open at the door time and time again and hearing 'Alhamdulillah' اَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ 'God be praised' in Arabic. I remember other words that were commonly used such as 'Yallah' (Let's go!). Other memories in Brixton are of music making and singing with our Caribbean friends, the smiles of happiness, and the sound of laughter filling the room.

This happy existence was suddenly brought to a screaming halt when my father suffered a heart attack and died. I know he worked all hours, as did my mother, and the strain must have contributed to his heart disease. The consequences were far reaching. Not only did we have to leave our vicarage home but plans were drawn up for my sister and me to be sent to boarding school. At the tender age of nine I found myself separated from family and friends and from all that was familiar. My sister and I were only allowed to see each other for one hour every week. The school was actually founded for clergy orphans such as me yet this was such a very different environment I found myself in. I had moved from a Junior Mixed School in Brixton with a diverse range of pupils to a posh girls' school. My South London accent and lack of polished manners were out of place and I was only too aware of this. In addition to that, I arrived in the middle of a school year so that friendship groups were already made and I was the odd one out. I was also a year younger than the rest of my form. It was a case of sink or swim and I knew my sister was sinking rather than swimming yet could not do anything to help her. I had lost all I had known, and found myself in a strange new culture that did not welcome me. This now has a resonance I could never have dreamed of then. But if I search for the origins for my passion to bring people together and bridge barriers of race, nationality, culture and

language it started in my early life.

I loved to welcome new girls to the school, and I would be the first to respond to requests to offer hospitality to any unable to go home for an exeat weekend. I was not a well-adjusted pupil, however, and was always in trouble for breaking school rules and even being the ringleader in activities that were banned. Yet somehow, I managed to confound my teachers and do well in public exams winning a place at university to study French. Spending a year abroad as part of my Modern Languages degree course, and having to develop my language skills in order to make friends and integrate into the new culture was another key experience in early adult life. In a different context, I again experienced what it was like to be different, and perceived as different. I found that other people's perceptions of me were affected by stereotypical ideas about the country I came from. All these experiences fed in to my choice of career as a social worker, and desire to work in deprived urban areas. All the training and experiences gained in social work became useful again through my role in East Meets West. Training to be a Modern Foreign Languages teacher some years later, after having a family, taught me more about the importance of language, communication, and intercultural understanding. I discovered the value of school exchanges and set up an exchange with France and an exchange with India. In the end when I took on the leadership of EMW I felt all my professional training and work had been preparing me for my voluntary role in retirement!

2. Faith

So what of the influence of my faith in the development of my drive and passion to bring people together? I am someone who has grown up in the Christian faith and can never remember a time when I did not believe in and trust God. I can honestly say that the faith that permeated our lives was authentic, joyful and nurturing. In a sense, it is impossible to separate the knowledge and experience of being loved by one's parents and by the God they believed in. I also had the privilege of meeting my parents' friends who were hugely influential, in particular my godparents. The ones that stand out are those who were great fun to be with, and who communicated a mix of profound faith, intellectual inquisitiveness, practicality, honesty, humour and humility. They were people similar in calibre to Desmond Tutu or Rowan Williams. They had sometimes suffered for their faith. Invariably they were more interested in me than in themselves so that I found myself regretting having answered their questions at such length because I then had much less time to hear about them! They believed and they had committed their lives to their beliefs: I loved their company and their belief therefore became infectious. I must have listened to thousands of sermons in my life, and some have motivated me to practise the faith in my day-to-day life. I have read many spiritual books, attended retreats and been a member of a religious community albeit for a short time. Yet what I remember most is the people that I have known, and the honesty and authenticity of their faith journey.

Another key strand of influence is my personal experience of an 'encounter' with Christ. As I read both Old and New Testament scriptures, it is as though I am being affected on a different level, as though I am

being nurtured and fed in my spirit. I might be encouraged, challenged, excited, or rebuked. I have also had ecstatic experiences where I have felt caught up in the presence of Christ, which has in turn prompted a sense of much greater connection to others as well as elation and deep seated peace. These experiences have generally been when I have been on my own, praying, but occasionally they have occurred in the context of public corporate worship. I have also had the experience of sensing Christ present with me, in encounters with strangers. A passage from Genesis evokes this last type of encounter:-

“The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance to his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said ‘If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way – now that you have come to your servant.’ ‘Very well,’ they answered, ‘do as you say.’”⁷

Abraham honours the strangers who turn out to be God’s messengers. Indeed the account opens with the words, “The Lord appeared to Abraham. At the East Meets West drop in the stranger, the asylum seeker, the refugee is in our midst and we welcome the God in whose image we are all made as we eat together and enjoy fellowship. This is a kind of spiritual encounter which is not articulated openly but for me it finds its expression in the instinctive desire to welcome, to embrace and to serve food. It is similar to the desire to worship, and produces deep joy and a strong sense of being in the will of God. My desire to welcome follows, consciously or unconsciously, from God’s desire to welcome, accept and feed me. If I know God’s welcome and acceptance then I can offer that, too. However, if that is how I trace back my own desire to welcome and offer hospitality it does not mean it is exactly the same for every volunteer. For those who share a common faith and trust in God or Allah, it is an unspoken point of reference and communality, but some offer that welcome in spite of having lost their faith or having only a very tenuous grasp of it. One of the team, when asked about her motivation spoke of just wanting to care for her fellow human beings, out of respect for equality, justice and human rights. Whatever our motivation, whether faith based or humanist we make common cause in the simple desire to offer a welcome and hospitality. There is little interest in discussing what our reasons are for doing what we do. There is certainly no hierarchy of any kind, including any differentiation between those of us who follow or practise a religious faith and those who do not.

For those of us from a Judaeo-Christian tradition many texts can serve to encourage and reinforce our purpose. The writer of Leviticus exhorts us to ‘love the alien as yourself’ adding that ‘the alien ‘must be treated as one of your native-born’⁸. We do not make any difference between native born and ‘alien’ or

⁷ Genesis 18: 1-5.

⁸ Leviticus 19: 33.

foreign born in the way in which we welcome one another, or care for one another. In our circle exercise, all give their name and their country, native and foreign born alike. All are invited to shop and cook lunch. Whoever arrives with news to celebrate or in tears for whatever reason, it is treated the same: hugs are exchanged. We are very aware, however, that there are cultural differences that we need to understand and respect, and in getting to know the individual we learn to have those cultural differences in mind. We try to be aware that many cultural references that are part and parcel of our mind-set, world view and vocabulary are unfamiliar to the other. This is clear with food and drink, for example. At our Christmas lunch last year gravy was served in jugs to be poured over the food, but the notion of pouring an unknown liquid over the more recognisable food items was viewed with suspicion by many. There are also assumptions made about attitudes towards blended families, and same sex relationships that come to light and the resulting discussions tend to over simplify the issues because of language problems. You can easily say something by way of explanation that is farcically simplistic, but which is nevertheless preferable, in the moment, to issue avoidance.

3. Culture and Religion

The fact that I had been married to the same man for forty years and that both my children were married was reassuring to some who were confused to meet so many kind people whose personal life had been less straightforward, and did not hold any religious belief. Other assumptions on the part of both 'the West' and 'the East' relate to the convergence of culture and religion. Those of us from the West assumed that women arriving from majority Muslim cultures would be Muslim and have some knowledge of Arabic. When a family arrived from Afghanistan I was taken aback to learn that they were Sikhs and spoke Punjabi. My Muslim Co-Chair for many years is from Gujarat in India and has no knowledge of Arabic at all, yet finds she has to explain repeatedly that being Muslim does not mean you are Arab, or have any knowledge of Arabic. We also assumed that the resident Muslim population would be very pleased to be able to offer a welcome to fellow Muslims arriving from all over the world. However, we had overlooked the fact that every culture within every country has a different background and history. Some of those arriving from the Middle East had different ways of practising their religion to some of those who had been living in the UK for fifty years, and this, as well as differences in social class, meant that there were unexpected barriers to overcome. Meanwhile those of us, who might not share much in terms of identity, seemed to have an immediate rapport in terms of general outlook on life.

In Hebrews 13 v 2 we are told 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for thereby some have entertained strangers unawares.'⁹ Ian Wallis points out that this biblical exhortation, preserved within a letter addressed to an oppressed community reminds us that the practice of hospitality has been a defining expression of Christian faith from the outset, and also that there are reciprocal dynamics

⁹ Hebrews 13: 2.

embedded within the practice of hospitality in which the role of 'host' and 'guest' are not static but that roles can be reversed.¹⁰ At the drop in we invite any to shop and then prepare a meal. Whether asylum seeker, refugee or volunteer we are all offered the same sum of money, £30, to offer this hospitality. As we sit and eat cries of thanks and appreciation are shouted out to the cook, who is normally serving at the hatch, and always prompts a big smile. Someone always takes pictures of the food and then puts them on the EMW drop in Whatsapp group. The thread continues¹ with multiple expressions of appreciation, followed by a thank you from the cook. Here is an example after the drop in on 5th September 2019:-

'A: What a wonderful gathering!

L: It was nice to meet everyone again. Thank you Amina for the lovely food.

B: Nice to meet all thanks for Amina the food very delicious and thanks for everyone.

Am: It is very nice and welcoming that all my friends liked my food. Thanks a lot for this precious love and care.'

At Christmas and at Eid we have big parties in the 'Upper Room' at the Baptist Church premises where we meet. All the available tables are attractively presented and completely covered with home cooked food. Presents are wrapped and put at the foot of the Christmas Tree for the Christmas party. One newly arrived asylum seeker was astonished to find a present with her name on it. She looked at me through her tears and said that she had never in her life received a Christmas present and that she would never forget this.

4. The role of an inclusive incarnational theology alongside Muslim and other Religious Practices

Jesus applauded hospitality that cannot be reciprocated:-

"Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.'"¹¹

We are blessed. That is exactly our experience. And we are equally blessed, whatever our role, or status. This is experienced in the profound joy of giving away and being generous, whether in preparing for weeks to put on a big feast, or in the weekly 'giveaway' where donated goods are posted on the WhatsApp group and then delivered to those who request them. The countercultural thread in the teachings of Jesus is that the more you focus on your neighbour rather than yourself the more joy you will have. New volunteers are

¹⁰ Ian Wallis. 2012. Giving Place: Exploring Christian Hospitality (Chapter 8 from Fear and Friendship: Anglicans Engaging with Islam edited by Frances Ward and Sarah Coakley, published by Continuum International Publishing Group 2012)

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¹¹ Luke 14:12

usually quick to catch on and delight in being able to meet needs from their own resources, whether that be time or goods. One day an Iranian asylum seeker was feeling very cold on a winter's day. The new volunteer rushed home, went up to her loft and brought back an unworn but very warm coat that fitted perfectly. She might have been out of breath but she was radiant with the pleasure of giving. The strange thing is that giving sits alongside equality. We do not have to be equal in terms of wealth to be equal in one another's eyes. The asylum seeker I know best sees herself as a 'prayer warrior' and so if I have concerns I share them with her and she prays.

Jesus was criticised for associating with the despised:-

“While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’¹² were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the ‘sinners’ and tax collectors they asked his disciples: ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?’”¹³

The asylum seeker is often despised by those who perceive them as a threat to the economy, accusing them of making demands on the benefits system and on health care, taking precious school places, and being ‘other’. We stand in solidarity with them, and take every opportunity to congregate in public places to walk, picnic, have coffee or party together. In fact, at the very start of East Meets West, before we welcomed any asylum seekers, a stall was set up in the city centre to freely offer food that had been jointly prepared. The stall was set up and run by women from both communities, ‘East’ and ‘West’ at a time when passive islamophobia was part of the national psyche and found expression in the media. We mostly attract stares of surprise rather than hostility but we take the opportunity to model an alternative way of thinking, acting and relating to push back against fear, stereotyping, and nationalism on a local level. One great Muslim friend, of Pakistani heritage and the treasurer of East Meets West at the time occasionally met up with me for coffee. As we parted in one of the main squares in town, we would give each other a prolonged hug, she in her hijab, and I dressed as a typical White British woman of my age. The hugs were genuine: and I recall them with a sense of grief and poignancy as my dear friend and mother of five young children was to die far too young a few years later, from cancer.

Ian Wallis discusses the ‘feasting not fasting’ approach of Jesus to his ministry and writes that ‘such radical hospitality embodied much that was central to his vision and vocation: welcome and acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation, joy and celebration, sustenance and satisfaction, giving and receiving, generosity and thanksgiving, trust and friendship, sharing and consideration, equality and justice, belonging and responsibility. It is this legacy that Jesus entrusted to his followers at the Last Supper.’¹⁴ It is also an

¹² Luke 14: 12-14.

¹³ Mark 2: 15-16. In the NIV the word 'sinners' appears in inverted commas.

¹⁴ Ian Wallis. 2012. “Giving Place: Exploring Christian Hospitality” Chapter 8 p 109 *Fear and Friendship* published by Continuum International Publishing Group 2012

inclusive feasting that embraces all, as seen in the feeding of the five thousand. I often think of that story when we have had rather meagre rations, for one reason or another, yet still manage to make a delicious meal. On many occasions, small miracles have occurred when the person who was expected to provide the food has not been able to, because of illness or the illness of her children, but then someone has unexpectedly arrived with food. Sometimes we have had a record attendance and yet the food has still been shared out with all being able to eat and leftovers offered!

As well as feasting, fasting is a subject that we deal with regularly in East Meets West. When Ramadan is being observed in the Islamic calendar we continue to meet and feast, and sometimes women who are fasting are happy to prepare meals for those of us who are not fasting. Then, after the meal, those who are fasting take away a portion of the food to eat at home when they break the fast. My Co-Chair organises Ramadan parcels for all who are fasting. In one asylum seeker household a Christian fasted with her Muslim co-habitees and was invited to a local Eid meal. A number of us have attended 'Experiencing Ramadan' events organised by Sisters4Sisters in Preston which has involved fasting for 24 hours, and attending an evening event where we have learned more about the Muslim faith, and had the privilege of sharing the breaking of the fast together, and the joy and fellowship of that. Some Christian asylum seekers from Africa are no strangers to fasting. One links up on the internet to her former church in the DRC to pray and fast with them every week. Part of her practice is to sleep on the floor when she is fasting. Given the decline in the practice of Christian fasting in the West I, and other volunteers have been challenged by these examples. Should we restore the practice to Lent? Yet we can also bear in mind the words of the prophet Isaiah

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"¹⁵

Food was a source of disputes in the early church, as some Jewish Christians refused to eat with their Gentile counterparts, or eat food previously offered to idols. We, too, have had issues with food. I remember being so excited and enthusiastic when a refugee was in the kitchen preparing an African dish when a Muslim committee member arrived and asked if the food was 'halal'. My heart sank as I tried to remember whether the guidelines regarding food being halal and the need to include a vegetarian option each time had indeed been given to our cook that day. Whenever we serve food at our parties, we also must remember to label the dishes carefully as halal or non-halal. The easiest option is to prepare vegetarian dishes, but some of the women attending love to eat meat, and cannot afford to do so often, so meat is a real treat for them. It seems that we are not immune to the sensitive issues regarding food, and

¹⁵ Isaiah 58: 6-7.

why should we be? How we handle such sensitivities affects our community life together. It is overwhelmingly the case that food has been a source of joy and fellowship but we have also seen frayed tempers and the breakdown of relationships in the kitchen. I would like to be able to say that there has always been reconciliation but this would not be true.

Forgiveness is an important aspect of both Christianity and Islam, but we have had instances of relationship breakdown between Muslims, and between a Christian and a Muslim. Yet reconciliation is always attempted. If we had a 100% success rate in forgiveness and reconciliation, the world would beat a path to our door. The call of Christ to forgive those who have offended us and to love even our enemies goes to the heart of relationships. We are still learning and here is where a diversity of faiths is both an advantage and a challenge: we can identify where there is common teaching in our different faiths, but we cannot call on a common authority. I take comfort in the words of Rowan Williams in his afterword to the book 'Fear and Friendship – Anglicans engaging with Islam' when he speaks of his 'intense conviction that sustaining an universal claim about healing and meaning without resorting to the tools of control and manipulation is a robust enough calling that takes a lifetime to learn.'

The magnet and the glue

I turn now to look at what I call the magnet and the glue of East Meets West. What is it that attracts us, and why do those who join us tend to stay around and get more and more involved and committed? In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf describes what he means by embrace in this context. "Open arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other." He describes arms opening and then waiting; it is he says a "soft touch" not crushing or assimilating. In opening the arms again "the other must let go so that her alterity – her genuine dynamic identity may be preserved; and the self must take itself back into itself so that its own identity, enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left, may be preserved."¹⁶

East Meets West has a long tradition of embrace. When we have wanted to express solidarity, acceptance, and affection, or give hope, comfort, and strength we have embraced one another. It is a wordless exchange that communicates volumes. When new women arrive at the drop-in the embrace is offered, at first through warmth and eye-to-eye contact, and then open arms. It is a creating of a space for the other to come in, as Volf says. It is a soft touch, not crushing or assimilating. Sometimes the embrace continues at the initiative of the newcomer, as though a deep need for security is now starting to be met. Our space is a safe space for women, where confidences can be shared and kept. We meet regularly, and there are familiar faces each time, as well as a familiar routine. Children can also find a welcome with new toys and other children to play with as well as food, and friendly nurturing adults to give their time and attention. Those we know are welcomed joyfully by name, and ushered in to join the circle. There is no

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 144.
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looking over to see who has arrived and then looking away again which can make anyone feel unwanted.

The embrace of those we know can also be a long embrace. Whether new or known the embrace is often followed by a prolonged smile, more embraces, and expressions of thanks or 'Alhamdulillah'. An embrace is not an embrace if it is not mutual. If it is a volunteer offering the embrace she will also benefit, emotionally, for it is supremely an act of affirmation that in one gesture expresses acceptance, solidarity and commitment. Commonly one embrace will lead to several so that by the time our friend sits down she is, in the colloquial expression, 'well and truly loved up'. If she then joins a circle of women who want to know her name and the country she is from, through the simple ball tossing game, her identity and equality are valued and affirmed and she can start to relax. If there is someone in the circle who can interpret for her, she feels even more at home. If her child or children are by now playing happily with toys and there is a good smell emanating from the kitchen she will begin to smile and laugh. We have seen this over and over again.

One Arab volunteer came to us because other Arab women recommended our meeting. She described her first visit: -

"This was very interesting for me. I came to the drop in and I said to myself 'I want to be here every time'. First and foremost, it was the idea and ethos of East Meets West that attracted me, but then the experience of the drop in and the warm, cosy atmosphere. I saw people being privately helped and supported one to one. Here I had the chance to practise my English and get to know UK people. I wanted to belong and to contribute more and more.'

Another Arab volunteer who first came as a refugee, said:

"My first memory of East Meets West was when you, Hilary, came to my house with your bike. We take me, and my kids for a walk round Lancaster. It was the first time anyone take me round Lancaster and the castle. I remember you were very kind to let me know more Arab ladies; you were very keen to help me find them. You explained to me about East Meets West and welcomed me to join you."

Her memory of coming to the first 'tea and biscuits' drop-in was that it was a good chance to practise English. However, her memory of coming to the relocated drop-in was that "everyone was kind, everyone wanted to help me in a different way so it made me very happy to be honest and I started to think that this is where I wanted to stay." Another more recent volunteer who has just retired, recalled her first encounter with East Meets West. She had seen a post on Facebook that interested her and got in touch. We had tea together in town. I invited her to the drop in and she told me later: - "I was hooked. They were just like us, these women. We were all women with the same joys and sadnesses."

Another volunteer told me: -

“You were so welcoming. It was such a lovely thing! My first impression was of such a lovely atmosphere created by such friendly people, and women greeting you like you’re their favourite person. It was absolutely amazing, really lovely.’

One volunteer said: -

“There was a tangible sense of community, everyone sitting in a circle, with the women very involved and happy and relaxed. I felt then that this was my place, and that I had come to something very special indeed. I loved the sharing of food. It is an easy way to bring people together and a great way to bring women together in appreciation of each other.”

Volf writes, “a genuine embrace cannot leave both or either completely unchanged.” Our experience is that the embrace of East Meets West changes us.

So, what else attracts us? One common motive, given by the small sample I interviewed, was previous formative experience. One Arab volunteer had previous experience of starting a similar group whilst studying at university in her home in Gaza. The group was called ‘Lifemakers’ and it was started by her and her friends with the aim of helping people in need and doing environmental projects. Other volunteers spoke of previous experiences of community life or of getting to know refugees whilst living abroad. One described getting to know a UN refugee from Liberia whilst living and working in Norway. They had learned Norwegian together and made music together too. Meeting him had had a profound impact on her life and her family’s life, and through it, they learned the importance of reaching out to others, especially those who come from elsewhere in the world. Through their friendship, she learned what it is to have to wait and wait, together with the difficulties of learning a foreign language. This refugee friend had to wait for five years before he could see his wife again. He is always there in her mind when she is with refugees. She was also strongly inspired by his profound Christian faith that nurtured her own faith. This previous experience meant that when she heard about East Meets West she was attracted by the international element, but the idea of working with women and being part of a community where there was equality and where volunteers and refugees were treated the same was also a magnet.

Some volunteers were particularly attracted by the opportunity to give back, or to make good use of their skills and experience. One said she had heard about the group from others, it seemed very interesting and she felt she could contribute her experience of working with second and third generation migrants in an education setting. Another spoke of her sense of privilege, and wanting to offer friendship and make a difference. She quoted Mother Theresa’s words: “Small things done with great love can change the world.”¹⁷ Several of the team have lived abroad, and had to learn a new language, and adjust, sometimes alone, to a very different culture. They knew what it was to feel homesick and experienced the difference it made when someone reached out to them in friendship. Some had had previous experience of living in an

¹⁷ www.vaticansite.com/st-mother-teresa-quotes-love

Islamic country. Some were able to trace earlier influences such as meeting someone who became a mentor figure. One had completed a module in her degree course on 'Race and Education', and then later applied for a teaching job in an area with a high number of ethnic minority families. She had even led a team of staff who organised an event called 'East Meets West'! In the context of her work there, over thirty years, she had seen what did and what did not, promote cohesion between people from different ethnic groups, and was interested in continuing to engage in community cohesion following her retirement.

It is the case that many who join our group, either as volunteers, international women seeking fellowship or asylum seekers and refugees stay in the group, and become more and more involved and committed. The reasons for this seem to vary according to background. For volunteers what attracted them is deep seated and they find pleasure and fulfilment in becoming closer to like-minded women with similar values. During the years before East Meets West began to welcome asylum seekers and refugees, women from 'East' and 'West' also formed close friendships. One particularly close bond was established between an older White British committee member and a slightly younger committee member of Asian heritage. One is married but has no children; the other has three grown up children. Their husbands have become friends too, and there is mutual support in times of illness and difficulty. The one was invited to the weddings of two of the other's daughters, and the two of them represented East Meets West when they travelled to Scotland together to attend the funeral of another committee member. Our dear friend's death caused real anguish and pain in the group.

Another factor in the increasing commitment is religious faith. Ours is an interfaith group, not by definition, but 'by the way'. Yet the opportunity to experience one another's faith practices and festivals is highly prized and rare, as is the chance to ask for prayer from a fellow believer in God or Allah in time of need. The conversations I have had with Muslim friends made through the group have been very stimulating and have altered my perceptions. Two stand out as being very special. The first was when we were establishing links with a similar women's group in Israel/Palestine. We decided to send surprise gifts to each other in the post. My Muslim friend had the inspiration to send butterflies made from wood, on sale in our local Butterfly House. We were astonished when the parcel arrived from Israel/Palestine: butterfly brooches made from Palestinian olive wood... The joy we shared in that moment was profound and led both of us to exclaim that this was 'of God'. There have been other instances of this over the years. The second conversation was when I, and a new member of the group, who apparently had little in common in terms of age, ethnic background, or faith found ourselves exchanging thoughts and ideas about faith. As we did so, we felt increasingly close, emotionally. After about half an hour, she cried out "I love you, Hilary!" I am not being sentimental, here. These experiences have the potential to alter our perceptions forever. This same woman said to me "The happiness that you feel after giving and contributing is like nothing else. To see people happy and know you had given them something to make them happy, that uplifts you for days." Her perceptions have changed, too. She explained that she wanted to explore UK culture for herself and had

heard in the media that there were many differences between the two cultures. However, as she put it, “When you get closer to people you find these differences are very small. Through East Meets West, I have gained the confidence and language skills to relate to the general community of Lancaster.” Media reports suggesting that wearing a headscarf might make her liable to be attacked have proved unfounded.

If native volunteers stay with the group primarily because of shared values, formative experiences, the chance to contribute their skills, and, if people of faith, the opportunity to cross the barriers of different faith traditions, those who originate from outside the UK have other reasons for staying. These relate primarily to women’s empowerment. The opportunity to practise English is mentioned by many, as is the chance to develop greater confidence and to engage increasingly with the community. We have offered many opportunities over the years to learn to swim and ride a bike. It is not possible in most Muslim countries to learn to swim because there is no opportunity to do so in a way that respects the rules of modesty. It is similar with riding a bike. One says that she is so happy to cycle here in Lancaster but if she went back to see her family she would not ride a bike! This same committee member has been greatly empowered by being enabled to start up a new project in our group which brings together refugees and asylum seekers with older people in the community. She was saddened by meeting older people in her work in the local hospital, who did not receive a Christmas card at Christmas and who had no one to look after them when they returned home. This would not happen in her culture. She has developed the confidence to present her ideas to groups of professionals, to make contact with new people, and manage all the relationships, administration and logistics. Four years ago, when she first arrived she would not have imagined that this would happen. The project is bringing her much happiness as well as confidence. She says that it makes her day to speak to one of the elderly people on the phone. Her own father died recently and she was devastated with grief. Some of us went to express our condolences at the house and this, she said, meant so much to her. It felt as though she was in her own country.

Several women have gone on to set up their own business since gaining leave to remain; some together, and others on their own with support. Two are soon to start doing research alongside native UK women on a Black History project. Another two were invited to meet girls at a local Muslim girls’ boarding school. They were invited as asylum seekers, but by the end of their presentations about the work they had done in their home country before having to flee, the teachers were inviting them back for a Careers Evening. The impact of being a part of the group on family and friends is another ingredient in the glue that sticks us together. Whilst there are many jokes about grumpy husbands complaining about the storage space needed for donated goods, many husbands are willing porters, chauffeurs and even shoppers. Our children are also influenced as they see the place that the group has in our lives. When our daughters and grandchildren join us on outings or for parties they experience the special atmosphere and we hope that just as our formative experiences led us to become involved that the same would be true of them in the future.

Are the magnet and glue of East Meets West especially distinctive? It is hard to assess this because I do not have the same knowledge of other similar groups that are running not only in the UK but elsewhere. It would certainly be very interesting to explore the nature and dynamic of international women's groups. The fact that we are a women's group means that all feel safe, and we can express the solidarity inherent in periods, pregnancy, childbirth, child rearing, and the menopause. The importance given to quality of welcome, affirmation of the individual, and to embrace is also a key factor. The sharing of food, home cooked, is key to the convivial atmosphere, and the equality implicit in our introductory game confines status, and hierarchy to the bin. There are big cultural differences between us, not least in the practice of faith, but there is a desire to overcome these differences for the sake of retaining the benefits of such rich fellowship. We plumb the depths, but we also tiptoe carefully over the surface. We do both, and the role of the leaders is to model tolerance, patience and discretion. East Meets West was born out of a need to build bridges in a world that was becoming more polarised, fearful and nationalistic. Few would question that the group has always been relevant and topical. One could argue that this is likely to continue as austerity, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, increases sharply and makes those polarities and fears all the more raw. We are a group defined by what divides us, superficially, yet unites us at our core. Our testimony is that personal experience is transformative, and that love needs know no boundaries.