

The Wind of the Spirit among Muslims in the West Midlands

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According to John 3:8, the work of the Spirit is like the blowing wind that cannot be fully grasped by observers. However, one of the signs of the Spirit's presence is a focus on Jesus as the giver of eternal life. John 12:32 suggests that the process of spiritual rebirth is linked to Jesus actively drawing people to himself. How do Christians in the West Midlands who live in areas with a significant number of Muslims discern the work of the Spirit in the Muslim community? Is Jesus drawing Muslims to himself? If he is, then how is that understood? Are people from a Muslim background becoming involved in church life? Or is it better to think of Muslims being drawn to Jesus on an individual basis as followers of him within their own faith community? Should the latter be encouraged to meet together in homes rather than in formal church meetings to further their spiritual journey? The best way to try to answer such questions is to research what is happening on the ground.

Birmingham Christian College has been providing opportunities for research into questions like this since the establishment of the MA in Mission validated by the Federal University of Wales in 1999. Alongside dissertations dealing with a wide range of topics concerning mission on all continents, three dissertations have specialized in Christian mission among Muslims in Birmingham. The Reverend Simon Holloway explored how his church related to the substantial Muslim population in his parish in south east Birmingham. Sidwille Snyers, a Worldwide Evangelisation for Christ worker in Birmingham, also analysed the mission of Holloway's church in his survey of four churches engaged in mission to Muslims in the city. Tom Walsh, a member of Navigators living in a largely Muslim area of Birmingham, interviewed several Christians from a Muslim background to discover how they practised their faith.

These research projects provide evidence that churches long established in parts of the city with growing numbers of Muslims have a mission of Christian service to Muslims. They also show that Muslims maintain a strong sense of community identity with the result that participation in church life beyond receiving Christian service is limited. As a result, Muslims who wish to follow Jesus find difficulties relating to churches unless they have meaningful relationships with Christian friends. Friendship within a similar

linguistic and cultural group has also been found to be a significant factor in the spiritual nurture of some Muslim followers of Jesus.

A. Christians Serving Muslims

Simon Holloway's dissertation, *The Gospel Breaks Down Barriers* (2003), is subtitled *an exploration of mono-cultural and multi-cultural churches with case studies in Britain, Sierra Leone and Pakistan*. His experience of 18 years as a Church of England minister in a multi-cultural parish in Birmingham gave Holloway an inside perspective on mission to Muslims that he used to great effect. Sabbatical visits to Pakistan and Sierra Leone enabled him to make comparisons between the situation of his church and other churches in predominantly Muslim areas.

He asks, 'to what extent has the Gospel broken down barriers in Birmingham? Is there evidence from the church in the Second City of Britain that people of different cultures, faiths and ethnic backgrounds have come to faith in Christ and been integrated into His Church?' (p.13). He answers that the evidence from the part of Birmingham where he served for the best part of two decades is mixed. In 2001 the population of his parish was over 70% Black and Asian with a majority of primary school age children from Muslim homes. In the same year his church counted 18 different nationalities among its 41 White, 24 Black and 7 Asian members.

Holloway encouraged a variety of efforts to serve children and young people in the community. These included co-operation with the Malachi Community Trust, a Christian charity based in Birmingham that focuses on developing musicals with young people. One teenager from a Black family who performed in a Christmas musical, 'Led by the Star', in the Symphony Hall became a youth leader in the church. He had first been contacted through the work of a church related team who performed a 'road show' in local primary and secondary schools at Christmas, Easter and in the summer term. For many years Holloway's church ran a homework club meeting after school and a holiday club and camp during the summer break. Holloway believes that 'the Gospel has broken down the barriers between youths from different ethnic backgrounds on camps and in clubs, where the leaders modelled the unity which comes from knowing Christ' (p.17). However, he reports that only a few of those who have fully identified with the church have come from a faith background other than Christian.

This assessment is confirmed by Sidwille Snyers, a South African WEC missionary who joined Holloway's church in 1996. His MA dissertation, *Mission to British Muslims* (2005) subtitled, *towards effective mission to Muslim Immigrants by*

the local church in twenty-first century Britain, includes this church as one of four models of mission to Muslims in Birmingham. Snyers gives more detail about the impact of the homework clubs on Muslim families for whom the clubs were set up. Many children from Muslim homes needed help with school homework because their mothers in particular were themselves learning the English language and these families appreciated the service provided by a team of volunteers made up of members and friends of the church. Some of the children went on to become part of the teenage network of the church. A weekly youth club attracted an average attendance of twenty of which around 40% were from Muslim homes (pp.14-15). Still, Snyers points to only three church members coming from Muslim backgrounds, so the impact of the considerable mission to Muslim families has been 'in the form of a servant ministry' (p.13) that did not lead to attachment to the church as such. He believes that the church has been hampered in its mission by the fact that half of the members live outside the parish and this reduces the number of Christians living in the community to a rather small core. Snyers believes that 'Muslims will leave their community if the Christian community could offer better or similar security' (p.18) but the communal character of the church lacks the strength of the Muslim community in which it is placed.

Snyers selected another parish church in the same south eastern area of the city as his second model of mission to Muslims in Birmingham. This parish has a large number of Asians, the majority of whom are Muslims. In 1998, the church decided to utilise its halls for the benefit of the community and was able to secure funding from a variety of sources to employ a project manager and twelve members of staff. By 2005, activities run on the premises included a mother and toddler group on Tuesdays and Thursdays, a nursery on five afternoons, a play group on Thursday mornings, an after school club on Tuesdays to Fridays, and a boys' club once a week.

The impact of these various activities on Muslim families has been considerable. The mother and toddler group has attracted mothers from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds with typically over 60% of the mothers being Muslim. There has been a high demand for the services of the mother and toddler group and growth has been limited by the fact that the premises can support only 50 adults and 70 children. The after school club has had an average attendance of 130 boys and girls from 5-13, around 70% of whom were from Muslim families. The boys' club has attracted 25 boys on a weekly basis between the ages of 10-12, most of whom had been involved in their earlier years in the mother and toddler group, or the nursery and playgroups. Around three quarters of the boys have come from Muslim homes.

In addition to the use of the church premises, the church has invested in outreach activities in the community. Family support staff and volunteers have 'worked alongside social workers, health visitors and other professionals from health and education' (p.21). Examples of this co-operation include 'play workshops' to help improve parenting skills, and a 'respite crèche' for parents who need a break from caring for children. Two outreach workers have visited homes to offer family support. Youth work has involved contacting young people out in the community. Football coaching has been arranged and under 12 and under 16 football teams

formed, with over half the boys from Muslim homes.

Snyers is impressed by the breadth of the activities which cater 'for all the age groups in the community with the exception of the elderly' (p.23). He notes that although the leaders are Christians and there is a Christian ethos in the management of the various activities, the reliance on secular funding from government and charitable trusts 'does not allow the Christian staff and volunteers to proselytise in the workplace' (p.23). He also observes that a minority of the members of the church have not agreed with the policy of employing non-Christian staff and using non-Christian volunteers. Snyers believes that the differences between the white Christian leadership and the Muslim families served by them have meant that language and cultural barriers have prevented integration of members of such families into the life of the church itself.

A third model of Christian mission to Muslims chosen by Snyers comes from a different area of Birmingham two miles south of the city centre, where the Baptist Church set up a 'community project' in 1988 to help disadvantaged people in the community. During 17 years the project has served 'the unemployed, the homeless, women involved in prostitution, ex-offenders, people involved in substance abuse, people with learning difficulties, and the young people in the community' (p.25). Increasing numbers of Muslims living in the area has meant that the project has steadily developed greater numbers of contacts with Muslim clients. The mission statement of the church project is 'to show unconditional love in practical ways as demonstrated in the Christian Gospel by respecting the importance and dignity of each individual, affirming, assisting and encouraging them in their efforts to make a fresh start' (p.25). In 2005, there were 24 full-time staff funded almost entirely from government, business and charitable trust sources, 15 of whom were Christians but not necessarily members of the local Baptist Church.

An Outreach Job Search Project was set up in 1993 in the church hall on Wednesday mornings to assist the long term unemployed to access training opportunities and job vacancies in co-operation initially with the Employment Service and then with the Education Business Partnership, until 2000 when the Project became independent. A Community Business Project began in 1998 in a warehouse near the church. In 2005, training was being offered in bricklaying, carpentry, garment manufacture, office administration, and retail and marketing. Over half of the trainees in 2003-4 were Muslims. A Youth Club Project was running two clubs, the Nisa Girls Club, founded in March 2003, which attracted mainly Muslim young women and the Connexions Mixed Youth Club, started in December 2003, which targeted teenagers 'with anti-social behaviour, domestic difficulties, high school dropouts, and those involved in substance abuse' (p.27). The two clubs were led by a full-time Muslim youth worker, supported by two part-time workers, one a Muslim and the other a Christian, and five Muslim volunteers. The Mixed club was frequented by around 30 out of the 100 members each week, 85% of whom were Muslims.

Snyers evaluates this model of mission as a 'social development project' (p.27) with few definite links to the local church. The use of a warehouse rather than the church hall, the appointment of significant numbers of staff not involved

in the congregation, and the dependence on secular funding that prevents overt Christian proclamation, have tended to limit its 'Christian distinctiveness' (p.28). With the exception of the Wednesday Job Search sessions in the church hall Muslim clients had virtually no real contact with members of the church. Even though other Christians were employed they were white British Christians whose culture was distant from the various Muslim cultures of those they were serving.

Holloway chose to compare and contrast his own church in south east Birmingham with two Church of England parishes in a northern sector of the city with a large Muslim presence. Holloway conducted his survey of these churches in the summer of 2001, when he reported that one church had recently incorporated a Punjabi speaking fellowship into the Sunday worship of the church. The Asian fellowship had been meeting on a Saturday morning for a bilingual service and a meal. He received the impression that the Saturday Asian fellowship was 'a cell group, providing a place for nurture, teaching, fellowship and belonging' (Holloway 2003, p.21), and that second generation Asians with good English were more comfortable with the Sunday worship. The Asian group was composed of Punjabi speaking Christians of long standing as well as Punjabi speakers from Hindu and Sikh families. Holloway does not indicate whether any of the Asian group was from a Muslim background. He was impressed by the multi-cultural nature of Sunday worship. Though the two clergy were white, there was a full-time black youth worker, and the two church wardens were black and Asian. Punjabi was used on occasions along with English, though this had not been popular with a minority of black and white members.

The second parish church in this northern district had around 80% black, and 20% white members, with only 1 Asian who was employed as a youth worker. The mission of the church focused on a playgroup, youth clubs, and a community advice centre. The playgroup catered for 20 children from 2-5 years, was staffed by Christians and Muslims, and was government funded. Two Christian youth workers led three clubs for boys aged 8-11, most of whom were Muslims. Funding came from a combination of church and charity sources. The Advice Centre was led by a Muslim but managed by the church, and through volunteers, gave advice in 7 languages to around 15,000 enquirers per annum.

Holloway raised the question why none of the Asians served by the church had become involved in the life of the congregation, unlike in the neighbouring parish Church. He identified three answers. Firstly, the majority of the congregation lived outside the parish and were 'disengaged from the immediate context' (p.28). Secondly, the two youth leaders felt that the church members had not taken ownership of the youth work done in their name, because the clubs were funded more with external than congregational money. Thirdly, the 'strong local Muslim *Ummah*' (p.28) made it difficult for Asian Muslims to identify publicly with the church as a worshipping community. This last point applies equally to both parish churches in the north of the city, since it appears from Holloway's report that neither of the Church of England congregations found it possible to attract Asians who had come from Muslim families into the life of the church.

A quite different picture emerges from Snyers' fourth model of mission to Muslims in Birmingham, an Iranian Fellowship formed in a parish church community centre less than two miles west of the city centre. Snyers had become involved with this parish church in 1996 as a missionary to Kosovan Albanian refugees. After their repatriation in 1999, there was an influx of Iranian asylum seekers to the area and Snyers became part of a larger team of 10 dedicated to serving them, made up of church members and missionaries from Operation Mobilisation, Birmingham City Mission, himself from WEC, and an exiled Iranian pastor from Agape.

The initial mission was to offer practical help to these asylum seekers, 'many of whom had fled their allocated accommodation because of persecution in towns and cities in the north and north-east of the country' (Snyers, 2005, p.9). Members of the team helped with form filling, and accompanied Iranians on visits to lawyers, schools, and charities. The asylum seekers asked for a place to meet socially and to learn English, and the community centre of the parish church was made available on Saturday evenings. The team organized an hour of games and conversation, followed by an hour of English and a final hour of food and a talk usually given by the Iranian pastor. Most of the Iranians who attended regularly were single men but there were also a few families with children. In time a children's club was started in another room. The first New Year celebration, *Naroosh*, attracted around a hundred Iranians from across the Midlands.

Within eight months a request for baptism was made by an asylum seeker, with several more requests two months later. The team realised quickly that these requests by the Iranians were related to 'a perception that if they became Christian they would be more able to get permission to stay' (p.11). As a result, the team decided to baptise only a year after the request was made. Twelve Iranians were duly baptised in a baptismal pool in a local Baptist church. Some of them had to leave accommodation shared with other Iranians, some were disinherited by their extended families, and others received death threats. Nevertheless, by 2003 there were 40 baptised Iranians who began to meet in the city centre to reach out to a wider group of Iranians. A small group stayed in the community centre, and had grown to 13 by 2005, led by an American Iranian missionary.

Snyers believes that the mission to Iranian asylum seekers was successful for the following reasons. Firstly, the team met the needs of the asylum seekers. Couples with children appreciated help with relating to local schools, and help with visiting lawyers and housing authorities was welcomed. Secondly, the team understood the importance of community for the Iranians who enjoyed the Saturday evenings together. Thirdly, they believed that prayer for the asylum seekers bore fruit in spiritual awakening. Fourthly, six of the team members were missionaries who could give time to individual needs during the day. Fifthly, the exiled Iranian pastor not only led the worship of the emerging group but translated for non-Farsi speakers on Saturday evenings. Sixthly, the Iranian group did not attract hostile attention from Pakistani Muslims living in the area. Perhaps Snyers could have added that these Iranians had fled from Iran in very negative circumstances, from a regime that had oppressed them in the name of a strict interpretation of

Islam. Maybe they were ready for a different type of spirituality and were open to the ministry of the team who offered the compassionate service they needed.

B. Muslims Drawn to Jesus

A third MA Dissertation by Thomas Walsh, *Voices from Christians in Britain with a Muslim Background: Stories for the British Church on Evangelism, Conversion, Integration and Discipleship*, 2005, looks at Christian mission to Muslims from the aspect of those who have come to Christian convictions. He interviewed 16 Christians from a Muslim background who had been living in the UK for a significant period or had been raised here. The majority were from the West Midlands and 8 were from Birmingham. Up to 2005, Walsh had lived for 17 years in the same south eastern sector of the city as Simon Holloway, and had become a friend of many of those he interviewed for the dissertation.

Walsh lists several reasons for pursuing the research. The London bombings by British Muslims have made British Muslims a new centre of anxiety for the population as a whole. There are significant numbers of Muslims concentrated in particular cities like Birmingham so the influence of such Muslims will grow. Few Muslims are attracted to the churches that exist but British people are becoming Muslims and writing accounts of their spiritual journey to Islam. He knew several Christians from a Muslim background so thought someone should chart their spiritual journeys, 'they would have something to say that might influence both society and Church' (p.6). Finally, very little research has been done on Muslim background Christians in the UK.

His choice of the interviewees was determined by the following factors. Firstly, he wanted to be sure that each person understood him, and he them, and to avoid 'people giving him perceived right answers' (p.8). Secondly, he wanted people who had lived in Britain for a long time, so he avoided asylum seekers, those who had come recently on student visas, or those who had become Christians outside the UK but now lived here. Thirdly, he looked for those who had become stable Christians over a considerable time span. Finally, he searched for those who were taking responsibility in a Christian church, fellowship or organisation.

As a result of his work Walsh discovered several points of interest. The average length of time which these individuals had been Christians was 18 years, and many of them became Christians when they were young. Eight of the interviewees were women 'which might indicate greater freedom which women find in British society' (p.14). There were 8 individuals who had married white Christians, and 1 who had married a Christian from a Hindu background, so these interviewees had chosen cross-cultural marriages. Walsh had not anticipated this latter discovery so had not asked questions about cross cultural marriage in his questionnaires and suggested that this could be a subject of future research. The ethnic background of the 16 was largely South Asian, 7 with Pakistani roots, 3 from Bangladeshi families, and 3 with Indian origins.

Walsh was interested not only in the process of response to the gospel but also in the process of integration into a Christian community. Concerning the first process about how

they heard the gospel message he asked three questions; 'Jot down the main points and defining moments up to the point of decision, how long would you say this process took, and what three factors strongly influenced your decision to follow Jesus' (p.18). The results were that 14 chose to follow Jesus either as children or young adults. Thirteen were weighed down by some personal need which was met by faith in Jesus. Thirteen said that knowing a Christian personally was very important in their decision. Ten mentioned reading the Bible. Nine spoke of the impact of a Christian worshipping community. Eight reported a sense of distance from the Muslim community. Six told of mysterious or miraculous events related to prayer. Five simply said that Jesus attracted them. Walsh paints a picture based on these responses.

A young Muslim person, distanced from their home and community, meeting and befriending Christians, searching for answers to big questions, open to visiting their places of worship, reading their scriptures, and praying with honesty to God is most likely to end up becoming a follower of Jesus (p.31).

Walsh has some telling comments for British Christians in post 9/11 and 7/7 days. Christians should do all they can to befriend Muslims rather than to adopt a polemical attitude towards them. The posture of the Christians who influenced these Muslims to put their trust in Jesus was 'positive not negative, gentle not polemic, engaged not distanced' (p.32). The most important aspects of Christian witness to Muslims, according to Walsh, are openness to God the Holy Spirit and the people themselves.

The reaction of their families was the second part of the process of response to the gospel. Eleven interviewees took two or more years to inform their parents of the decision to follow Jesus. One still had not talked to his parents after ten years. Seven took more than three years to openly share their new convictions with their parents. Siblings were told much sooner and were usually supportive. Walsh concludes that 'there is some evidence that those with the best relationships with their family now are those that took longer to speak about their new faith' (p.35). Once families came to realize that a Christian confession had been made, reactions were negative for 15 of the interviewees. One was kept separate from her family, another threatened with death, another thrown out altogether, but several related that 'their decision was ignored as though it had not happened' (p.38). Only one had a positive reaction since his mother and sisters thought he had become a better person. Once again, Walsh has observations for British Christians, whom he calls on to offer support to new believers from an Islamic background. 'The church should be present and aware, as opposed to absent and unaware; concerned and caring as opposed to unconcerned and uncaring; sensitive and diplomatic as opposed to insensitive and aggressive' (p.40).

The second process of concern to Walsh was integration into a Christian community. Eleven were baptised less than five years from the point of decision, and 8 less than three years. However, most of these said that the process of integration was not smooth. Walsh picked up in his interviews a variety of interpretations of this difficulty. Firstly, they had been raised with a sense of opposition to Christianity, and

the public manifestation of the faith, the church. Secondly, the decline of confidence in the churches themselves of their place in society made them less attractive. Thirdly, British churches are not replacement communities for those rejected by their families since individualism is so strong within churches. Fourthly and most importantly, British churches are not good at assessing their cultural biases. One commented, 'I became integrated straightaway, but it was a further ten years before I realised I had lost my cultural identity' (p.46).

This last point has led to experimental Christian fellowships where British Asians can express themselves without having to fit in to British practices of church. One West Midlands example attended by 3 of the interviewees focuses on prayer and meditation, a high degree of visual and sense stimulation, little singing, space to meet God, and food at the end. Another group, led by one of the interviewees, is a meeting for Muslims with Muslim background Christians to help the latter 'resolve their cultural, social and theological issues in order to strengthen their faith and walk with Jesus' (p.50).

Walsh has five concluding comments for British Christians. They need to listen to voices from other cultural backgrounds. They should believe that people from Muslim backgrounds can become followers of Jesus. They ought not to be afraid of Muslims but come to understand them better. They should allow for different experiments of worship and Christian community. Finally, they need to see that conversion is only the beginning, but the goal is maturity in Christ.

C. Evaluation

The wind of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the churches in the West Midlands among Muslims can be discerned in more than one way. First of all, long established churches in the Birmingham inner city ring have developed ministries of service to Muslims in recent years. Whether through full-time salaried personnel or willing volunteers these churches have made a significant contribution to the cohesion of their communities and to the investment in Muslim young people and families that is essential to the wellbeing of the city as a whole. Birmingham experienced race riots in the 1980s and in order not to return to that kind of fragmentation members of the community need to promote ethnic integration. Holloy and Snyers have provided evidence that churches are

playing an important role in valuing and enhancing different ethnic and religious groups, including Muslim ones. Play-groups, homework clubs, children's recreational clubs and camps, teenage clubs for girls and boys have provided the neighbourly love that Jesus called his followers to offer. One church has become involved in offering training for life skills to adults, many of whom are Muslims. The employment of Muslims in advice centres, and in youth clubs has demonstrated a belief by some churches that partnership between Christians and Muslims can break down barriers between them. The wind of the Spirit is bringing reconciliation between people who might otherwise be in separate camps in the city.

Secondly, the wind of the Spirit can be felt in the response of individual Muslims to the message of the gospel. While it is true that Muslims retain a strong sense of identity which involves seeing Christianity and churches as both unfamiliar and lacking in the fullness of truth, there are Muslims in Birmingham who have been attracted to following Jesus on Christian terms. However, there have been comparatively few who have integrated into the life of the long established churches. It appears that new churches or forms of fellowship are coming into being to meet the needs of these individuals, in one case led by one of them.

Thirdly, there is evidence that language is a barrier to the integration of some Muslims who wish to experience Christian life and worship. The story of the Iranian fellowship illustrates the importance of the mother tongue in community experience. However, the integration of a Punjabi speaking group into English language Sunday morning worship in one church highlights the fact that the second generation felt much more comfortable with English language and culture than the parents who had come to Birmingham speaking Punjabi. Mission to Muslims then is bound up with issues of language and culture to a greater extent than some of the churches seemed to recognize. The team that served the Iranian asylum seekers understood the need to have worship led by a Farsi speaker rather than assume that translation from English would be adequate for a meaningful experience of worship. Therefore the wind of the Spirit is discerned in those Christians who have made conscious attempts to make allowances for the linguistic and cultural differences of Muslims who wish to share worship with them.

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