

BEARING LIGHT TO ONE ARABIC-SPEAKING COMMUNITY IN THE UK

by Caroline

In 1987-89, Caroline (pseudonym) was part of a two-year OM team in Brussels amongst N Africans and lived for a month in Morocco with a local family. Following a gap in service and more recent language study, she has been serving as an outreach worker in a large northern UK city for the last eight years.

In early 2002, I had newly returned, as a single woman, from sixteen months of Arabic study in the Yemen. Living once more in my own home in a large city, I was catapulted into UK life: a new twenty hour-a-week nursing job, re-identifying with my small household-based sending church, plus the emotional and practical upheaval of helping family support my mother, who was suddenly ill with a long-term sickness. However, I was eager not to miss the obvious opportunities that I had to encounter Arab Muslims locally.

The city has long had a diverse Muslim population, partly of long established communities (Pakistani, Bengali, Somali and Yemeni (mostly from the rural south) in three main clusters throughout the city), and partly of newer, Iranian individuals/families, Asylum seekers (especially Iraqi Arab and Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, some Eritreans). Eight years on and there is a decent sized Libyan post-grad student population (they have developed their own Arabic and Qur'anic weekend schools for their kids). Furthermore, Syrian, Egyptian and a scattering of other less religious Middle-Easterners intermingle. In the last 1-2 years Gulf students, particularly from Saudi, are arriving and increasingly have their families with them, others are single women with chaperones. Algerian and Moroccan's students are also appearing. There is also Egyptian Coptic presence in the area, which is positive and could resource future overt evangelism.

In 2002 and up until today, the known believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs) are generally all Iranians (Fellowships exist and a new Iranian pastor was recently installed). There is a long term befriending outreach centre in a Pakistani/Bengali area of the city. Emergency accommodation for destitute Asylum Seekers is provided by one church with volunteers from different churches. A scattering of individuals from various churches are involved in different small outreaches. There is no company team or multi-agency/church team outreach to Arab Muslims. An English couple who have Arabic and overseas ministry experience and are nearing retirement, recently located in the city. An English Christian woman, with Arabic, works for a Yemeni organization full time, befriending women in her context. Another couple, expelled from a non-Arab Muslim country after ten years, are running a significant course for a

large Anglican church to equip people to be good supporters of overseas workers.

Upon returning to UK in 2002, I realized I needed to keep improving my Arabic and sought to find a language helper from the Yemeni community. I had predominantly learnt Modern Standard Arabic (with a Yemeni accent I am told!) and had a background in the Moroccan dialect. A fifty-year-old Yemeni graduate mother, with strong religious convictions, took up the challenge on a bi-weekly basis. Later, our religious discussions grew into a study of the Old Testament in a fairly confrontational manner for a time, using the study *One God One Way*. Another determined attempt at language was joining a Sunday afternoon class full of Yemeni women (with varied English levels) in the local community who were learning to write Arabic. Conducted totally in Arabic, it was a much better place to make friendships and practice language than subsequent night classes I tried, which were run in English by the local secular college.

From these and other encounters or introductions to women and families, I developed a number of solid friendships and had homes to visit in different areas of the city. Some friendships were fun, enlightening with interest in the scriptures; some were draining at times with sudden or on-going complex needs developing. They were times of breaking up the ground, both tentative and bold sowing of gospel seeds in terms of literature, media, discussions and prayer.

I did my best to keep up a quarterly newsletter to my prayer supporters, which included a small core that prayed daily. Such backing is indispensable and I owe a large part of my survival to God's grace at work through them. I was also accountable to my church, and team leaders based at a distance in London, resourced by mutual visits and some shared ministry efforts where I joined them outside of my situation.

A key change from solely visiting homes came when I was encouraged by a Muslim Lebanese friend to volunteer at a weekly women's only secular run conversation and activity club aimed at Refugees and Asylum Seekers. With decent numbers of Arab women attending and new people always turning up, I have continued to be involved and have prayed and sought to draw in other Christians to this setting. Two other mixed gender conversation clubs run weekly which are proving to be good places to make contacts with other groups.

In the last year, God has opened up an amazing opportunity through a woman I met in the conversation club. Newly arrived from Kurdish Iraq and initially only able to converse with me in Arabic, we formed a bond when we met over two years ago. On a casual visit to her home, I showed the Miracle Maker video to her and her husband and eldest son. They are from a Yazidi background, not Muslim, but are very familiar with Islam. She promptly fetched a bi-lingual Arabic English NT (obtained as a gift on a visit to a Christian bookshop in the city!), saying she read

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it aloud to her husband most nights or on car journeys! This outgoing family, popular with Muslim Kurdish neighbours and with other Arab friends, seem a God-provided vital link into the community. Quite quickly, I was able to introduce them to a church planting group in the city. This group had developed a weekly chronological Bible storytelling evening following a meal together with other Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, in which I also became involved. A year on this couple and their 9-year-old son are all responding very positively to Bible teaching. Together with another single man, this family have integrated into a Sunday household gathering. There is also a regular weekday visit to their home to read and pray with the wife and son (English, Arabic and Kurdish are all used). All are acknowledging that knowing about Jesus is changing them and we are praying for the Holy Spirit to complete His work of bringing salvation. The prospect of this couple hosting their friends and being a catalyst for their friends and neighbours to hear about Jesus is something for which we long and pray.

Eighteen months ago, just prior to meeting this couple, God moved me into a new local church. This church is actively involved in reaching out to a racially and socially diverse neighbourhood, which includes Somali, Yemeni and Arab student populations. I have been able to encourage and resource, in small ways, a women's befriending ministry that is developing. A weekly coffee morning, run by two women from church who are in the primary school, is starting as the women drop off their kids. An attempt to befriend Muslim neighbours has also begun to overcome barriers into the community. This has led to a quarterly International Women's Food evening. It is held in the church building or in the local park with music, dancing, singing, and food brought and shared.

In an effort to move deeper and attract those who were spiritually open, we ran a Bible Storytelling session for four weeks in a home. We told the story of Ruth. Invitations drew some keen interest and a desire to come, but many factors kept different women away, all except one Moroccan woman who interacted very positively showing much openness. Storytelling fascinates and reaches the heart and often brings a story in response from the one who has listened. It dispels argument and confrontation, and gives insight into how to pray for our friends. It also gives us opportunities to pray with them, as they trust us with their needs.

Long-term relationships that are not displaying obvious spiritual interest have been at their best when I have been involved with the whole family, sometimes for fairly intense periods. A natural pattern has developed for me, to value and pour a lot of time into the children, whatever age they are, modelling to parents the value of playing with them, giving health advice, homework help and taking them on outings. I carry a bag of craft stuff and English Bible storybooks everywhere. One simple family bike trip has been long remembered! Often children have displayed openness as questions about God arise in the midst of play and you realise they have heard you talking to their parents. There is an ebb and flow to these

relationships with lapses of time, and then picking up again unexpectedly strong as ever, all with different opportunities as the children mature.

In this type of work, we are generally prepared for fruit to come slowly. I often remind myself that the UK is a new field, despite the opportunity and freedom to share openly. My struggles with disappointment have not been with Muslim's themselves, but with seeing such opportunities to engage with and befriend them missed because very few local Christians have the vision to reach out across cultures or they are afraid to try in our politically correct society. Many, many more Christians are required to find those whose hearts God has prepared! My own lack of a focused team has led to me working largely alone. I have made various attempts to network with others, find people to work with consistently and made other abortive attempts to take church members along visiting with me (complex social circumstances are hard to take people into).

Challenges continue to abound; loneliness in ministry, demanding nursing work, playing an active part in church life, trying to keep a social life going, elderly parents and how to do deputation.

Working in nursing gives a good salary and that together with some financial support, allows time for ministry; however, it is demanding mentally and physically. Nursing also requires professional updating continuously, often in my own time, which competes with ministry. I have often felt that it leaves me making a 'poor job' of both areas! However, I find it helps when I view all of my time as belonging to God and I seek his direction in integrating the various parts. My days are a mixture of structured nursing, flexible activities and visiting. Some of my Muslim friends are my best friends, either because I have known them a long time or because I see them frequently. Their families are like my family as I see them evenings or weekends, often more than I see my blood relatives!

I have currently learned to accept a lower level of Arabic than I once had, as consistent study cannot be one of my current priorities. To know and keep within my limits was emphasised when I inadvertently ended up in an interpreting situation that was beyond me. Since I was present, I was used instead of an official interpreter in a complex social situation, which could have adversely affected my friend. Now I use the skills I have for developing rapport with people. In some situations, I would love to have more Arabic, especially spiritual language dexterity; in other situations, people are bent on improving their English and it is only right to help them!

The temptation to give up being part of the company and simply be an 'ordinary member of a local church' has come at various low points over the years, but somehow an echo in my heart reminds me that God has called me and is equipping me and working His strength through my weaknesses. This keeps me persevering and knowing that changes of direction need to come from Him not me!

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