

## Using *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* for Interfaith Discussion Groups with Muslims

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Fear over doctrinal conflicts are among the issues that can hinder Christians from sharing their faith with Muslims. Discussions over deeply-held core beliefs can lead to heated arguments that end relationships. This potential conflict causes many to avoid these conversations altogether and leave the discussions only to scholars and debates between apologists.

This dilemma begs the question of a constructive way to have these conversations. A way that allows Christians to be faithful witnesses while learning what their Muslim neighbor thinks and believes, without descending into argument. A way that helps to build friendships and community between Muslims and Christians, all the while giving Christians ample opportunity to introduce their Muslim friends to Christ.

In the Chicago area, we have been using the classic resource [\*A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue\*](#), by Badru Kateregga and David Shenk, to create three discussion groups between Muslims and Christians. This

book was written to create dialogue in both Muslim-majority and diaspora contexts; any situation where Muslims and Christians can have friendly conversations. Its aim is not just a mutual exchange of ideas, but for both sides to honestly hear each other's witness. It may challenge some Christians to hear the witness of Muslims, but this is an important part of the method. The authors wrote in the preface that

witness in dialogue is vital .... We have not minced words. We have spoken with candor. We have each attempted to be as faithful as possible to the respective witness to which we believe God has called us (Kateregga and Shenk 2011, 18–19).

In this article we discuss how these groups in Chicago were started, lessons we learned from conducting the groups, and suggestions for how to start groups.

## History and Description

Over the course of the pandemic, I (Mike) and a couple of men from my local church had a Zoom English Café with some Turkish men from a nearby cultural center. In June of 2021, as the pandemic began to wind down, we discussed a return to in-person meetings. I approached our Turkish friends about having a book discussion on *A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue*. The Turkish men in the group were enthusiastic about the idea, and so our monthly English Café became a book discussion group.

At our first meeting, we introduced the book showing that it was arranged in two sections, the Muslim witness and the Christian witness. Each of these sections listed core doctrines such as "There is no God but Allah," "Satan and Evil," and "The Seal of the Prophets" for the Muslim witness; and "The Lord God is One," "Sin and Evil," and "Jesus the Messiah" for the Christian witness. Also, we laid ground rules for the discussion as those advocated in the preface, including, "Don't interpret

my faith for me!” (Kateregga and Shenk 2011, 19). This rule helped in creating an honest and mutually respectful group. We agreed that we would have a rotation between the Muslim and Christian witness sections by discussing a Muslim doctrine one month and a Christian one the next.

This group has consistently met since that time, and while we have experienced ups and downs in attendance of both Muslims and Christians, a core group of committed participants has emerged. Having a meal together before the discussion helped us to build trust and create genuine friendships. This was evidenced by a time when some new Muslim young men joined our group. One of the older Muslim men, speaking of the Christians, told the newcomers, “They are our brothers. You can ask them anything.” These factors gave the group stability and created an environment where the core doctrines of our respective faiths could be discussed, understood, and challenged.

As an example, when the topic was “The Lord God is One” from the Christian witness, a Muslim participant stated, “I didn’t know that you Christians believed in only one God. In my village in Turkey, I was told that Christians believed in three gods.” This was in the same session when we talked about God being Triune. Our Muslim friend said this after we unpacked that God is one in being and three in person, all the while emphasizing that the love shared between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit points not only to God’s love for his creation, but also to His self-sufficiency.<sup>1</sup>

In another example, while discussing the chapter “Adam and Hauwa” under the Muslim witness, it was noted that the author wrote,

It is the sincere Muslim witness that the first phase of life on earth did not begin in sin and rebellion against the Creator. Although Adam and Hauwa (Eve) were sent

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1 For further explanation see [\*How Does the Trinity Impact BMB Discipleship?\*](#) – Part 2 by Malik Ibrahim

from the Heavenly Garden down to earth after Satan's temptation, they realized their sin and repented. They sought forgiveness from God. They were given the necessary guidance. (Kateregga and Shenk 2011, 43)

Our Muslim friends understood this event as a mistake that Adam and Eve committed but was forgiven after they repented. The Christians pushed back that the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience was the world of suffering and death that we have today. Thus, what they did was certainly not a minor sin or mistake.

When the topic was "The Word of God" from the Christian witness, some of the Muslims in the group were applying their understanding of Qur'anic revelation to the Bible. One of the Muslim men who had been in the group from the beginning spoke up, "You guys are trying to understand this as Muslims. In Christianity, the revelation is Jesus."

A noteworthy discovery happened in our session on "The Seal of the Prophets," when we talked about Muhammad. A Christian mentioned some of the stories about Muhammad from his earliest biographer, Ibn Ishaq, such as light emanating from his mother's body when she was pregnant with him that allowed her to see "the castles of Bushra in Syria" (Guillaume 2004, 69). One of the Muslims shared that the historicity of such stories was secondary to whether it produced faith in Allah and his messenger. This emphasized the difference that many Muslims approach Islam through the lens of faith, whereas Christians approach the Bible as living history.

For the chapter on "Worship and Fellowship," we discussed baptism, Sunday worship, and the eucharist, which was met with a surprising amount of interest from our Muslim friends. They were so interested that we had to use two sessions to complete the discussion. Their interest in these Christian practices most likely stems from the emphasis that Islam places on religious duties, such as the five pillars of Islam—the heart of their faith. In explaining these practices, we were afforded the

opportunity to share how each practice testifies to the completed work of Christ on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

The group has not always kept the schedule of discussing a chapter every month. During special holidays, like Eid Al-Adha (the feast of the sacrifice) or Christmas, the group taught about the meaning of the holiday. At Easter, we showed the Jesus film in Turkish at our friends' request. Holidays have proved to be wonderful times to share from Scripture the true meaning of the celebrations and how each points to Christ.

We have also taken unscheduled breaks during personal or national tragedies to support each other. When a Christian in the group had a sudden death in the family, the Muslims attended the funeral to show their support. The next discussion was on Christian funerals. When the recent earthquakes happened in Turkey, the Christians spent time listening to what was on the hearts of their Muslim friends, and praying for them in the name of Jesus.

As we write this article, the group does not show any signs of slowing down and has even added a few new people. It has also spawned another, larger group, which began meeting in the fall of 2022 and rotates meeting at a local church and a Turkish cultural center in a different part of the city. Recently, a third discussion group for Muslim and Christian women started.

## Lessons Learned

In conducting these discussion groups for over a year and a half, we have learned from both our successes and mistakes. The following is a list of the most significant lessons learned:

- Include people from local churches in the surrounding area and train them well. In our discussion groups, we have done a decent job of including Christians but not always the best job of training them for the task. Training is key because it assists people in overcoming their hesitations and equips them in answering difficult questions.

- Seek out partners in the Muslim community where you are engaging in order to help with the planning. This makes the Muslims equal partners in the discussion and creates ownership. They are the primary recruiters and organizers for their own community. The mutuality in our groups is one of the reasons we have had longevity.
- The Muslim community that you are engaging must have interfaith dialogue as a value. Not all have this value. We have approached at least one other mosque about these discussions, and they said no. Also, the book discussion seems to work better with those who have a university education or higher. Coupled with this is a good command of English, although *A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue* is translated into other [languages](#).
- The format of the book makes dialogue simple, especially since it requires little preparation. However, as with any book, it is not perfect, and there are some issues in the Christian witness sections with which some may disagree. An example for us was the statement, “Christians and Muslims worship the same God” (Kateregga and Shenk 2011, 34). We find this statement to be too simplistic, and when we’ve explained that to our Muslim friends, they have agreed with us. Yet we find ourselves largely in agreement with Dr. Shenk, and the differences allowed us the opportunity to explain why we disagree. At the outset of the group, we stated that even though these are learned authors, we will not agree with everything they say, since they are fallible. The Muslims have likewise found a few issues where they disagree with Dr. Kateregga.
- A disappointment that our Muslim friends expressed with the book was the brief treatment of “The Prophets in History” from the Christian witness. Since the prophets are so central to Islamic belief, they were hoping for a more comprehensive explanation of the missions of the major prophets in the Bible. As a result, the group decided to do a few supplemental sessions on the prophets at the conclusion of the book discussion.
- Although the goal is distinctly not teaching, a short presentation may be necessary for certain topics. Many of our Muslim friends have

never read the Bible. Thus, when the subject was “The Word of God” from the Christian witness, we taught how the Bible was structured and how it all pointed to Jesus.

- Read from Scripture regularly in the discussion. Dr. Shenk does an excellent job using biblical references, but sometimes more is needed to flesh out the discussion. An example is when Muslims puzzle over why Muhammad is not prophesied in the Bible. Here is where Hebrews 1:1–2 can be introduced to show that the prophets culminate in God’s Son. We made a sheet of all relevant Scriptures for the discussion sessions in both English and in Turkish. We also included QR codes which link to the Scripture passages on the sheets, in case participants would like an electronic version. Online Bible translations may be found [here](#).
- Hospitality is a key component to the success of our groups. It can be easy to think of this as just as an add-on or something polite to do to get to the discussion. Yet times of enjoying a meal together and talking about each other’s lives have created a deep trust in the first group. The second group elected to forgo the meal, but there were always snacks and refreshments present, which we enjoyed before the discussion starts.
- Commitment to the group over the long haul is key. Our Muslim friends have told us that they do not really know what Christians believe. Most of what we share with them is new; it is the first time they have heard it. Thus, patience and commitment over a long period of time is needed as our Muslim friends discover the truths of the Gospel for the first time and begin to understand.

## Suggestions for Getting Started

If you are interested in starting a group using this book, here are a few suggestions:

- Gather a group of like-minded believers in your area to begin praying about reaching out to a local Muslim community to start a discussion

group. A good place to begin recruiting is among those in your congregation who have had cross-cultural ministry experience, such as returned or furloughing missionaries or those who have been on a short-term mission.<sup>2</sup>

- Choose a curriculum like [Journey to Jesus: Building Christ Centered Friendships with Muslims](#) to train Christians. Make this a prerequisite to join the discussion groups.
- Locate a Muslim community in your area and reach out to them. If you are unaware of any mosques or community centers, then visit [salatomatic.com](http://salatomatic.com) to find one near you. Meet with the community leaders and present the idea of starting a book discussion. If they are amenable to the idea, then schedule a date for a first meeting where you introduce the book and set the ground rules for discussion. You can set up a regular schedule to meet or set a time at the end of each meeting when you will meet again.

## Conclusion

We are very grateful for the friendships that we have formed in these discussion groups and have seen firsthand how the groups foster peace between Muslim and Christian communities. Yet, we resonate with what the authors wrote in the preface, “Hundreds of millions of Muslims and Christians are each other’s neighbors. The faithful in both communities believe they have been called by God to be witnesses, yet they seldom hear each other’s witness” (Kateregga and Shenk 2011, 18).

Indeed, it is our desire that our Muslim friends hear our clear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ and embrace him as Lord and Savior, so that we cannot only call them friends but also brothers who share our relationship with the Prince of Peace.

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2 See my (Mike’s) previous article for Seedbed on this topic, “Reaching UPGs in the United States through Church-Missionary Partnerships: A Proposal” (Oct 2021).

## Questions for Conversation

1. What is most surprising to you about this case study?
2. What aspects of this case study might be applicable in your context?
3. What are the obstacles to forming discussion groups with seekers in your context? What fruitful practices have emerged in your experience?

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