Peacebuilding in Communities: Experiences of a Muslim Female Social Worker in Cultivating Interfaith Awareness in Australia

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Abstract: In 2007, following a lengthy debate, the United Nations (UN) expanded the definition of "peacebuilding" to not only be comprehensive, but more crucially described as a long-term process involving different actors and institutions. The UN also encouraged the acceptance of many of the indigenous approaches and strategies in managing different types of conflicts. In the expanded definition, women became recognised as a key factor in peacebuilding. Their participation was encouraged by adopting the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), which was to be implemented through National Action Plan by signatories. This paper focuses on the community-level peacebuilding mechanism in multicultural societies to build social cohesion through interfaith dialogue, awareness and education in Australia. Using interview method to relate a Muslim woman's experience of building peace at the community level, the paper describes the works of Dr. Nora Amath and her organisation, Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity (AMARAH). The paper analyses the approaches and strategies used by AMARAH to build trust between Muslims and non-Muslims through interfaith dialogue towards building peace and tolerance among the communities in Brisbane, Australia. The remarkable success of community leaders like her in maintaining openness to communication, respect and tolerance won her the Australian Peace Woman of the Year Award, 2015.

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Introduction

"For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls," stated the late Kofi Annan, the then-Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), at the opening session of the UN Security Council Debate on Women, Peace and Security in New York on 24 October 2000.

In the post-9/11 era, religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have often experienced fear and have also become the target of distrust in multicultural societies. This schism between the majority and minority groups living in such societies has often resulted in tension between these two groups and has led to the polarisation of "us" versus "them" in these societies in general. In Australia, the focus of this dichotomy is largely over the rights of Muslim women to wear headscarves as well as issues of their exclusion from and lack of participation in mainstream Australian society. It would be natural to say that, overall, the Australian community interpret the cultural diversity among the Muslims as being permitted by Islam. This misinterpretation has led to the stereotyping of Muslims, especially Muslim women, by ordinary Australians. The Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity (AMARAH) is an organisation based in Brisbane, Queensland. Its founder, Dr. Nora Amath, is a sociologist whose research focuses on religion and inter-community relations in Australia. Dr. Nora is highly active among the Muslim community in Australia. She is also a consultant to the Australian government on Muslim affairs. She is one of the foremost Australian Muslim women who has taken up the difficult task of changing the negative attitudes of ordinary Australians toward their fellow Muslim Australians. The membership of AMARAH is not exclusively confined to Muslims. In reality, this is an interfaith organisation that strives to educate the ordinary public through effective dialogue between members of different communities in order to help construct and rebuild broken peace at the community level in Brisbane. This paper examines the concept of peace building and the approaches and strategies adopted by AMARAH to achieve it at the community level. It focuses on the idea of inclusive peace, which emphasises the role

of women in the long-term process of peace building. This study also aims to examine the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) through Australian Action Plan. This paper chronicles the various initiatives undertaken by AMARAH in the fields of dialogue, education and awareness campaigns at the grass roots level in order to mitigate conflict and achieve social cohesion in the peacebuilding process in Australian society.

According to the 2011 census, 476,000 Australians (representing 2.2 % of the population) stated Islam as their religion (Hassan, 2015). Even though 40% of these Muslims were born and brought up in the country, they also comprise the most heterogeneous community, having originated in 183 countries (Hassan, 2015). A report titled "Australian Muslims, A Demographic, Social, and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia 2015" revealed apparent existing income gap between Muslim Australians and the Australian population as a whole. Muslims tend to earn significantly less, both at the household and individual levels, although the majority of them have at least a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education (SSCE) or a Master's degree. They are also less likely to own or to purchase a house than the average Australian. A quarter of all Muslim children in Australia live in poverty, compared with 14% of all non-Muslim Australian children. Muslims have a higher unemployment rate than the general population and are less likely to be in the labour market. Elderly Muslims are significantly more likely to be disabled or in need of assistance with core activities than Australians in general. However, a survey of personal wellbeing and community connections reveals that Muslims feel similar levels of wellbeing as Australians in general, except that Muslims are less likely to feel safe (Hassan, 2015).

A survey jointly conducted in 2015 by the University of Western Sydney, Charles Sturt University and the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy on incidences of racism in Sydney concluded that Muslims in Australia experience racism three times higher than the national average (BBC, 2015). The survey found that 57% of respondents have experienced racism. In spite of the high levels of discrimination, most Muslims still identified themselves as Australian and felt a sense of belonging to the country. Perhaps, more importantly, 86% of the respondents believed that relations between Australian Muslims and non-Muslims were friendly. Another finding from the same survey

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indicated that the unemployment in Muslim respondents stood at 8.5%, which is much higher than Sydney's average of 3.7%. Additionally, 62% of those surveyed had experienced racism in the workplace or when seeking a job (BBC, 2015). George Brandis, the former Attorney-General for Australia, acknowledged the problem and warned,

> The worst thing we could do is to alienate the Muslim community. They are our fellow citizens and they are our necessary partners in combating this menace. Australia is the most successful multicultural society in the world and the Muslim community is a very important element of the Australian society. The fact that a very small minority of fanatics defy the teachings of the Islamic religion by engaging in terrorist crime, whether overseas or in Australia should not reflect upon the Muslim community (Hurst and Brandis, 2015).

Several Muslim and non-Muslim organisations alike, independent individual efforts and social corporate bodies such as ACET-Global have taken up the cause of building peace. Many have taken the task of coordinating the effort of the Australian government and different communities, including the Muslim community, to integrate yet retain their respective cultural and religious identities by organising workshops, programmes, and community services. Hence, maintaining a strong national identity requires sustaining and building peace to curb radicalisation and promote development within the Muslim community in a diverse Australia.

The Concept of Peacebuilding

Broadly speaking, the concept of peacebuilding refers to a set of values, relation skills, analytical frameworks and social processes to create sustainable, just and peaceful communities. The term is not new as the idea and practices are deeply rooted in all cultures and communities to prevent, reduce, transform and recover from different forms of tension and conflict in societies. Moving away from the traditional meaning of creating peace between two armed groups, the United Nations in 2007 expanded the definition of peacebuilding to encompass women's role and declared it as,

a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levelled for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the concerned based on national ownership and should comprise a carefully prioritised, sequenced, and relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives (Decision of the UN Secretary General, 2007).

In his seminal report entitled *An Agenda for Peace*, the then-UN Secretary General Boutros- Boutros Gali pointed out that peace can be viewed from two perspectives. First, it consists of a wide range of activities associated with capacity building, reconciliation and societal transformation. Second, it is understood as an umbrella concept that encompasses not only long-term transformation early efforts, but also peacemaking and peacekeeping. In this view, peacebuilding includes early warning and response efforts, prevention of violence, advocacy work, civilian and military intervention, humanitarian assistance, ceasefire agreements and the establishment of peace zones.

Peacebuilding emphasises the fact that it is a long-term process that occurs after a violent conflict has either diminished or come to a halt. Therefore, peacebuilding refers to the phase of the peace process that takes place after peacemaking and peacekeeping. Peacemaking is the diplomatic effort to end violence between the conflicting parties, move them towards nonviolent dialogue and eventually reach a peace agreement. Peacekeeping, on the other hand, is a third-party intervention (often, but not always done, by military forces) to assist parties in transitioning from violent conflict to peace by separating the fighting parties and keeping them apart. These peacekeeping operations not only provide security, but also facilitate other non-military initiatives (Maiese, 2003). Long-term peacebuilding techniques are designed to fill this gap and address the underlying substantive issues that brought about the conflict in the first place. Various transformation techniques aim to move parties away from confrontation and violence are used towards political and economic participation, peaceful relationships and social harmony (Doyle and Sambinis, 2016). This long-term perspective is crucial for the prevention of violence and promotion of peace in

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the future. Thinking about the future involves articulating desirable structural, systemic and relationship goals. These might include sustainable economic development, self-sufficiency, equitable social structures that meet human needs and building positive relationships (Lederach, 1997, p. 7).

The following are the three major dimensions of peacebuilding:

1. The Structural Dimension: This focuses on the social conditions that foster violent conflict. Many note that stable peace must be built on social, economic and political foundations that serve the needs of the populace (Haugerudbratten, 2016). The root causes of conflict are complex. In many cases, crises arise out of systemic roots. These root causes of conflicts can be over land distribution, which could be a result of environmental degradation, and unequal political representation. Hence, parties must analyse the causes of conflict before initiating social structural changes.

2. The Relational Dimension: This centres on reconciliation, forgiveness, trust building and future imagining. According to Lederach (1997), "it seeks to minimise poorly functioning communication and maximise mutual understanding" (p. 82). One of the essential requirements for the transformation of conflicts is effective communication and negotiation at both the elite and grassroots levels. Through both high- and community-level dialogues, parties can increase their awareness of their own role in the conflict and develop a more accurate perception of both their own and the other group's identity (Maiese, 2003). As each group shares its unique history, traditions, and culture, the parties may come to understand each other better. International exchange programmes and problem-solving workshops are two techniques that can help to change perceptions, build trust, open communication, and increase empathy.

3. The Personal Dimension: This centres on desired changes at the individual level. The main argument here is simply that if individuals are unable to undergo a process of healing, there would be broader social, political, and economic repercussions (Maiese, 2003). Peacebuilding requires attention to these psychological and emotional layers of the conflict, "The social fabric, which is mostly destroyed in a war must be repaired, and trauma must be dealt

with on the national, community, and individual levels" (van der Merwe and Vienings, 2001, p. 343). At the national level, parties can accomplish widespread personal healing through truth and reconciliation commissions that seek to uncover the truth and deal with perpetrators. At the community level, parties can pay tribute to the suffering of the past through various rituals or ceremonies or even the enactment of memorials to commemorate the pain and suffering that has been endured. Strong family units, which help to rebuild community structures and moral environments, are also crucial.

Peacebuilding Agents

Peacebuilding measures involve all levels of society, which require a wide variety of agents for effective implementation. These agents advance peacebuilding efforts by addressing functional and emotional dimensions in specified target areas, including civil society and legal institutions (Maiese, 2003). While external agents can facilitate and support peacebuilding, it must be ultimately driven by internal forces; it cannot be imposed from the outside. John Paul Lederach's model of hierarchical intervention levels explain the various levels at which peacebuilding efforts occur (Lederach, 1999, p. 37). Visualising peacebuilding as a pyramid provides a simple way to explain the people involved at each level: the top elite, the middle-range, and the grassroots. The top-level elite leadership comprises the key political, military, and religious leaders in the conflict. They are the primary representatives of their constituencies and are, therefore, highly visible. The middle-range leadership has leaders of mid-level NGOs (non-government organisations) and GOs (government organisations). They mostly function in leadership positions but are not necessarily connected with formal government or major opposition movements. The leadership at the grassroots level is involved in local communities and usually comprise members of indigenous NGOs carrying out relief projects, health officials, and refugee camp leaders. These grassroot leaders represent the masses as they personally witness and experience the daily struggles of finding food, water, shelter, and safety in violence-torn areas.

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Community as an Approach to Peacebuilding

Community-based approaches (CBA) seek to empower local community groups and institutions by giving the community direct control over investment decisions, project planning, execution and monitoring through a process that emphasises inclusive participation and management. The basic premise for demand-led approaches is that local communities are better suited to identify their shared needs and the actions necessary to meet them. Taking charge of these processes contributes to a sense of community ownership, which can contribute to the sustainability of interventions. Community-based approaches are relevant across many sectors. They can be applied to individual community-level projects or as a component of wider national programmes. They can be focused primarily on achieving development outcomes, such as service delivery and good governance. Community-based peacebuilding interventions often seek to: transform relationships; collaborate with a wide range of actors beyond the development community, including diplomatic actors and, in some cases, parties to the conflict; and link to broader peace strategies. A project that aims to achieve development outcomes, such as service delivery, could be seen as a peacebuilding project if it seeks to bring together groups across conflict divides to work together to fulfil the need for services. The following are some possible types of community-based approaches for peacebuilding:

1. Security Community-based Policing: This approach brings together the police, civil society and local communities to jointly take responsibility and develop solutions for local safety and security.

2. Socioeconomic Recovery Community-based Approaches: These approaches are designed to provide services (particularly health and education), infrastructure, natural resource and environmental management, livelihoods and employment generation.

3. Media, Communication and Civic Education Community: This approach includes radio stations and other forms of media that broadcast in multiple languages to promote dialogue and debate on key issues in society. Many also seek to promote reconciliatory processes and civic education. Community video units are another form of participatory communication whereby people present their own ideas on key issues.

4. Traditional Justice and Reconciliation: Traditional approaches to justice and reconciliation often focus on the psychosocial and spiritual dimensions of violent conflicts. They are also often inclusive, with the aim of reintegrating parties on both sides of the conflict into the community. This important component is considered as an integral step in healing community relationships.

5. Heritage and Cultural Preservation: Initiatives designed to preserve culture in disaster and conflict-affected contexts have included community forums in order to allow for the articulation of local needs, quick responses on the ground, and increased social capital. Communities have also been involved in inventorying their culture, which has contributed to preservation and a sense of national identity (Haider, 2009).

Types of Community-Level Institutions

At the core of community-based approaches to peacebuilding is the representative community institutions, which can serve as a forum for discussion, decision making and implementation of decisions. Such institutions act as intermediaries between communities and local and national authorities as well as between communities and external development agencies and implementing organisations. These are explained by Colletta and Cullen (2000) based on their peacebuilding experiences in Rwanda and Cambodia in the following ways:

1. Association: a group of people, frequently from different kin groups, who work together for a common purpose and have a visible identity mainly through sector associations that facilitate self-help, mutual help, solidarity, and cooperation. They usually have clearly delineated structures, roles, and rules within which group members operate.

2. Cooperative: an autonomous voluntary association of people that work together for mutual economic, social, or cultural benefits through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

3. Civic association: a type of political organisation whose official goal is to improve neighbourhoods through volunteer work by its members.

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4. Community-based Organisation (CBO): an organisation that should ideally be representative of the community.

5. Village Leadership: an official, traditional, and informal leader at the local level. Official leaders include the communal chief and the local government administration. Traditional leaders are usually individuals who are revered for their religious or spiritual attributes. Informal leaders enjoy influence over the community due to wealth, special skills or charisma. Official and traditional leaders play key roles in local political, social, religious, and welfare activities.

    The community-based approach to peacebuilding can be explained as a grassroots initiative. In this initiative, a variety of actors such as religious leaders, community leaders, and individuals are involved. They try to make a difference to community groups that are struggling for their voices to be heard. They would also try to uphold the rights of Muslim women living in a Muslim minority community. To ensure women's participation in peacebuilding, the UN Security Council adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and all signatory countries are expected to implement the articles and clauses therein through developing National Action Plans. Australia signed this Resolution in 2012 and is currently encouraging the participation of women under the country's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012-2018) and learning by regularly monitoring and giving awards annually on the progress made.

Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012-2018)

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) that was adopted in 2001 on women, peace and security is considered as a landmark resolution and a great victory for women activists in lobbying the Security Council and UN member states for its adoption and implementation. As of January 2016, 55 nations have a National Action Plan (UNHCR, 2016). However, on its 15th anniversary, many countries either remain non-signatory, are in process of implementing the Resolution or are still developing and executing their National

Action Plans. There is much that still needs to be done in getting women to be accepted and included in the process of peacebuilding.

The UNSCR 1325 Security Council Resolution 1325 (United Nations, 2016) reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. It also stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. The Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality established the Inter-Agency Taskforce on Women, Peace and Security, which is chaired by the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. In 2003, the Taskforce developed an Action Plan on the implementation of the resolution and contributed to the preparation of the Secretary-General's study. In 2009, the Australian government funded the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in order to understand the national consultations on the development of a National Action Plan. WILPF Australia collaborated with other Australian women's NGOs in working out the details of both a discussion paper and final report on developing an Australian National Action Plan (Government of Australia, 2016), and subsequently the government ratified the Resolution in 2012. The Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2012–2018 recognised the important role of non-government and civil society organisations as a wealth of expertise in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions. The Australian government affirms the need for a gender perspective into all stages of the process of peacebuilding through the following five main themes:

1. Prevention: It incorporates a gender perspective in conflict prevention activities and strategies and recognises the role of women in preventing conflict.

2. Participation: It recognises the important role that women already play in all aspects of peace and security. It calls for enhancing women's meaningful participation, both domestically and overseas, by striving for more equal representation of women and men in Australian peace and security institutions, and working with international partners to empower local women to be involved in formal peace and security processes in fragile, conflict and post-conflict settings in which Australia is operating.

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3. Protection: It aims to protect the human rights of women and girls by working with international partners to ensure their safety, physical and mental wellbeing, and economic security and equality, with special consideration for protecting women and girls from gender-based violence.

4. Relief and Recovery: It calls for ensuring that a gender perspective is incorporated in all relief and recovery efforts in order to support the specific needs and recognise the capacity of women and girls.

5. Normative: It attempts to raise awareness about and develop policy frameworks to progress the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It also attempts to integrate a gender perspective across government policies on peace and security (Government of Australia, 2016).

The Australian government plans to see through the following strategies in order to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda:

1. Integrate a gender perspective into Australia's policies on peace and security;

2. Embed the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the Australian government's approach to the human resource management of Australia Defence Force, Australian Federal Police and deployed personnel;

3. Support civil society organisations to promote equality and increase women's participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, conflict resolution and relief and recovery;

4. Promote Women, Peace and Security implementation internationally; and

5. Take a coordinated and holistic approach domestically and internationally to Women, Peace and Security (Government of Australia, 2016).

The Experience of Dr. Nora Amath

In 2015, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), an UN-affiliated organisation, named Dr. Nora Amath as the Peace Woman of the Year in recognition of her work towards building peace among different community members in Australia. She has championed the cause of creating awareness among ordinary Australians about Islam through her community work and activities of her organisation, the Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity (AMARAH). A graduate of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), she went on to win a scholarship to pursue a Master's degree at Bond University in Australia and later earned a PhD from Griffith University. She has authored several articles and a book entitled *The Phenomenology of Community Activism* (2015). Her journey towards community involvement began when she got married and settled with her family in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. She first became involved in community activities when members of her friendly neighbourhood in Brisbane would meet for small talks and casually agreed not to fence their homes so as to allow their children to play freely. The horrific 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and the widespread intense media coverage tested the small peace-loving Muslim community living in Brisbane. With so many terrorist reports in the media, questions then arose as to whether the residents of this small community in Brisbane should fence their homes to protect their children and homes and also if their trust and peace would be broken. Fortunately, the compassion, understanding and acceptance shared in the neighbourhood never led to putting up fences. This inspired Nora to deeply respect her neighbourhood, after which she began building trust, creating awareness and spreading love by speaking to ordinary people in her neighbourhood. The post-9/11 period created a tense atmosphere of wars in Muslim countries and drawing a line on tolerance in a debate on democratic values was not easy in a multicultural nation such as Australia.

Dr. Nora Amath spoke at the community level in order to present Islam in a positive light. The aim of these talks were to dissipate tension and hostility against Muslims living in Australia. This was certainly not an easy task, given the general context of anti-Islam sentiments sweeping through Australia soon after the 9/11 attacks. She faced numerous problems in convincing members of the Brisbane community

to begin an interfaith dialogue. She was about to give up her efforts when, by chance, a Brisbane City Council community development officer introduced her to Pastor Dave Andrew. Nora's efforts to build interfaith dialogue began simply with trying to establish a relationship on common ground so that respect and trust could be built among the members of the Brisbane community. This was necessary so that theologically challenging topics in Christianity and Islam, such as Jesus and *jihad*, could be discussed. It is well known that peacebuilding must be based on the empowerment of people to take a community development framework as the basis for their work. This was aimed, in Nora's own words,

> i) [for] creating a safe open space, ii) [for] peace-making with a culture of acceptance, which extends more than tolerance; iii) expresses respect for our common humanity, which enables people to engage one another authentically, emphatically, and appreciatively; iv) listening to one another talk about our faith; v) learning from each other to grow in our faith; not seeking to convert others to our religion, but all of us seeking to be converted to God, so that we may love God more wholeheartedly, and love our neighbours – not only our friends, but also strangers, even   enemies - as ourselves; vi) not judging each other and each other's traditions, but encouraging each other to judge our traditions in the light of our sacred call in the common word to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves (On-line interview with Nora Amath, 22 January, 2016).

One of the first interfaith events that Dr. Nora and AMARAH set up was a gathering for both Christians and Muslims to come together over an evening meal during the fasting month of Ramadan. It taught people from another tradition on what they understood about the role of prayer and fasting in their spiritual practice. For many, this method of listening and learning from one another was a radical departure from the usual way they engaged in interfaith dialogues in which they were expected to listen to a lecture and correct each other. Sometimes, these meetings ended disastrously. For example, when Nora and others went to an Anglican Church in Brisbane to discuss the topic titled "How Christians and Muslims Can Live In Peace," they were met with an angry mob who, with clenched fists wrapped in Australian national flags, called

for the Aussies to 'Resist Islam'. On that occasion, all they could do was to pray for grace to absorb the hostility of the demonstrators and animosity. At other times, their meetings could only be described as miraculous, such as when Nora went to a Pentecostal Church to talk on the same abovementioned topic. There, she and other members of AMARAH were greeted with a barrage of curious questions about Islam, which they must have answered to their satisfaction. The Church goers, especially the pastors, were so moved by Nora's arguments that once she finished her talk, the Senior Pastor walked down the aisle to the front of the church, knelt at Nora's feet and asked for her forgiveness for his prejudice.

At the community level, creating harmony and solidarity against threats and provocations become essential to restoring confidence among members of the community and this is necessary for long-term peacebuilding. It is usually the small incidents that, when left unattended, may grow into distrust, which leads to conflicts within the community. Such was the case involving three separate incidents of *hijab*-wearing women who were taunted, stalked and assaulted in Logan, Brisbane, in 2007. To create cohesion within the community and develop confidence to replace distrust, Christian pastors organised a Christian leaders' meeting at Kuraby Mosque, also known as Masjid Al Farooq, to stand publicly in solidarity with the Muslim community. A group of 20 Christian leaders from various denominations — Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Quakers, Waiters, Churches of Christ, Salvation Army, the Uniting Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church — came from around Logan and South East Queensland where the attacks on Muslims had occurred. The Muslim community were relieved and some even wept to hear Christian leaders say that day that: "We are all people of faith. An attack on any of us because of our religion is an attack on all of us. All of us have the right to feel safe on our streets and in our homes. All of us have the right to practice our faith freely without fear. We appeal to every member of our community: Stop this harassment, stop these attacks, and stop this climate of suspicion." This clear and simple message went viral on media, sending waves of content and peace.

Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity (AMARAH)

In 2006, Dr. Nora Amath set up the organisation, AMARAH, to formalise and expand on her activities. AMARAH supports and encourages the positive engagement of Muslims on issues of concern for the whole of humanity. It is not exclusively for Muslims and, hence, encourages and welcomes people of different faiths, no faith or orientation. The organisation focuses on issues of human rights, civil rights, social rights, environmental responsibility and Islamic awareness, though interfaith dialogue remains one of its strongest activities. Since AMARAH's establishment in 2006, the organisation has developed strong relations with other diverse religious groups and organisations based on values of compassion, hospitality and embracing differences. AMARAH has also been involved in a number of multi-faith cooperatives and participated in different levels of dialogue initiatives, including dialogue of life, dialogue of collaboration, dialogue of theological discussion, and the deeper dialogue of religious experience.

According to Dr. Nora, AMARAH's approach to interfaith dialogue is inspired by Chris Marshall who argues that "the best way to initiate change in the consciousness of mutually hostile groups towards peaceful coexistence is by the building one-to-one friendships among individuals of both sides" (On-Line interview with Dr. Nora Amath, 22 January, 2016). It is not about the clergy, leaders or scholars of different religions attempting to impress one another about their own faith. Rather, it is about people of faith and no faith simply sitting down with one another, truly listening to one another's stories and learning from one another. The organisation provides the setting for such an interaction by hosting an annual *iftar* (breaking of fast) during the month of Ramadan, inviting their society's homeless and less fortunate residents to St. Andrew's Anglican Church. It has become a sought-after event to meet and make new friendships from different faiths and backgrounds. AMARAH's programme of educating the public and creating awareness about Islam and other faiths has been exemplary. In 2010, AMARAH undertook an interfaith project aimed at a discussion on spirituality involving community issues and different traditions. It also worked on projects with other organisations to develop inclusive communities, such as the seven-month project titled "Spirituality, Conversations and Community-Building" with MISBAH, a Christian organisation. A total of 150

participants from diverse minority religions were invited for reflection and discussion and, later, a book was launched based on interfaith reflections and discussions. In all its activities, AMARAH attempts to create a safe space for people to come together, share their similarities, embrace diversity and work for the common good.

AMARAH believes that it is important for the organisation to take a lead in creating respect, understanding and harmonious co-existence with people of other religions and even with no religion in living in their area. They are busy developing an exciting project that focuses on the concept of being responsible for neighbours. The project aims to create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the different places of worship around the Kuraby, Eight Mile Plains, Rochedale and Underwood suburbs of Brisbane. These suburbs are rich in cultural and religious diversity. The project is in partnership with West End Refugee Collective, The Waiters' Union and MISBAH. It has generated a good deal of interest among others in the areas around Brisbane as well as the Oasis Centre, the Marion Mosque and the Pilgrim Church in Adelaide. AMARAH's Board members and volunteers are highly sought after by others in the community and are invited frequently to be speakers and panellists at workshops, seminars, conferences, church gatherings and so forth. Dr. Nora has been invited to speak at the Brisbane Writers Festival, the International Unity in Diversity Conference, the Australian and New Zealand Anabaptist Conference, the Young Christian Leadership Conference, the Sea of Change Conference, International Community Development Conference on Community, The International Inter-faith Asia-Pacific Summit: One Humanity, Many Faiths, and the Asia-Pacific Symposium on Women, Faith and a Culture of Peace.

Dr. Nora's dedication to Islam is comprehensive. She explains on the teachings of Islam and speaks about human rights. She also emphasises interfaith and inter-community dialogue. She has served on the boards and committees of various community organisations and institutions, including the Islamic College of Brisbane Advisory Committee, Muslim Community Reference Group (a Queensland State Government initiative), Democrats Youth Steering Committee, Ethnic Community Council of Queensland Youth Advisory Committee, Believing Women for a Culture of Peace, Al-Nisa' Youth Group Inc., the Multicultural Advisory Council to the Queensland Government and Sakina (a crisis accommodation shelter for women escaping domestic violence). In

recognition of her services to the community, she received the prestigious award of Australian Muslim Woman of the Year in 2006. In both 2007 and 2012, she was awarded the Australia Community Award. In 2015, she was recognised as the Peace Woman of the Year, awarded by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She also worked as an Electorate Officer for in local elections in Queensland. Having developed a reputation as a competent and dignified ambassador for Islam in Australia, she is frequently invited to present on various topics of Islam, multiculturalism, and human rights.

In conclusion, peacebuilding is unique to each community with its own sets of conflicts rooted in differences and issues related to culture, religion, ethnicity, history and progress. Solutions cannot be imposed externally; they need to be understood and tackled locally so they may provide valuable learning and practice experiences. Local community leaders and local organisations have better chances of success in sustaining, building and maintaining peace, as proven by AMARAH and Dr. Nora Amath along with Pastor Dave.

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