

## **Sixteen Years of Appreciative Conversation: The Building Bridges Seminar in Retrospect**

January 2002 saw the launch of several interfaith initiatives from the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Of these, the Building Bridges Seminar has sustained itself the most vigorously and has borne the most fruit. Founded out of the sense of urgency following the events of September 11, 2001, and now having met sixteen times, the seminar has been described from its inception as an exercise in “appreciative conversation” made possible by “listening with openness and mutual respect” and characterized by “courage, grace, imagination and sensitivity in addressing and retreating from painful issues.”<sup>1</sup> Presented below is a brief description of its history, methodology, and impact.<sup>2</sup>

### **History: The Lambeth Palace Years**

The first convening, which was exploratory in nature, was hosted by then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, in collaboration with Prime Minister Tony Blair and HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, and held at Lambeth Palace in January 2002. Some forty Christian and Muslim scholars and religious leaders from diverse geographic and theological locations met for two days of deep discussion that sought to broaden inter-

faith understanding and cooperation. To the question of whether such a gathering could be held annually and purposefully, the response was emphatically positive. And so planning began almost immediately.

For the next decade, the seminar was convened by Rowan Williams (Carey's successor), who made it a significant priority during his term as Archbishop of Canterbury (2003–12). As the following litany of locations and themes should make clear, this event provided an annual opportunity for a virtuous circle of engagement with complex topics, as it alternated between Muslim-majority and Christian-majority venues.

- 2003 – Doha, Qatar: *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'ān Together*. Williams called this meeting a “seedbed” for future dialogue.<sup>3</sup>
- 2004 – Georgetown University, Washington, DC: *Bearing the Word: Christian and Muslim perspectives on the nature of prophecy*.
- 2005 – Sarajevo: *Muslims, Christians, and the Common Good: Addressing the interplay of faith and national identity, governance and justice, the safeguarding of religious freedom, and global poverty and environmental issues*.
- 2006 – Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Christian and Muslim understandings of divine justice, political authority, and religious freedom.
- 2007 – National University, Singapore: Christian and Muslim understandings of human diversity, destiny, and relationship to the environment.
- 2008 – Villa Palazzola (an ancient monastery near Rome): *Communicating the Word: A study of revelation and its complexity, translation of scripture, and scripture that itself reflects on how scripture is to be interpreted*.
- 2009 – Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul: Christian and Muslim points of view (past and present) on the interface between science and religion.
- 2010 – Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Muslim and Christian perspectives on *Tradition and Modernity*. This session included discussing the changing patterns in religious authority and different conceptions of freedom.
- 2011 Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar (SFS-Q): *Prayer*: Scholarly concerns were paired with matters of personal faith, practice, and experience.
- 2012 – London and Canterbury, UK: *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny*: In a manner similar to the seminar on prayer, scholarly concerns and personal faith were brought together.

## History: Under the Stewardship of Georgetown University

In anticipation of retiring as Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams ensured the continuation of the Building Bridges Seminar by transitioning stewardship to Georgetown University. The university's president, John J. DeGioia, had been convinced of the seminar's significance and potential since 2003. In fact, he had already hosted it several times. Georgetown professors had participated in the dialogue under Williams' leadership, as had DeGioia himself. By 2010, the university's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs had assumed some of the seminar's administrative needs.

Thus, since 2013, the Building Bridges Seminar's invitations have come from the president of Georgetown University. Daniel Madigan, S.J., a Ruesch Family associate professor in the Department of Theology and a leading Christian scholar of Islam, served as convener and has worked closely with David Marshall, now the seminar's academic director.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, Lucinda Mosher became its assistant academic director, with responsibility for preparing the proceedings for publication. The Berkley Center maintains the Building Bridges Seminar website and provides support in other ways as well.

Convenings in Washington, DC, and Doha have taken advantage of the university's facilities and staff in a majority-Christian location (on the one hand) and a majority-Muslim milieu (on the other).

- 2103 – SFS-Q, Doha: *The Community of Believers*: Its nature and purpose, its unity and disunity, and matters of continuity and change.
- 2014 – DC campus and a northern Virginia conference center: *Sin, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*.
- 2015 – SFS-Q, Doha: *Human Action within Divine Creation*.
- 2016 – DC campus and a northern Virginia conference center: *Affirming the Unity of God: Monotheism and Its Complexities*.
- 2017 – DC campus and a northern Virginia conference center: *Power: Divine and Human*.

## Methodology

This accounts for the catalogue of topics taken on, but what about the method? The Building Bridges Seminar fits well within the category of "dialogue of theological exchange," defined by the Vatican in 1991 as a forum in which scholar-believer "specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each

other's spiritual values."<sup>5</sup> As Daniel Madigan explains, the seminar strives for relational theological exchange, which "recognizes that being in search of the one truth means also being in relation to those other seekers of the truth who do not believe as we do."<sup>6</sup>

The Building Bridges Seminar has always been a flexible enterprise, with planners striving to balance necessary experimentation with respect for earlier practice. Its "spiritual heart" is the dialogical reading of scriptures. At its core lie Muslims and Christians studying the Qur'an and Bible in an atmosphere that allows members of one religion-community to wrestle over their own scriptures' meaning in front of members of the other. However, the seminar differs from Scriptural Reasoning, to which it is sometimes compared, in its willingness to include as necessary the close study of doctrinal statements and excerpts from theological writings from every era.

Participation is by invitation only, in the interest of ensuring a well-constructed dialogue circle, with Muslims and Christians nearly equal in number and with the balance of other factors. Repeat participants provide stability and continuity, which enhances the frankness with which discussions proceed; but newcomers are incorporated easily. Everyone is expected to attend all sessions. To encourage preparation for discussion, they all receive in advance a booklet of the convening's pre-selected texts.

Pairs of lectures introduce the year's theme and subtopics. Sometimes these are public. However, at its core, the seminar entails the closed, collaborative study of pre-selected texts. While ample provision is made for plenary discussion and reflection, the pre-assignment of each participant to one of the four small break-out groups, crafted with Christian-Muslim parity, denominational variety, the presence of women, and the distribution of newcomers in mind, is crucial to the Building Bridges style. Groups remain intact for an entire convening. During the daily working sessions of these small groups, the seminar's primary activity occurs: dialogical close reading during which participants dig deeply into texts and theological concepts. These conversations are "off the record," which encourages challenging questions, genuine exchange, and collegial generosity.

Whereas the purpose of some bilateral dialogues is to formulate and issue a formal statement, this has never been the seminar's aim. Rather, the goal of the Building Bridges Seminar has as much to do with exploring difference as it does with finding common ground. Rowan Williams has characterized it as an exercise in improving the quality of Christian-Muslim disagreement.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Madigan calls it the offering of mutual theological hospitality.<sup>8</sup> The seminar provides "the freedom to allow others into our own theologizing space." Theologizing "is necessarily a complex and even messy process, with

historic disagreements and unresolved issues within our own traditions. We do not normally allow outsiders to see this.” During these seminars, “we invite the other into our questioning, not only into our answers.”<sup>9</sup>

## Impact

It has often been asserted that the Building Bridges Seminar has resonance beyond its annual convenings. In what ways has its impact been felt? The Building Bridges Seminar provides a model and method for a dialogical close reading of texts that has indeed been adapted and employed by others. Its proceedings – published with Church House Publishing in the early years, and since 2005 with Georgetown University Press – are a resource for higher and continuing education. These volumes have been reviewed by scholarly journals and have found their way into undergraduate- and graduate-school syllabi. Other items useful in studying Christian-Muslim comparative theology are available via the seminary’s online archives (<http://buildingbridges.georgetown.edu>). The seminar has been the topic of at least one Master’s thesis and a growing list of scholarly essays.<sup>10</sup>

However, the seminar’s value begins with the impact it has on the participants themselves for, as Muslims and Christians alike have attested, it has made them more attuned to interfaith matters. Participants have reported that Building Bridges has changed how they teach and how they “do theology,” and also influenced their research and writing. In turn, this has impacted their classrooms, congregations, and networks.

## Where Next?

Even after sixteen years, the possibilities for Christian-Muslim scripture-driven dialogical study are far from exhausted. As of this writing, plans for a seventeenth Building Bridges Seminar are underway. According to one regular participant, the care with which the seminar has been led since its inception means that “by now no issue or topic is a taboo for this forum.” Therefore, without doubt, whatever the theme chosen, it will be framed creatively to ensure that the seminar remains an enterprise that encourages scholar-believers “to know each other’s hearts.”<sup>11</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Gillian Stamp, “‘And They Returned by Another Route,’” in *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, ed. Michael Ipgrave (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), 112.

2. Earlier forms of the information and reflections presented here include my many public lectures since March 2002 about Anglican Communion interfaith initiatives; my essay reflecting on the Building Bridges Seminar's first five years, published online at <http://repository.berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/Mosher-Building-Bridges-Article.pdf>; my essay "A Decade of Appreciative Conversation: The Building Bridges Seminar under Rowan Williams," in *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny*, ed. David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014); and my essay, "Getting to Know One Another's Hearts: The Progress, Method, and Potential of the Building Bridges Seminar," in *The Character of Christian-Muslim Encounter: Essays in Honour of David Thomas*, ed. Douglas Pratt, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
3. Rowan Williams, opening remarks, *Building Bridges*, 2012.
4. David Marshall, a Christian-Muslim relations scholar, became chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2000, and thus was involved in planning the initial and subsequent seminars. Although he left the Archbishop's office in 2005, he has remained one of Building Bridges' primary planners and has attended almost every annual seminar. In addition, he has been an affiliate research fellow of Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs since 2012.
5. The Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue, Dialogue, and Proclamation, 1991, accessed at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html) on 20 February, 2014, article 42.
6. Daniel Madigan, email exchange with the author, 2017.
7. See Rowan Williams, "Analysing Atheism: Unbelief and the World of Faiths," in *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective*, ed. Michael Ippgrave (New York: Church Publishing, 2005), 1-13.
8. See Daniel Madigan, "Mutual Theological Hospitality: Doing Theology in the Presence of the 'Other,'" in *Muslim & Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "A Common Word"*, ed. Waleed El-Ansary and David K. Linnan (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), 57-66.
9. Correspondence with the author, 2017.
10. Douglas Pratt, "From Edinburgh to Georgetown: Anglican Interfaith Bridge-Building," *The Anglican Theological Review* 96, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 15-37. Mosher, "Getting to Know One Another's Hearts."
11. Rowan Williams's description of the Building Bridges Seminar outcome. See his Preface to *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), xxii.

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