

Grassroots
...a different point of view



Why we do what we do:

Developing Theological Rationale

2014-17

Charity Registration Number: 1163427

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Who We Are

GRASSROOTS is an ecumenical Christian programme of community engagement. In dialogue with the churches and other faith communities, GRASSROOTS strives to uncover a sharp edge of engagement with contemporary issues of community cohesion, peace and reconciliation, and injustice and inequality in Luton's diverse context. This vision is strengthened by working with and through our partner agencies - Churches Together in Luton, the Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches, Luton Council of Faiths and Ghar se Ghar (Hindi/Urdu words for 'Home to Home') - a Women's Co-operative.

Our Vision

GRASSROOTS seeks to engage in God's mission by discerning the Spirit and living the Word of God in the plural world of today. Motivated and nourished by the spirit of justice and peace, GRASSROOTS, alongside communities and individuals of all faiths and backgrounds, is:

- working for common good and human flourishing
- building renewed trust in place of broken relationships
- fostering the development of new skills by providing resources for learning
- enabling all to explore and express their spirituality and values with confidence and creativity

Our Objectives

- To accompany the churches in their mission and ministry
- To work for strengthening relations amongst different faiths
- To empower communities to articulate their own needs and solutions
- To serve the community through supporting community initiatives and advancing educational development
- To engage with the building of a civil society in Luton and its vicinity

Current Work and Priorities

- Community Cohesion and Inter Faith Relations (Gave birth to Luton Council of Faiths)
- Spirituality of Justice (Gave birth to the "Making Luton a Fairtrade Town" Campaign)
- Working with Women across Faiths and Cultures (In partnership with Ghar se Ghar [Hindi/Urdu words meaning Home to Home])
- Church Related Community Work (In partnership with Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches)

Vision

that is global and inclusive - bringing new insights and perspectives

Hope

that the forces of good can triumph over the forces of evil

Faith

that the Spirit is at work transforming the world

Respect

for every person, and their ability to give and receive

Freedom

for individuals and communities to develop their full potential

Solidarity

in our commitment to share in the struggle for justice

An Introduction to GRASSROOTS' Theological Reflection Process (2014-15)

Aim

To reflect upon GRASSROOTS' central theological rationale of its community involvement and development, and to re-evaluate the purpose of GRASSROOTS through an exploration of the theological and practical implications.

Context

Ecumenical, multi-faith, secular, increasing levels of poverty, deprivation, unemployment, crime, drugs, extremist ideologies (religious and political), fundamentalist attitudes preventing mutual engagement, lack of awareness of inter-cultural dynamics and lack of willingness to be aware.

GRASSROOTS, in partnership with various churches and organisations in Luton, is actively seeking to respond to the challenge of “being a Christian presence” in our hugely diverse local context, perceived by many on-lookers as intimidating. In some senses Luton has become a ‘test case’ for how different groups can live together in a town, and how diverse communities can respond constructively when tensions and grievances do arise.

3 Key Questions to Prompt Reflection

- 1) What are the theological underpinnings, justifications or implications of GRASSROOTS working within the Christian ecumenical and multi- faith (plural) context of Luton/UK?
- 2) How and why GRASSROOTS, being a Christian programme, should or could be, inclusive of those of other faiths or of no faith affiliation?
- 3) What makes GRASSROOTS ‘Christian’ and ‘Christian on the margins’?

Process

Facilitated by Revd Dr John Campbell, Minister of High Cross United Reformed Church, Tottenham, and Ministry Student Zaidie Orr, we engaged in a process of Messy Theology seeking to explore our identity by identifying and working with our own stories, bumping these stories into Bible stories to find any significant connections or tensions, before finally sharing a story rich conversation about us and God.

Fourteen participants, in groups of two and three, were asked to share a story which they thought captured something significant or defining about GRASSROOTS and its work. The stories were based on real life experiences in Luton (see pages 17-26); no other parameters were set as to what constituted a ‘story’. Each group chose their ‘top story’ which was then assigned to a fresh group, whose task was to connect the story with three Bible stories, either in harmony or in tension with it. Again, a top biblical story was selected.

Finally, there was discussion of the story pairs, seeking theological insights about how and why GRASSROOTS works. The process enabled exploration of how the personal stories are shaped to perform particular functions, how the team's interpretation of biblical stories supports GRASSROOTS' commitments, and how numerous narrative streams are interwoven to evolve a theology of working with people across different faiths and cultures.

Two poems were also produced by 'poet in residence', Lucy Berry. These poems can be seen as narrative in their own right (see pages 12-16).

Outcome

It became apparent that it would be not be possible to write one piece of theological reflection representing the complex discussions or doing justice to the numerous threads which contribute to the ever-evolving tapestry of GRASSROOTS work. It was agreed, therefore, that we write ten theological principles which underpin the work of GRASSROOTS.



Ten Theological Principles

1) Created in God's Image – Concern for Humankind:

Human beings have a distinctive relationship with God. The first chapter of Genesis relates the Judaeo Christian traditional story of God's blessing and commissioning of humankind in the context of that relationship. We, being shaped and formed by this relationship, are therefore obliged to grow further into a network of relationships with God, God's creation (ecology and the environment), and our fellow human beings. Through all its projects, GRASSROOTS does exactly that, constantly awakening into the consciousness of all people being created in God's image, including those often excluded by reason of their gender, ethnicity, ability or sexual orientation.

2) That they all may be One – Concern for Ecumenism:

Ecumenism has often meant different Christian denominations working together, locally, nationally and internationally. Some churches, struggling to survive, hold on to each other, whilst others do not wish to participate. However, the word 'oikoumene', from which 'ecumenism' is derived, means 'the whole inhabited earth'. Therefore, while GRASSROOTS aspires and works for a visible Christian unity, it also strives for the renewal of the whole human community in Luton, which is relevant and needed for the growing multicultural context of contemporary Britain.

3) Diversity of Religious Traditions, Unity of Purpose – Concern for Inter Faith:

Hans Kung, the famous Catholic theologian says, "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions." GRASSROOTS, while acknowledging the need for dialogue, also emphasises the need to move from dialogue to action, for improving the quality of life locally as well as globally and standing up together in solidarity with one another, whenever needed.

4) The Dignity of Difference – Fruit Salad, not Fruit Smoothie:

Difference need not breed conflict alone, it can also be used to enrich our understanding. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12:1, desires no uniformity in terms of people's gifts and skills. Likewise, GRASSROOTS, in inter faith engagement work, emphasises unity within diversity rather than uniformity. GRASSROOTS acknowledges and affirms each individual and group in their own right rather than seeking to mix all into one new religion or unified religious/spiritual ideology which compromises our distinct and unique differences. Hence, the analogy of a fruit salad rather than a fruit smoothie!

Peace will
always grow.



Spread
peace

1916
1926
1936
1946
1956
1966
1976
1986
1996
2006

5) Spirituality that does Justice – Concern for Discerning the Spirit:

Micah 6:8 explores what the Lord requires of us all - to act justly, to love tenderly and walk humbly with your God. Acknowledging that this is easier said than done, GRASSROOTS strives to develop the experiences of justice spirituality by building compassion and solidarity with and amongst people of different faith traditions in Luton and beyond, thus translating spirituality of justice into a spirituality that does justice. Discernment (daily/weekly/monthly/yearly) is a core element of GRASSROOTS' work. It seeks to deepen the understanding of justice spirituality, enabling people to reflect on their role as religious/spiritual people in the face of local and global injustices.

6) Social Transformation – Concern for Community Development:

Community development is a process in which community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. Community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural) often evolves from this type of collective action being taken at a grassroots level. GRASSROOTS, therefore, believes in being incarnational - being alongside people and creating opportunities for people to speak for themselves. It seeks to act, at a grassroots level, as an agent for change, service developer and capacity builder – reflecting in the light of the gospel and continuing to encourage collective action. Through its participatory processes and reflective practices, GRASSROOTS chooses to work in the background, so that the communities can build confidence and skills and take ownership and leadership of all they do.

7) Journeying – Concern for being pilgrim rather than for the destination:

Catholic theologian Richard Rohr draws our attention to the first verse of Mathew chapter 24, which says, "Jesus left the Temple." Insignificant as it may sound, this verse makes an important point. If one could imagine, 'the Temple' as the personification of all our theologies and liturgies, Jesus leaves it behind. Yet, the disciples draw Jesus' attention to it. They listen, but do not hear, when Jesus says that it is all going to fall apart; "Not one stone here will be left on another. Stop putting your trust in it. Stop putting all your focus on the temple buildings. Look instead at the people and their needs – the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." That was Jesus' big proclamation. At GRASSROOTS, therefore, our emphasis is not on becoming an 'institutional centre', rather on being a 'pilgrim' on our journeys, soaring like eagles, exploring and learning from different worldviews and trying to generate consensus to work for the well-being of all humankind.

8) Mission through Partnership & Networking - Missio Dei:

Historically, in the predominantly Christian west, mission has largely been understood as promoting salvation through Jesus Christ alone. However, there are many different approaches to Christian mission, evangelism being only one. In 1984



CAPTAIN SHERIDAN

He gave His life
FOR HIS COUNTRY

1914

1918

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the Anglican Communion adopted the Five Marks of Mission: preaching, teaching, baptising and nurturing, serving those in need, honouring all creation and transforming unjust structures. GRASSROOTS focuses on the fifth of these. It is now accepted that inter faith dialogue is also an integral aspect of mission (Papal Encyclical 1990 'Redemptoris Missio'). True dialogue requires openness and does not compromise commitment. It is an essential part of God's mission in which GRASSROOTS actively participates, as it works in partnership with people of all faiths and none seeking wholeness and reconciliation between all people.

GRASSROOTS recognises that channels of God's grace are not limited to Christian churches alone, but are found in people of all faiths in Luton.

9) Vulnerability as opposed to Power and Growth:

The great Roman Empire had the largest and most efficient army in the world. It was inventor of that peculiar form of execution - one they saved for dangerous political terrorists, persons who were threats to the empire itself, charismatic leaders who attracted followers - crucifixion; the cross. It was under such a regime that Jesus grew. Yet Jesus repeatedly rejected power for vulnerability. Throughout his lifetime Jesus made a series of choices, at the end of which stood the cross. His disregard for power is seen clearly in numerous parables recorded in the Gospels: Don't be preoccupied with who is sitting at the head of the table; the last shall be first and the first shall be last; the meek will inherit the earth. These insights inform GRASSROOTS' own disregard of the quest for institutional power, whilst serving as a crucial reminder always to give attention to those on the margins.

10) Freedom & Flexibility but with a sense of accountability:

Voluntary sector work has traditionally meant people working together for the common good. In recent years, however, institutionalism and professionalism have increasingly crept in. GRASSROOTS has made a conscious choice to be different; we choose to be a presence and a companion, remaining organic and emergent rather than operating like a business. We seek to be a wrestling entity, affirming the importance of being on the margins, even whilst engaging with and influencing the mainstream; (we are) committed to 'being on the journey', remaining open to God's unexpected ways of reaching us. Thus, GRASSROOTS cherishes its freedom, its non-prescriptiveness, its flexibility, its response-ability, but with a sense of accountability to operate within an agreed framework rather than taking absolute freedom for granted.

Conclusion

In our reflections, we recognised and cherished how GRASSROOTS takes into account every individual's 'whole-self', seeking for the gifts, skills, talents and potential of each person to flourish. This is reflected in the wide range of projects, programmes and activities GRASSROOTS leads in partnership and networking with others such as Ghar se Ghar and Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF).

GRASSROOTS' way of working is difficult to summarise and hard for people and institutions to understand; its true value does not lie in the organisational or corporate framework within which all staff and volunteers must fit, rather it is the organisational willingness to value each individual's uniqueness which makes GRASSROOTS so very precious for us all. Nothing can be boxed or categorised finitely. Instead, numerous threads continue to contribute to the ever-evolving tapestry of GRASSROOTS work.



The GRASSROOTS Team feel greatly affirmed by the words of the following poem by Joy Mead (member of IONA Community - www.iona.org.uk). Perhaps, for once, GRASSROOTS' work may actually be summed up in just a few words.

Today...

I'll try to make peace
in practice and poetry.
I'll choose words and images carefully,
avoiding all that proscribes, restricts,
oppresses, destroys, humiliates,
patronises, demonizes or enslaves.

I'll try to use words
that open minds,
widen moral vision
and motivate the will,
words that show an alternative
to famine, war, racism,
torture and violence,
unjust structures, systems
and relationships.

I may talk about sex
or about violence
but I will resist the media urge
to conflate the two.

I'll not abandon reason
but I'll ask questions
that challenge the relentless
course of logic.

I'll value imagination, story
and poetry that show
there is another way.

I'll fight no fights, not even 'good' ones
I'll not stand up for Jesus
or be a soldier of anything
not even the cross;
nor wave any flaming swords;
I'll address no-one as Lord
or mighty conqueror
or put on any sort of armour
not even the armour of Christ
or the dressings of power.
I'll not march for Jesus
or anyone else.
I'll parade no nationalistic flags,
nor bang any triumphalist drums.
I'll be a pilgrim
and try to walk lightly
for the sake of the earth,
and the diversity of life
it sustains.

I'll recognise the fragility
and finite nature of the earth
our only home and resist creatively
all that denies fullness of life by:
playing, laughing and dancing
planting trees and sowing seeds
making and sharing bread
... and ice cream!
Lighting candles,
being alive to song and symbol.



I'll look more
and listen more.
I'll live more moments
as given moments.
I'll make this day,
and every day,
a holy day;

I shall make mistakes
and admit to them humbly.

Today I'll dream -
of all sorts of people together,
loving, sharing, playing, dancing
celebrating difference.

And at the end of the day
when things are much the same
I'll continue to hope.
I'll remember that the personal
is always political; that inner peace
cannot be separated from wholeness
and health in community;
that small acts of beauty
by small groups of people
still carry the potential
to change the world.

Joy Mead





“Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

Psalm 46:10

Trusting Tellings with reference to Psalm 137

You come with your song; I come with mine.
Out of your song, I hear who you are.
Out of my song, you may hear who I am –
or, you may not.

*“In the by-ways of Luton, I crouched down and wept.
Agh, I wept as I recalled my beginnings.
There on a street-lamp I hanged my heart.
My neighbours, my inquisitors wanted joyful songs;
but how can I sing my god’s songs
in this estranging place?”*

To tell you the story, to sing you the song of my landscape,
the tune of the meaning I march to,
to tell that to your ears,
is to risk that you have no ears for hearing.

*“From your mouth to God’s ears” say the Rabbis,
“From your mouth to God’s ears!”*

But to trust you with my mouth-song
is to put my song in your hands.
So, I beg you:
Do not change my song.
Do not translate it into your language.
Do not plant me into a tune I do not sing,
from a parentage not of my birth.

Listen:
I ask you to hold my story as an infant,
to retell it with the same gentleness
like you might sing a lullaby;
and bring it up in places where it might,
someday,
belong.

Do not smash my song against your pavement;
and I will not smash yours.
Let us be the midwives to each other’s wailing songs,
new-born, in every trusting telling.

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Warm Behaviour

Men often make the structures which people live within;
the temples and instructions to shelter us from sin.
They settle the foundations and institute each rule;
the human regulations for Faith and Work and School.
Those necessary systems for how we should behave
stretch forwards, and reach backwards, for priest, prince, boss and slave.

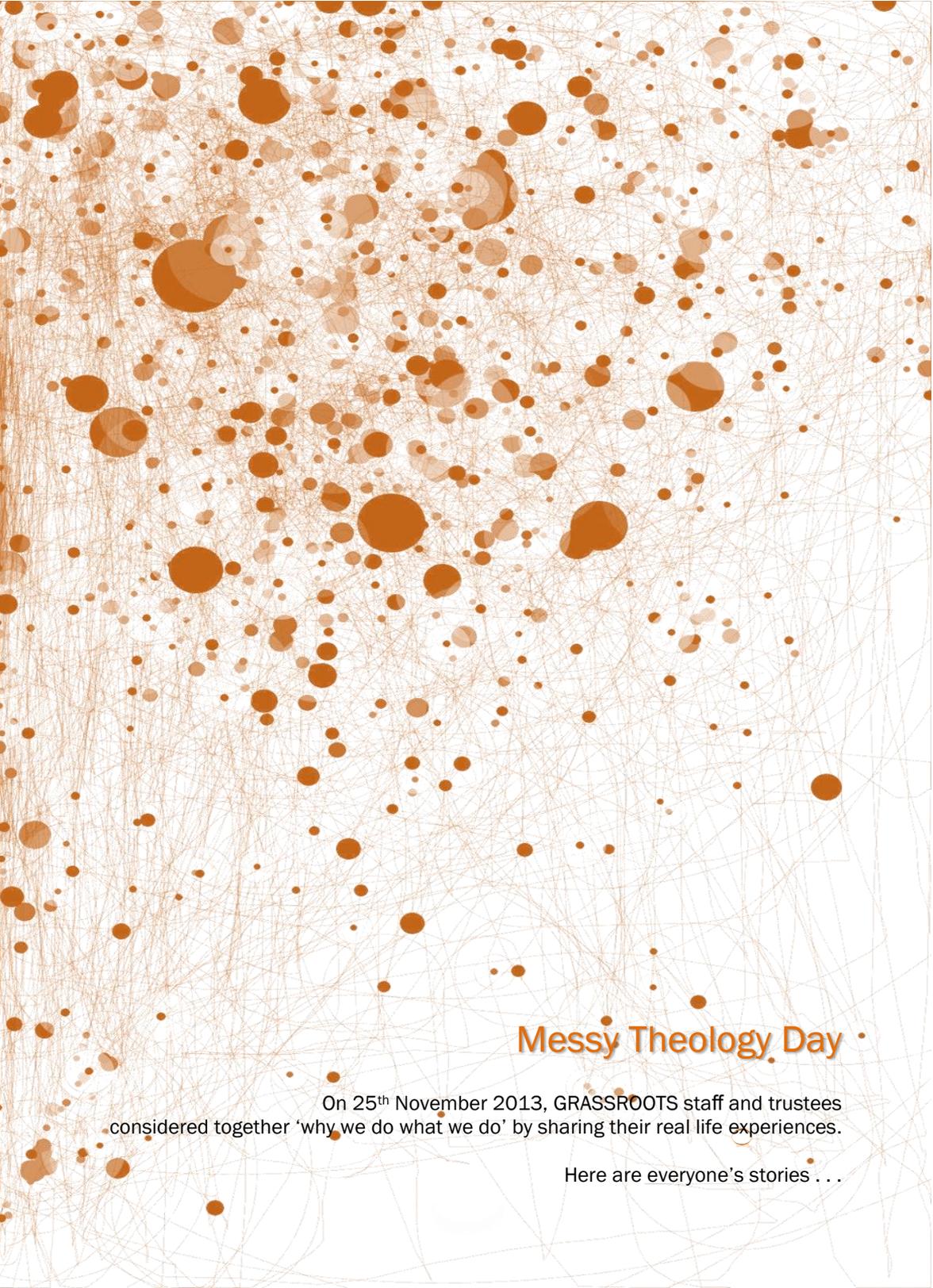
Though, if you need a forum to visit and stay warm,
(with no appointed leader and no specific form),
the people who will greet you, agenda-less and free,
are women. And they'll meet you around a cup of tea.

And yet, the warm behaviour
of mother, daughter, wife
is echoed by the saviour who offers up His life;
He needs no formal structure.
He simply moves to greet
in story, blood and fracture,
so everyone can meet.

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'Trusting Tellings' and 'Warm Behaviour' written on 25th November 2013 at GRASSROOTS' Messy Theology Reflection Day by Lucy Berry 'Poet in Residence' (this poem is able to be used at any time by GRASSROOTS or in other contexts on application to LB)



Messy Theology Day

On 25th November 2013, GRASSROOTS staff and trustees considered together 'why we do what we do' by sharing their real life experiences.

Here are everyone's stories . . .

The Drip, Drip of Transformation

Karen Campbell

During the time of the Pakistan floods I was sitting in a church, chatting to a group of the members. The subject of the floods came up and one of my companions said “I wouldn’t send any money to the appeals; they’d just use our own money to bomb us!”

I was taken aback. How could anyone see the sheer misery and devastation of the floods unfolding on our television screens and respond with such a view? Perhaps even more shocking for me was to hear this sentiment being expressed in church, by a church member, amongst other church members. These were people I knew... ‘good Christian people!’... yet no-one felt inclined to challenge what had been said or to express an alternative view.

So I challenged them. “If you’re worried about how your money will be used, you can give through a reputable charity; how about Christian Aid?” The response came back that no money would be sent, because ‘Those people hate us!’

“Those people?” “Yes. Muslims!”

My companions generally seemed to be in agreement... or at least, no-one dissented.

I doubted whether my companions really held the views they were expressing. I could hear the voice of press hysteria and negative stereotypes. This was about 9/11, the London Bombings, the way many people had subsequently allowed irresponsible press coverage to do their thinking or speaking for them.

I tried again. “In any group, in any faith – including Christianity! – there will be extremists. They are always the minority. We shouldn’t allow the minority to colour our view of a whole people!”

And again. “When you get up in the morning, isn’t your time taken up with simply getting on with life? Do you really imagine that when Muslims get up they have time or energy to invest in consciously hating you?”

The reply came back, “That’s true. But what I can tell you is this... they hate us!”

I realised it was not helpful to be a lone voice challenging these views directly. My companions trusted me enough to speak openly in my presence. I didn’t want them to clam-up, didn’t want to alienate myself from them. Although it saddened my heart, it was good that I’d heard what they had to say. These were good people, but my companions couldn’t see past ‘them and us’. Even in the face of human tragedy, they couldn’t see ‘people’; only a faceless, nameless ‘they’... Muslims!... and ‘they hated us’.

Here in Luton the different faith/cultural communities seem to live largely parallel lives; our paths have no reason to cross. 'I see you, but you're strange to me. I don't know who you are, what you are saying, what you are doing.' There is no personal experience to counter the opinions served up by the media. It seemed to me that what was needed was 'encounter' - some way of bringing people together, a way of enabling people to learn each other's names, an opportunity to see 'the other' first and foremost as a human being. So I came up with the idea of the Cooking and Befriending Project - gathering people across faiths and cultures to cook, eat, talk and learn together... and ultimately to build friendships. Cunningly, I invited the people from 'that' conversation to take part.

The project spanned several weeks. Each week a different group took the lead in cooking and sharing aspects of their faith, culture and backgrounds. They thoroughly enjoyed offering hospitality to each other. Through conversations, people learned about their similarities and differences; they learned about food and ingredients; they heard about each other's families and careers. They talked and laughed and looked forward to meeting up the next time. Over time, attitudes were challenged and started to change. It wasn't anything radical or political, no 'community leaders', no fanfares... just ordinary individuals with a growing realisation that 'these people' are ok, and I can call them my friends.

'Ade' is a case in point. A Christian woman in her 70s, Ade is of African descent. She says of herself, "I am snobby. I keep myself to myself!" (I would describe Ade as an introvert.) Since taking part in the project, Ade says "I have met lots of different people. We bump into each other on the bus. We say hello. We stand and we talk." Despite living in Luton for many years, Ade confesses that before the project, "I didn't really talk to Asians." She says now, "I've tasted Indian food for the first time . . . and I like it!"

Trusted by Tom

Ann Hyde

We had a weekly activity group at the Community Cafe in which many different activities were experienced over a long period of time.

Tom was a member of the group but it took him a long time to get involved. He had a long term disability as a result of an accident in his youth and his ability to walk was severely restricted.

Tom used to hang around with a group of alcoholics and drug addicts who sat outside on a bench outside the cafe. He often used to come into the cafe to use the toilet and although he was invited to join in whatever activity was going on, he always declined.

However, one day when we were doing poetry he seemed interested and sat down on a table by the door by himself. In the space of half an hour he produced a wonderful rhyming poem. It turned out that he loved writing poetry. That was the start of his involvement with the group. He would come along every week and sit by himself and write. Gradually he started to integrate into the group and after a few weeks he was the life and soul of things and would demand that his poems were read out loud and even read at wider community gatherings.

Tom's poems were always on the "lovey-dovey" side and one day I suggested that he went away and wrote something related to the social problems that existed on the estate. After all, there were plenty of them to choose from!

He came back the following week with a poem called 'The Bench' which was about the group that he hung out with outside the cafe. In the poem he spoke positively about them, referring to them as gentlemen.

Coincidentally, the council removed the bench the same week to try and rid the shopping centre of the group. The women in the cafe then gave them some cafe chairs to sit outside on!

Tom was a lovely man and sadly died a few years later from cancer. He sent a message to me from his bed in the hospice. When I went to see him he asked me to type up all the poems that he had written and put them into a booklet....to be sold to help his wife with the cost of his funeral.

With the help of my friend and colleague Marie, we managed to get it done... just in the nick of time.

Thinking about all of this in Grassroots office the other day, I noticed that there is still one of Tom's poems stuck up on the notice board in front of my desk. Over a period of time it had gained a lot of post it notes stuck all over it. I've taken them away to reveal that shining light. Tom's light also shines as an acrostic poem engraved on one of the milestones that surrounds Icknield ward. It is on the A6 just before Enderby Close turn off. (This was another project by the estate.) Writing an acrostic poem based on the letters spelling LUTON was encouraged by a visit to one of the cafe's poetry sessions by John Hegley, the well-known performing poet who went to Cardinal Newman School in Luton.

Walking with the Rabbi

David Jonathan (Johny)

In October 2009, it was brought to the attention of Luton Council of Faiths, in its bi-monthly meeting, that our local Jewish Rabbi was being subjected to repeated verbal and physical assaults by a group of Asian (Muslim) lads as he walked with his family on each Sabbath between Synagogue and his house.

Grassroots organised at its office an emergency meeting of key faith and community leaders and the Police. It was unanimously agreed that LCoF circulates a letter to Luton's Faith Communities and Spiritual Organisations, Luton Council of Mosques and Churches Together in Luton to:

- Inform what was happening
- Assure that Police are investigating and monitoring the incidents
- Generate a consensus that such irresponsible actions are unacceptable. This should not happen to anyone, let alone to a religious leader of any community
- Encourage and reinforce an attitude of tolerance and peaceful co-existence across all faiths and cultures in the town

The poem by Pastor Martin Niemoeller who was imprisoned at Dachau for seven years by the Nazis was used to provide a poignant reminder to all, of the importance of community solidarity and tolerance:

"In Germany, the Nazis first came for the communists. I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for the trade unionists, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

They came for the Catholics; I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me, and by that time, there was no one left to speak for me."

Bedfordshire Police was approached to provide escort to the Rabbi, when possible. Members of different faith communities, inspired by their own religious teachings and principles of tolerance, were requested to consider the following 3 action points:

- Join in expressing solidarity to Rabbi, his family and wider Jewish community
- Make known the plight of the Rabbi and his family, encourage support and offer prayers
- Volunteer to walk with the Rabbi for one or two Saturday(s)

A rota of volunteers was drawn for a group of people to accompany Rabbi on Saturdays until he had moved his house, closer to Synagogue. In pursuing the above action points, at GRASSROOTS we had believed it to be a mark of our religious obligation to stand up against hatred and to be good neighbours. So, for some eighteen months GRASSROOTS gathered diverse religious leaders to walk with him.

We visited!

Sheila Marsden

In the late 1970's, after having my two young sons, I was asked to go back to teaching English language to a small group of Muslim children who had recently come to Luton from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The head teacher encouraged me to "be like a mum" to them, so I took them to, many places – out shopping, on the 'bus and around the local area. This could be done quite freely then without much red tape!

On one occasion we spent time looking at the houses on a street near the school, learning vocabulary and seeing how the houses were numbered. One of the girls took my hand and propelled me to her home, knocked on the door and her mum came. We were warmly invited inside. She made us tea and sent her son to the corner shop to buy a cream sponge cake for our little group. She also sent for a neighbour who spoke some English to help with the sharing of conversation.

When I left I was embraced – we had hugs all round. What a welcome! I was truly in a hospitable space. Through such simple encounters we can share our stories and learn much about and from each other.

Thousands of candles and no shots fired

Gordon Slater

In Leipzig 1989, Christians gathered for prayer in the face of armed security forces. Each week they witnessed outside the main church carrying candles, even when there was rumours of a security crackdown and the risk of death or arrest. At the point of greatest tension nobody in the security forces was ordered to fire. (Not a personal story, but heard directly from someone directly involved).

The story of Hassan and Carla's friendship

Ruth Tetlow

The Faith Guiding course is a 12 week evening course, designed to enable people of all faiths to show groups of visitors, mainly school children, around their places of worship, with real sensitivity and an ability to interpret their own faith to others. In 2012 two of those who enrolled on the course were Hassan, a retired Pakistani Muslim bank manager from Nairobi, and Carla, a young Jewish business woman in her twenties. The chances of them ever meeting in any other circumstances were slim. Something about their shared sense of humour meant that they became friends during the course, which involved building confidence and presentation skills during

classroom sessions and visits to places of worship of different faiths. It emerged that Carla was preparing to get married soon after the course ended, so one evening when she wasn't looking, Hassan proposed to the rest of his course mates that they give her a wedding gift. They readily agreed and all contributed. Hassan bought a gift and, on the day of the practical exam, as Carla finished her presentation in the synagogue, he stepped forward and presented her with her wedding present from the group. The group included 5 other Muslims, some Christians and a Buddhist – how many Jewish brides have received wedding gifts from 6 Muslims?! Carla was bowled over with delight. Subsequently, the Near Neighbours project arranged for photographs to be taken of the two of them in the synagogue, for an exhibition of 'Friendships across Faiths', which is still touring.

From 2005 till now

Phil Horner

Following the London bombings, our local council of churches arranged a multi-faith evening on neutral territory to share concern for the situation, and support the local targeted mosque. It was a 'one-off'. Coming to Luton it is encouraging to see Grassroots building those relationships not just in a crisis moment.

One World Week

Karen Drayton

During the previous year's One World Week I invited a Bengali Hindu friend to the local Dunstable One World Week Event. As I hadn't been there before myself, having just moved to the area, I thought it would be like my previous experience of OWW - interfaith, interdenominational - but this I discovered was very Christian, with Christian prayers throughout the evening. I felt embarrassed to have invited her. But, she joined in the Lord's Prayer word- perfectly at the end, as, she explained later, her father, a Hindu priest, had taught her to appreciate and learn something from every religion, while being a good Hindu. It taught me the graciousness of other religions, and the frequent poverty of ours. Also I learned not to assume things about other people. They came back as a group the following year, singing some Hindi devotional songs, Bollywood songs and entering fully into the spirit of the lovely evening of crossing cultural and religious barriers.

My Grassroots Story

David Lawson

My journey into interfaith work and engagement began many years ago in Glasgow, where I was hugely inspired and encouraged by a pioneering woman in the field of interfaith relations by the name of Stella Reekie. She helped me to open my heart and mind to the possibility of being a committed, practising Christian, and at the same time being open to engaging with people of other faiths and cultures. In time I discovered that such encounter enriched as well as challenged my faith. Becoming involved in the work of Grassroots several years ago reignited for me this vision of a multi-faith, multi-cultural society, which I can celebrate as well as being a committed Christian. It is a real privilege to be part of Grassroots and to work alongside and support Christians who, not only enthusiastically share this vision of a multi-faith world, but also work tirelessly to make it happen in unexpected, imaginative and surprising ways.

How Grassroots has entered into my life

Sr Maire Hayes

After 22 years living and working in the shanty-towns of Santiago, Chile, I was sent to Luton! I was very disorientated, my language skills were of no use in this Asian population – this was not the country I had left. Where would I find myself? Was my life as a committed Religious, imbued with Liberation Theology, options for the Poor and working for Human Rights, over?

I had always worked in a Catholic context, ecumenism even was weak in me, and here I was presented with a reality, multi-faith, that I had not experienced. With Grassroots programme, I found new possibilities, a way to adapt the skills I had, an exposure to communities thirsting for God, as I do, but not in “my way”. All of which brought out in me creativity and openness. The companionship, humour and solidarity of working in a team of different denominations and faiths opened the way of deepening my faith and encountering “the other” – remaining faithful while celebrating difference, I developed networks of unthought-of links, enabling harmony in difference.

When my congregation opted to close our house in Luton, I asked to stay and live here to continue my mission, so a new way of living community live in a Muslim area was experienced by our Province.

From feeling that I was almost a “returned empty” so to speak, I have been privileged to set out on a new journey of living the Gospel for me and for others.

Bullet Points

Keith Brown

- Crisis – responding
- Community cohesion
- Taking risks
- Living a Christ-like journey – crossing boundaries – opening doors
- Signs of solidarity with struggling communities

A Grassroots telephone conversation

Sarah Alexander

A telephone conversation at the Grassroots office with a person who was very angry, fearful and hateful of a particular group of people reminded me how important Grassroots' work of encouraging and facilitating encounters with others is. As this man was basically giving a 20-minute monologue on how evil these people are, I was immediately able to think of specific, real people I had met that challenged his views. Grassroots' work had helped me become more human (in a good way) as I could not remain detached and unaffected by what this man was saying and the emotion, fear, and sense of powerlessness and hopelessness with which he was sharing. In the same way, I must remember that this "angry person" with whom I spoke is also a human, with his own story and set of beliefs and experiences.

Peace-making Children

Maureen Borbone

During the war my mother used to make us get up and pray for the pilot who was killed when his plane crashed near us. This happened frequently, but one morning when we went into school we were told it was a German plane so we should not have prayed for the enemy. My mother said we have to pray for any child of God – someone's son, husband, father. This taught me to value everyone and try to work for peace, so I was impressed by Grassroots being such a fantastic group working with people of all faiths and nationalities. I recall especially January '09 when there was unrest in the Gaza Strip and a meeting was called to pray for peace. There were representatives of all denominations and faiths and each said a prayer or read a poem about peace. One little Christian girl had designed a card to be signed by everyone and sent to the Prime Minister. It was so impressive that everyone in their own way was praying for peace and creating a wonderful atmosphere and recognising the value of every individual.

Peace will
always grow.



If
bees
can
spread
pollen, we
humans
can
spread
peace.



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