

Planting the Seeds of Respect Between the Faiths

➤ **By Julie Berman, Janice Harris-Lord, Carole Sturm**
(Jewish) (Christian) (Muslim)

Daughters of Abraham is a group formed by women of three faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—they have come together to enhance understanding of the spiritual and cultural similarities and differences between the groups. Ideas and values to promote peaceful relationships and good welfare among the faiths are shared at monthly meetings with the goal of building bridges and deepening relationships.

The origin of this very successful and active Interfaith Group in the Dallas / Fort Worth area was planted thousands of miles away by a seed of respect between faiths in a very unlikely spot - a battlefield.

Steve Lord, a U.S. Marine artillery officer in Desert Storm, ordered his platoon to shell an Iraqi tank platoon and then moved forward to assess the situation. The Iraqi soldiers were either dead, dying or surrendering.

The Iraqi platoon commander approached Steve and, through a Kuwaiti interpreter, requested permission to pray over his dead and dying men. He revealed that one of the dead men's brother and father had already been killed, and he was agonizing over how to break the news to this man's mother that her only remaining son was now dead too.

Steve lowered his gun, granted the request, and listened to the Muslim prayer chanted in Arabic. Though he could not understand the language, he says it was the most beautiful prayer he had ever heard. At that moment, Steve said, it became absolutely clear to him that men and women who could pray together ought not to be killing one another. He resolved to spend the rest of his life working for peace.

Out of that experience, Steve's father, Dr. Richard Lord, the pastor of Rush Creek Christian Church in Arlington, Texas, initiated a study group with Congregation Beth Shalom, a Reform Jewish community. Desiring to include Muslims also, he and Rabbi Keith Stern initiated a six-week dialogue, with two meetings at the Christian church, two at the Synagogue, and two at the Mosque in Fort Worth. Speakers addressed the distinctiveness of each faith followed by lively small group discussions. For many, the sessions offered their first opportunity to enter the house of worship of other faiths.

In the fall of 2002, following the tragedy of 9/11, Janice Harris-Lord (step-mother of Steve) began facilitating a similar group, but of women only. Calling themselves the "Daughters of Abraham," they focus primarily on similarities among the faiths, and secondarily on distinctions. The women have shared

personally what their faith means to them, their understanding of themselves as descendants of Abraham and as "People of the Book." They have shared how the different faiths celebrate various holidays (including the exchange of wonderful recipes).

During the fall of 2004, the meeting during the month of Ramadan was hosted at the Masjid Al-Hedayah. As a show of solidarity and support, most of the Christian and Jewish members joined the Muslims in the fast for that day.

During one very poignant meeting, a Jewish woman, a Holocaust survivor, shared her horrific experiences between 1944 and 1946 with the group. Following that testament, several members of the group participated in the observance "Holocaust memorial day" with their Jewish sisters.

Most of the meetings, however, involve minimal "presentation" and more personal sharing about a given topic. Many women in the group have found that by sharing the details of their beliefs, it actually has strengthened their faith. This year, the Muslim women shared personal experiences about wearing hijab, the reasons for it, and some of the hardships that they often face when wearing hijab in the United States and other countries. Through this sharing, one of the Muslimas (who was not currently wear-



ing hijab), realized the great importance of it, and made the decision to cover! Masha'Allah!

The group has continued to grow in number, but more importantly, it has grown beyond mutual education and tolerance to genuine respect and love for each other. They have prayed together, shared meals together, visited each other's homes, and learned that knowledge, tolerance and mutual respect is the key to a peaceful coexistence.

The Daughters of Abraham believe in and actively work towards peaceful and non-violent solutions to problems. Several of the women help victims of crime through police departments, a battered women's shelter, and a rape crisis center. They have served meals together at a local Homeless Shelter as a model of peaceful care-giving. From April 10 - 17 this year, they will honor crime victim services programs in the area by listing their names and phone numbers in ads in the Ft. Worth Star-Telegram. At the end of this observance week, they will conduct a press conference to give awards to agencies in the

Dallas/Ft. Worth area that provide unique services to victims of bias-related crimes.

The Daughters of Abraham believe that if groups like theirs can celebrate commonalities and address differences with respectful dialogue, there is hope for peace in the world and peace in the home. This goal may never be achieved, but in the meantime, they invite you to join them in promoting peace and understanding between peoples. For information on forming a Daughters of Abraham group in your area, please go to their website at www.DaughtersOfAbraham.org.

Shared Prayer: Our God, the soul that you have implanted within us is pure. You created and formed it, breathed it into us, and sustain it each and every day. So long as we have life, we will be grateful to you, Adonai/God/Allah, our God and God of our mother and father, Creator of all life, Sustainer of every human spirit. Blessed are you, Adonai/God/Allah, in whose hands are the souls of all life, and the spirits of all flesh. ■

What has your involvement in Daughters of Abraham meant to you?

It is like a window to a peaceful world. - Sharmina Zaman, Muslim

It has been the pearl of my life. The people are very wonderful, and the purpose of our meeting is important to me. - Etta Schmerler, Jewish

This has been one of the best experiences of my life - learning at each meeting has broadened my horizons, and opened my mind - that is the key! - Regina Holtman, Christian

I expected to come to the group and learn things, but I did not expect to feel the spirit of God/ Adonai/ Allah so deeply and communally. - Kristin Burrow, Christian

How similar we really are, especially the Muslim and the Jewish faiths. - Julie Berman, Jewish

Our common monotheism and longing for peace are far greater than our differences. And, I must admit that more than once, it has been said with a smile, "You know, if women were ruling the world, there wouldn't be nearly so much bloodshed." - Janice Harris-Lord, Christian