

**Christians, Muslims, and the Reign of God:  
An Experiment in Interfaith Dialogue and Partnership**

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**Abstract**

Evangelical pastors often feel conflicted about interfaith dialogue due to perceived conflict between sharing the gospel and loving one's neighbor. This paper will argue that The New Testament narrative of the Reign of God, interpreted from the perspective of critical pedagogy, provides a theologically grounded model for evangelical engagement in interfaith dialogue and cooperation. It also suggests a model for what such dialogue might look like in the context of one Vineyard church's journey of relationship with a neighboring Islamic Center.

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## **Introduction**

At a recent lunch with an imam from the Islamic community in my city, I was asked why it is that evangelical pastors seem to be hesitant about friendship with their Muslim neighbors. I replied that I thought the hesitation had to do with a perceived conflict between the Christian imperative to share the good news about Jesus and the knowledge that friendship primarily characterized by trying to convince the other to change religions is not viable. The hesitant pastor sees three possibilities: remain eternally silent about what matters most, go head to head in a confrontation that has no hope of becoming a friendship, or pretend at authentic friendship while secretly harboring an ulterior motive. Given three untenable options, the well-meaning evangelical pastor simply does not know how to engage.

The reason I think this of course is that I am the evangelical pastor of my own imagination, beginning a journey of boundary crossing, truth telling, and what Anne-Streaty Wimberly calls “listening as radical openness.”<sup>1</sup> I have become convinced that the problem doesn’t lie either with the compulsion to share the gospel or with the conviction that friendship should be characterized by integrity and mutuality but with my own imagination for what it looks like to share the good news about Jesus with the religious other. This paper follows my journey and the journey of my congregation as we are learning to build relationships with the growing Muslim community in our city. And, it describes a proposed experiment in how Christian and Muslim women from our two worship communities might participate together with Jesus in the coming Reign of God by developing friendships with one another and partnering together in blessing our community.

The first section of the paper will describe the history and present state of the relationship between my church, fictitiously referred to as City Vineyard Church or CVC, and a neighboring mosque, similarly referred to as Neighborhood Islamic Center or NIC. The second section will put the biblical narrative of the reign of God into conversation with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Jurgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action, making an argument for cooperative criticality as a form of what is known in Christian charismatic circles as spiritual warfare. The third section of the paper will describe a proposed series of women’s gatherings designed to further the cooperative relationship between our two communities based on a dialogical action and reflection approach, drawing on the work of Thomas Groome and Peter Block.

## **A Brief History of an Unlikely Friendship**

The friendly relationship between CVC and NIC began in 2012 when, as part of an annual sermon series based on write in questions from the congregation, a member of CVC asked, “Do Muslims, Christians and Jews believe in the same god?” I didn’t feel equipped to speak on what Muslims and Jews in our community believe. So, after attending an intro to Islam class at NIC where I got to know one of the imams, I told our congregation I thought it would be best to let others speak for themselves and invited both the imam and a rabbi from a local synagogue to address the question together with me. I gave each of the three of

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Streaty Wimberly, “Listening in Faith Communities,” *International Review Of Mission* 87, no. 346 (July 1, 1998): 331-341. Accessed online at <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.naomi.fuller.edu:2048/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=eb2be281-001f-4dd6-b996-b3f7d855249c%40sessionmgr114&vid=1&hid=107.>

us ten minutes to answer two questions, “Who is God?” and “Do you think we believe in the same god?”

The Sunday leading up to the event, I taught on the Good Samaritan, and, sharing about the imam’s extensive justice work in our city, I encouraged the church to come with open minds about what we could learn from the religious other. The next Sunday, our two services were bursting at the seams. None of the church members had met an imam before, and everyone was curious to see what would happen. There is not room in this paper to describe each of our responses to the questions posed or to discuss my continuing friendship with the rabbi. What was most striking about the morning, however, was that the imam came together with his wife and children and that the church community received them with such warmth and openness that, in his closing comments, the imam suggested as a follow up event a CVC vs. NIC soccer game.

Since then, we’ve played four soccer games. As the imam is fond of pointing out, they won the two men’s games, and we won the two women’s games. We’ve also held several other joint events. One of the first was a Thanksgiving celebration with messages from both the Koran and the New Testament, followed by youth from both communities going downtown together to give out sandwiches and socks to people living on the streets. Another was a tutoring day at a local elementary school. Immigrant families from NIC were having trouble helping their kids with math homework, and CVC has a number of math teachers. Teaching kids and parents about methods used in our school district was a great way for members of CVC to serve our new friends. Members of our community occasionally attend prayers and special events at the mosque, and the imam and his family occasionally visit our church on Sundays.

We’ve been frequently asked where this relationship is heading and what we are trying to do. Our response has typically been that we don’t know but are simply following what we feel has been the leading of the Spirit. At the same time, there is a desire on the part of the leadership of both communities to deepen our relationship and grow in intentionality. A recurring theme in conversations between leaders at CVC and at NIC has been our desire to find ongoing ways to partner together in blessing our city.

NIC has hosted a series of informal women’s gatherings for the purpose of inter-faith relationship building over the last year. It presently lacks direction and energy, but the organizer, the wife of the imam, is enthusiastic about growing it. She and I are now in conversation about what might be the possible future of the group. This group presents itself as a potentially ideal venue for intentionally pressing deeper into intentional relationship. As a casual gathering aimed at lay people, it is an opportunity to invite regular members of our communities into deeper engagement in a setting conducive to small group dialogue.

Craig Van Gelder points out that it is frequently the role of the Spirit to draw the church into disruptive, cross-cultural engagement.<sup>2</sup> Understanding later emerges in the context of action in the community. Van Gelder proposes that the church that finds itself in this situation needs to ask two questions, “What is God doing?” and “What does God want to do?”<sup>3</sup> Addressing the first of these questions involves identifying the Spirit’s leadership in an unplanned situation that stirs up new questions. Addressing the second question involves

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 157.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gelder, 59-60.

making sense of God's reconciling purposes in context and planning strategic participation.<sup>4</sup> This paper is an attempt to engage Van Gelder's second question. As it has become clear to us that the Spirit is at work building this relationship and pushing us to engage the growing Islamic community around us, I hope through this paper to make theological sense of how partnership and respectful dialogue with our Muslim neighbors constitutes faithful participation in the coming Reign of God. And, I will propose a future direction for the existing interfaith women's group hosted by NIC that might facilitate such partnership and enable us to bless our city together.

### Critical Thought and the Reign of God

As a member of the Association of Vineyard Churches, my theological perspective revolves primarily around the biblical narrative of the reign of God. In this section, I will briefly explain this narrative as it is commonly understood in Vineyard circles. Then, I will discuss ideas from Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas on systems of oppression and learning methods designed to promote freedom. Finally, I will explain how these ideas apply not just to overcoming political and economic oppression but also to overcoming oppression on a holistic, spiritual level and in particular to engaging Christian-Muslim dialogue.

#### *A Scriptural View of Liberating the Mind*

The Bible describes the rightful ruler of the universe as the Trinitarian God of love existing in eternal unbroken community. Human beings are created to be like God in love, imitating God in communion with God and with each other (Gen 1:27, John 17:21, 1 John 4:16). Our great enemy, whose rule on earth is opposed to God's, often referred to in the New Testament as the slanderer, works to break this communion through the blinding of our minds and the propagation of lies. Under the deceptive rule of our oppressor, human beings have become slaves to sin, fear, and death. Failing to recognize our true oppressor, we falsely imagine other human beings to be our enemies and imitate our oppressor in hatred and violence (John 8:44, Rom. 6:16, 8:15, 2 Cor. 4:4, Eph. 6:12, Titus 3:3).

The decisive liberation of humankind came in Jesus' defeat of the reign of sin and death on the cross (Col. 1:20). Despite this victory, freedom is an ongoing process we continue to work out in our lives (Phil. 2:12). Too often, even as we attempt to engage freedom, our approach still reflects a slave mentality. This plays out in dogmatic adherence to rigid ways of thinking and acting that, as illustrated by the Pharisees described in the New Testament, lead to self-righteousness, accusation, and ultimately more hate and more violence (Matt. 12:1-14, Gal. 4:9-10). Interreligious fear and conflict are perfect examples of this dynamic.

A central task in the ongoing struggle for human freedom is liberating our minds to imagine new realities and new behaviors. As Paul says in Rom. 12:2, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." (NLT) Paulo Freire offers valuable insight into the attitude required to pursue liberation of the mind.

#### *Paulo Freire and Rehumanization Through Action and Reflection*

According to Paulo Freire, dehumanization through injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence is humanity's central problem.<sup>5</sup> All too often, the oppressed,

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<sup>4</sup> Van Gelder, 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2006), 43-44.

instead of recognizing liberation of both themselves and their oppressors as their central task, accept the situation imposed on them by their oppressors as divine will. Rather than uniting against oppression, they imitate their oppressors in how they treat each other.<sup>6</sup> The solution to this, Freire says, is for the oppressed to find out their oppressor and engage in collective struggle through action and reflection, recreating both their knowledge and their reality in order to become more fully human.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising that this echoes the biblical description of humankind's problem with satanic oppression.

Freire also describes helpful and unhelpful ways of engaging the problem. What he calls the sectarian stance is non-communicative, arrogant, unreflective, and unloving. The sectarian sees in terms of absolutes and attempts to force personal choices on others. Sectarians cannot liberate others because they are not free themselves. Freire opposes this to the radical stance, which he describes as critical, loving, humble, and communicative. Of the radical, Freire says, "He is convinced he is right, but respects another man's prerogative to judge himself correct. He tries to convince and convert, not to crush his opponent."<sup>8</sup> Freire goes on to propose educational techniques based on dialogue that challenge false perceptions of reality and lead to transforming action.<sup>9</sup>

Taking Freire's message to heart, if we wish to be agents of freedom, we can't go in believing we have all the answers and attempting to impose our understanding on others. Take for example the Pharisees of the New Testament who demanded adherence to the law without reflecting on the heart behind it or the nuances of specific situations (Matt. 12:1-12). They were too blind themselves to be of any use to others (Luke 6:39). This doesn't mean we shouldn't be passionately convinced we are right. But, it does mean we need to approach the convictions of others with respectful dialogue, listening with an attitude of love, reflecting critically on what we believe, and responding to reflection with corresponding action. We now turn to Jürgen Habermas for further thoughts on what this kind of dialogue might look like.

#### *Jürgen Habermas and Communication for Freedom*

Habermas describes how our lifeworld, which he describes as the intuitively present web of presuppositions that underlies all our communication, has been invaded by capitalism so that our communication is systematically distorted.<sup>10</sup> Instead of discussing and debating important issues requiring action, we allow mass media to control our loyalties.<sup>11</sup> According to Habermas, humankind must reclaim reason in order to reclaim freedom.<sup>12</sup> This is reminiscent once again of biblical teaching regarding the role of our deceiver in disseminating lies that maintain an oppressive rule of fear and death.

To reclaim reason, we must reclaim communication. Habermas describes communicative action, or communication done in good faith, as communication in which each person does their best to communicate truthfully and clearly and to understand the other.<sup>13</sup> Such good faith communication should lead to the ability to decide together on a

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<sup>6</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy*, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy*, 65-66.

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 228, 238, 243.

<sup>11</sup> Brookfield, 232.

<sup>12</sup> Brookfield, 228.

<sup>13</sup> Brookfield, 262.

course of action and ultimately to the creation of a just society.<sup>14</sup> As paraphrased by Stephen D. Brookfield, successful democratic process “depends on everyone contributing, on everyone having the fullest possible knowledge of different perspectives, and on everyone being ready to give up their position if a better argument is presented to them.”<sup>15</sup>

There is a sense in which CVC’s engagement with our Muslim neighbors has reflected elements these values from the beginning. This was seen, for example, in my initial instinct to let others speak for themselves and the congregation’s enthusiastic response to the opportunity to hear from the imam. But, this isn’t something we could have articulated when we began. It is only now that we find ourselves led by the Spirit into relationship with our Muslim neighbors that we are compelled to attempt to explain theologically what we believe God is doing and from there to imagine our next steps. How does all of this come together to undergird a vision for developing partnership between Christian and Muslim neighbors?

#### *Synthesis: Cooperative Criticality as Spiritual Resistance*

The invasion of our lifeworld by money and power is palpably real in the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the world. For example, the western world’s insatiable hunger for oil plays out in the relationship between the US and many of the middle-eastern nations Islamic immigrants to the US have come from. The propaganda Americans are bombarded with in our media seeks to form our basic understanding of reality in ways that support US economic power. It is difficult to extricate ourselves from the intuitive understanding of reality that is our lifeworld enough to even imagine how our perceptions of people and relationships might be different without this. From a theological perspective, this is symptomatic of a larger problem, the colonization of the lifeworld by the satanic hegemony of sin and death, of which the seductive power of money is a principal agent (Matt. 6:24).

A biblical perspective teaches us that to be fully human is to be like our loving, relational God in active communion with God and with people. Using the vocabulary of Freire and Habermas, William Stringfellow points out that the work of the demonic forces known as principalities is dehumanization and the destruction of the mind. He then goes on to describe ways in which these powers distort our communication.<sup>16</sup> He also points out in words that echo Freire, “Human beings do not readily recognize their victim status in relation to the principalities.”<sup>17</sup> Just as the oppressed seek to become like their human oppressors, oppressed humanity seeks to become like its ultimate oppressor, mistakenly perceiving others among the oppressed, our fellow human beings, to be our enemies.

Muslims and Christians both live in a world saturated with propaganda designed to alienate us from each other in the interest of promoting not merely capitalism, but the broader satanic agenda of sin, fear, and death. It is, for example, in the destructive interest of our oppressor to spread the fear of Islamic terrorism through our nation and to use that fear to build hate and mistrust. To combat this, we need to identify our true enemy, recognize how we are being manipulated, and organize against our oppression cooperatively. This is referred to in Vineyard and other charismatic circles as spiritual warfare, a term that usually

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<sup>14</sup> Brookfield, 256.

<sup>15</sup> Brookfield, 265-266.

<sup>16</sup> William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians & Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1973), 97, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Stringfellow, 86.

implies engagement through prayer.<sup>18</sup> I propose that we can learn from Freire and Habermas valuable lessons in engaging spiritual warfare through dialogue.

Followers of Jesus, who by definition have signed up to be revolutionaries, must learn to act as radicals and not as sectarians. If we unlovingly and unreflectively attempt to enforce our own culturally embedded understanding of Christianity on others, we can liberate no one because we ourselves have not become free. If we are to be liberators of humanity along with Christ, we must be engaged in critical communication that is open to correction even in our unabashed belief that we are correct in our understanding of the gospel. Too often, Christians have been socialized to believe we must be sectarians, to believe that if we engage the other with openness to changing our minds if we are demonstrated to be wrong, we discredit the gospel by our lack of faith. The truth however is that, if we are truly confident in Christ, we can be radically open with no fear because we are certain that increased understanding through dialogue will serve to further reveal rather than further conceal the one true God. With this in mind, I'd like to explore how the interfaith women's group at NIC could be used as a forum for dialogue that is fully open and mutual, genuinely faithful to the Christian call to share the good news about Jesus, and leads toward a plan to bless our city together.

### **Creating Conversations for Blessing Our City**

The current series of women's gatherings hosted by NIC lacks direction and energy, but the organizer is enthusiastic about growing it. She and I are in conversation about what might be the possible future of the group, and it may be an ideal venue for the kind of mutual dialogue described above. As I form a proposal for the future of the group, Thomas Groome, who takes a dialogical action and reflection approach to Christian discipleship, and Peter Block, who takes a similar approach to community development, will provide useful ideas for how to design a series of meetings aimed at building purposeful relationship with the intention of working together to bless our city.

#### *Thomas Groome and Shared Praxis*

Groome's shared Christian praxis approach to Christian education assumes the purpose of teaching and learning is to promote "the wholeness of human freedom that is fullness of life for all, here and hereafter."<sup>19</sup> With this purpose in mind, he recommends an approach to teaching and learning that involves recalling *subversive memories*, calling for social commitment, and treating learners as what he calls *agent-subjects in community*. These are people empowered to speak their own words and to make responsible decisions based on critical dialogue with others.<sup>20</sup> He incorporates these ideas into a five movement model that calls people to recognize their own agency, to reflect on their present actions and on the Scriptures, and to engage new actions in light of this reflection, all in the context of partnership and dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

Although this model is designed for Christian education, Groome leaves the door open for interfaith applications, pointing out that dialogue between responsible agent-subjects of different faiths in the context of authentic relationship inevitably demands

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<sup>18</sup> Note that this is an entirely non-violent form of warfare. (2 Cor. 10:4)

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 133, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Groome, 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Groome, 137-138, 143.

transformation of all participants.<sup>22</sup> Because this is in some ways a community development project, some strategies from Peter Block will also be helpful.

#### *Peter Block and Conversations for Community*

Peter Block argues for the importance of building the social fabric of communities, both as an end in itself and for the sake of responsible communal action.<sup>23</sup> This experiment aims to do just that, to build relationships both for their own sake and in such a way as to be a blessing to our neighborhood. According to Block, this kind of transformative relationship is built through shifting the conversation from problems to possibilities and asking powerful questions.<sup>24</sup>

People have a tendency to avoid responsibility by thinking of community issues as problems owned by others that need to be solved through the intervention of leaders.<sup>25</sup> We tell ourselves limiting stories that expect the future to be similar to the past.<sup>26</sup> Community transformation happens when people think instead about what is possible through their own agency in cooperation with each other. In other words, transformation happens when we take ownership of our role in creating the present reality, the story we have been telling about it, and the new story that we can choose to write together.<sup>27</sup>

A relevant example is the story told about Muslims and Christians in the media. We are bombarded with a story that Muslims are religious fanatics prone to acts of terrorism and also with a story that Christians are judgmental and closed minded perpetrators of hate. We can blame the media for defaming and manipulating us, or we can take responsibility for our influence on the media and how we choose to respond to it and decide what story we would like to tell instead.<sup>28</sup> Our conversations in this experiment will attempt to challenge limiting narratives and shift conversation from blaming others toward naming new possibilities and enacting new stories. According to Block, small groups are the place these kinds of conversations begin to happen because they foster the kind of intimacy that builds the experience of belonging needed for engagement as a community.<sup>29</sup> Small groups are also the best place to discuss what Block calls powerful questions.

Block describes powerful questions as questions that have transformative power because they evoke responsibility and commitment.<sup>30</sup> A good powerful question is personal, ambiguous enough that the answerer must supply personal meaning, and anxiety provoking enough to get at things that truly matter.<sup>31</sup> He lists six community building conversations that good questions should provoke: invitation to participation, naming possible futures, owning responsibility, the freedom to dissent, making commitments, and gifts brought to the table. In addition to the five steps in Groome's shared praxis model, the proposed series of gatherings will address each of these six conversations.

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<sup>22</sup> Groome, 143.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008), 30.

<sup>24</sup> Block, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Block, 39, 57-58.

<sup>26</sup> Block, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Block, 67, 75, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Block, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Block, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Block, 103.

<sup>31</sup> Block, 106.

## The Experiment

What follows is a description of an invitation process and six gatherings I am proposing as next steps for the women's group. Each section begins by noting which of Groome's five movements are engaged, which of Block's six conversations are engaged, and key discussion questions.

### *The Invitation*

Groome Movements Engaged: None

Block Conversations Engaged: Invitation

Key Questions: Are you willing to commit to a series of six gatherings of Muslim and Christian women with the intention of building humanizing friendships and finding ways to partner together to bless the community?

According to Block, the invitation to participate in a community building process is a call to create an alternative future.<sup>32</sup> In this case, that means naming the possible future of our two worship communities developing humanizing relationships through which we are able to be a blessing to our neighborhood and inviting people to commit to six gatherings involving wrestling with cultural and religious differences and commonalities without knowing where that wrestling might lead and what the final outcome might be.

For this project to be successful, the two communities need to come together as equal partners. This means I will need a co-leader from the mosque with whom I have been fully transparent, who is fully bought into both the possible future hoped for and the method to be engaged, and who participates equally with me in planning and envisioning. Thus the first invitation will take the form of a meal with the organizer from NIC over which I describe the ideas presented in this paper and ask if this is something she would be interested in pursuing together. Assuming I get a positive response, the whole plan needs to be discussed and reworked until there is a sense of shared ownership and readiness to move forward. This means of course that every part of what follows here is only my initial sketch of how this project might unfold, laid out as I might present it to a potential co-leader from NIC.<sup>33</sup>

The next step will be for invitations to go out to women from both communities. This should be done in ways that are appropriate to each of the two contexts. For CVC, this will take the form of an initial invitation to an interest meeting where vision is shared and people have a chance to ask questions and decide if they are going to commit to participation. A key element will be to explain this experiment in light of the overall

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<sup>32</sup> Block, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Since the original writing of this paper, this conversation has already begun. I briefly proposed a series of meetings like what is described here. The NIC facilitator suggested we modify the format to focus on a different theme at each gathering rather than building toward a plan to bless the city together. And, she suggested the first theme could be fitness. This was a surprise to me. But given further conversation and reflection, I get the impression that, as with the tutoring day, which she would like to do again, she is thinking in terms of strengths women at our church have that could serve her community. A few women at the church are interested in further conversation about what this could look like. It would be less focused and less overtly faith oriented than what I have described here, but it also might attract more people from the NIC community. Another factor is a leader from a liberal Lutheran congregation whom the NIC leader would like to include in our partnership. This woman as well as friends she would bring from Lutheran and Unitarian congregations, is coming from an agnostic viewpoint and thus adds a third, completely new spiritual perspective to the group. We are presently in the process of imagining what a three way partnership for fitness focused or loosely topically based gatherings might look like.

Christian responsibility to share the good news about Jesus and to cultivate a heart posture in the group consistent with what I have described in section two of this paper.

### *The First Gathering*

Groome Movements Engaged: Focusing Activity, Naming/Expressing Present Action

Block Conversations Engaged: Possibility

Key Questions: Why are you here? What do you hope will be the end result of these gatherings?

According to Heifetz and Linsky, an important part of working through any adaptive challenge is keeping stress at a productive level.<sup>34</sup> The “temperature” in the room should be hot enough to keep people engaged but not so hot that people experience a counterproductive level of stress.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, we’ll want to engage the work right away, sending people home with a sense of momentum and eager to come back and re-engage. On the other, we’ll need to give everyone a chance to get to know each other in a non-threatening way. As Block points out, connection needs to happen before content.<sup>36</sup> The potluck should accomplish this purpose and function as an initial experiment in relationship, serving as what Thomas Groome calls a focusing activity to engage people’s interest and participation and draw their attention to present praxis.<sup>37</sup> In this case, present praxis refers to the current state of our inter-faith relationships (or lack thereof) and our overall posture toward one another.

Everyone will be asked to bring a favorite dish to share, preferably something traditional in their family of origin.<sup>38</sup> An appropriate person will welcome everyone and briefly restate the invitation,<sup>39</sup> reiterating our intent to engage the possibility of developing relationships both for their own sake and in the hope of partnering together in blessing our neighborhood. Partway through the meal, we’ll ask everyone to share their name, what food item they brought and why, why they came, and what they hope will be the end result of this experiment.

Having people share their hopes for these gatherings engages Block’s second conversation, possibility. In the initial invitation conversation, the convener names the possibility, but in the second conversation, the participants name the possibility, bringing it to life and increasing its power through each individual expression.<sup>40</sup> It also gives people one initial positive thing to say about their present praxis. They are here and ready to engage!

This gathering will end with letting people know what to expect from future gatherings, asking for volunteers to host future gatherings in their homes, and asking if anyone would like to organize and host optional field trips to each other’s worship services. Heifetz and Linsky suggest that one way to keep the temperature low early on is to start with a technical issue rather than an adaptive issue.<sup>41</sup> These logistical conversations will give us some initial, easy successes in working together. Block notes that each gathering should

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2002), 103.

<sup>35</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Block, 146-147.

<sup>37</sup> Groome, 155-157.

<sup>38</sup> This will require some instruction to the CVC members on how to make sure their contributions don’t contain animal products their Muslim neighbors won’t feel comfortable eating.

<sup>39</sup> Block suggests this as important part of the first meeting. Block, *Community*, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Block, 125-126.

<sup>41</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 109.

reflect the future we are trying to create.<sup>42</sup> What better way to reflect the possible future of humanizing relationships than to host each other in our homes! And visiting each other's worship services will help us to learn about each other, giving us new information with which to challenge our existing assumptions and practices.

### *The Second Gathering*

Groome Movements Engaged: Naming/Expressing Current Action, Critical Reflection on Present Action

Block Conversations Engaged: Ownership

Key Questions: What attitudes and beliefs do Christians/Muslims you know have about Muslims/Christians? Where do these attitudes and beliefs come from? What have you learned so far that challenges assumptions you came in with? What is one question you still have?

In the first session, we gave people the opportunity to say something easy and positive about their present praxis – to talk about their choice to come to a community building event and what they hope to get out of it. The truth however is that most of the attendees are not already deeply invested in relationship building across our two faiths. In this session, we'll be turning up the heat by describing current praxis on a more challenging level and also beginning to reflect critically on our present praxis in a way that encourages ownership.

Groome suggests that when topics are sensitive, especially in groups that don't know each other well, it can be less threatening to start with generalizations about the present praxis of society and move from there to personal praxis.<sup>43</sup> These conditions certainly apply here, so we'll begin with the more general question, What attitudes and beliefs do Christians/Muslims you know have about Muslims/Christians? Ultimately though, it is our own hearts we wish to examine, and we'll need to push gently toward ownership of our own present praxis. We'll discuss this first pair of questions as a large group, writing down responses on a white board.

Next, we will move into critical reflection, considering both where our ideas about each other come from and the validity of those ideas. We'll start with the small group discussion question, Where do these attitudes and beliefs come from? Then, after sharing answers in the larger group, we'll press gently toward our personal praxis with the questions, What have you learned so far that challenges assumptions you came in with? and What is one question you still have? These questions get at the combined work of naming present praxis in a more personal way and questioning the validity of present praxis. They also move us further toward ownership of the current situation.

### *The Third Gathering*

Groome Movements Engaged: Critical Reflection on Present Action, Making Accessible Christian (Islamic) Story and Vision

Block Conversations Engaged: None

Key Questions: What is your personal faith story? What does it mean to you to be a Christian/Muslim? What have you learned so far that challenges assumptions you came in with?

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<sup>42</sup> Block, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Groome, 176-177.

In small groups, each person will be invited to tell the story of their own faith journey. As we share our stories, the speaker engages in a radical act of truth-telling that goes hand in hand with the hearer's radical act of listening. In a world where so much of our communication has been distorted, speaking the truth as we personally experience it is a defiant and transformative act of freedom and restoration of relationship. In fact, Walter Brueggemann refers to telling the truth as an act of "subversive obedience."<sup>44</sup> Listening to the other in such a way as to truly hear is a similarly revolutionary act.<sup>45</sup>

This activity touches on Groome's second movement as the hearer is invited to continue critical engagement with current action, re-evaluating present posture toward the other, and it touches on Groome's third movement as all parties begin to engage Christian and Islamic story and vision as it is personally understood by participants. Perhaps even more importantly, it increases participants' perspective of one another as subjects. Afterward, we will respond by sharing one thing we have learned that challenged our assumptions.

#### *The Fourth Gathering*

Groome Movements Engaged: Making Accessible Christian (Islamic) Story and Vision, Dialectical Hermeneutics to Appropriate Story/Vision to Participants Stories and Visions  
Block Conversations Engaged: None

Key Questions: The actual discussion questions will depend on the study methods chosen, but the gist of our conversation will focus around the question, How do our scriptures speak to us in personal and relevant ways about relationship and/or partnership with each other?

In small groups we will read and interpret selected passages from the Bible and the Koran and discuss what they mean to us personally as well as their relevance to our current project of blessing our city together. Attending to passages both from the Bible and the Koran may produce anxiety in some of the participants, but it is my hope that the interest meetings will have provided a safe space to process this aspect of the experiment, ask questions, and decide whether to commit to the gatherings from an informed perspective.<sup>46</sup> Recall Freire's vision of the radical. If Jesus is who we say he is, there is no harm in learning from diverse perspectives. This logic also applies to a key deviation I will make from Groome's model in this gathering.

Groome describes the interpretation of scripture in his third movement as the responsibility of the educator leading the process, but I will approach this project with the assumption that the group is responsible for co-interpretation. This assigns a higher level of responsibility both to the participants as agent-subjects and to the Holy Spirit as guide, leaning farther away from a banking model and deeper into a co-learning model consistent with Freire's pedagogy and with methods of small group Bible study common in the Vineyard.

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Truth-Telling as Subversive Obedience*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 78.

<sup>45</sup> Wimberley describes listening caringly, attentively, and without judgment as a form of radical openness in which we engage a co-presence with people inspired by God's co-presence with us. Wimberly, 337. Parker J. Palmer says, "When we allow the whole self to know in relationship, we come into a community of mutual knowing in which we will be transformed even as we transform." Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 54.

<sup>46</sup> I expect the Muslim participants will be less uncomfortable than the Christians since Islam affirms the Bible as Scripture.

The traditional small group approach to investigating meaning in the scriptures in the Vineyard revolves around posing challenging, personal questions and discussing them in a small group in which everyone participates with the expectation of the Spirit's leadership as described in Don Williams' *How to Lead a Small Group Bible Study*.<sup>47</sup> The questions used follow a pattern of moving from simple observation to interpretation of meaning to personal application. I don't know what if any methods for such activity are commonly used in the Islamic community.<sup>48</sup> Before deciding on the exact method to use, I will need to have a conversation with my co-facilitator. This could result in a variety of possible outcomes, either using the same method for both passages or trying two different methods.

Regardless of the approach chosen, each facilitator will chose a text from our own scriptures that we feel speaks into how Muslims and Christians might relate to one another and the possibility of cooperative action to bless the neighborhood. Each text will be read and discussed separately in small groups with a break in between. Assuming for the purposes of this paper that we're using a discussion-based version of inductive study moving from observation to interpretation to application, the observation and interpretation steps correspond to Groome's third movement, Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision. The application step corresponds to the fourth movement, Dialectical Hermeneutics to Appropriate Story/Vision to Participants Stories and Visions, which asks the following questions: "How does this aspect of Christian faith, affirm, question, and call us beyond present praxis? From our present lives, what do we find true, and what do we question in this symbol of our faith? And from this, how are we to live our Christian faith in the world?"<sup>49</sup> The first and third questions are very similar, but they are interrupted by the second question, which provides an opportunity for refusal similar to Block's fourth conversation of dissent.<sup>50</sup>

After both passages are studied in small groups, we will have a time of large group sharing, using the questions, What key insights and ideas emerged in your group? and What are your present thoughts about partnering together to bless the neighborhood in light of what we have read today? If it is appropriate from a Muslim perspective, we will end with a time of prayer, asking for direction for partnership and next steps. Everyone will be asked to pray about next steps between now and our next meeting and also to come to the next meeting with a story of partnership across boundaries from their own life or from history that inspires them toward our possible shared future.

### *The Fifth Gathering*

Groome Movements Engaged: Decision/Response for Lived (Christian) Faith

Block Conversations Engaged: Possibility, Gifts

Key Questions: What stories from our lives and from history inspire us to partner across boundaries? What story do we want to tell in our neighborhood and our city about our two faith communities?

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<sup>47</sup> Don Williams, *How to Lead a Small Group Bible Study* (Van Nuys, Ca.: BIM, 1977), 16, 18, 21, 31.

<sup>48</sup> It is my current understanding that religious education at NIC is optional for women and typically uses a banking model.

<sup>49</sup> Groome, 251.

<sup>50</sup> The opportunity for dissent at this juncture is less critical when participants have made their own interpretation and doesn't make an appearance in the inductive study method supposed here. But, dissent will make its appearance again at the next gathering.

Block talks about how the stories we tell about our lives and our communities are our own inventions and claims we can change them if we choose, crafting new stories of possibility, generosity, and accountability.<sup>51</sup> At our second gathering, we will have talked about what stories are told about us in the culture and in the media. One way for us to start envisioning the future is for us to write the story we'd like to see in the media instead. This activity is very similar to Branson's idea of the *provocative proposal*, described in *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* as "an imaginative statement about the future, crafted as if it were already experiential and generative."<sup>52</sup>

One element Branson includes in his practical theology cycle that Groome does not is the sharing of stories from the community before moving to discernment for future practice.<sup>53</sup> An advantage to this step is that it helps to spark the imagination in hopeful ways. Each small group will first share inspiring stories of interfaith cooperation from history or past experience and then work on crafting the story we'd like to see told about our friendship. Then we will attempt to discern and synthesize until we can agree on one story that will become the inspiration for next steps at the sixth gathering.

#### *The Sixth Gathering*

Groome Movements Engaged: Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith

Block Conversations Engaged: Gifts, Dissent, Commitment

Key Questions: What gifts do my group members bring to the table? What gifts do I bring to the table? What have I appreciated most about our gatherings? Where should we go from here to tell our new story?

Before engaging Decision/Response, we will begin by engaging Block's gifts conversation. There are three reasons for this: 1) Naming gifts is a positive relational activity that can serve as an ice breaker before the hard work of the decision making process is engaged. 2) All parties may not commit to further participation after this meeting. In that case, this will be some people's last gathering, and a gifts conversation gives us the opportunity to affirm one another in a way that provides a degree of closure. 3) Thinking about what gifts each person brings to the table will help us believe in what we can do together.<sup>54</sup>

Breaking into our small groups, we will take five minutes to focus exclusively on each person, one at a time. In this five minutes, each other group member will share one thing they have appreciated about that person and one gift they see in that person. For the CVC women, this would be a good time to engage listening prayer and to share anything we feel God is speaking to the person. This of course will need to be discussed with the NIC co-leader. After everyone else has shared, the person in the hot seat will also be asked to share one gift they bring to the table that has not yet been mentioned.<sup>55</sup>

When we return to the large group, each person will share one thing they have appreciated about our time together, and one of their own gifts. A designated person will make a visible list of these responses. Naming what has been most valuable in our gatherings

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<sup>51</sup> Block, 35-36.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004), 86.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 215.

<sup>54</sup> Block, 140.

<sup>55</sup> According to Block, naming our own unacknowledged gifts is an important part of this conversation. Block, 142.

will help us identify themes we would be most excited to build on.<sup>56</sup> Focusing on our individual and collective gifts should ready us for a discussion on what we can accomplish through the agency of the group.

The story crafted at the last gathering will be used as the springboard for ideas for how to tell that story through cooperative next actions. The proposed outcome of this series of gatherings has been to develop a cooperative plan to bless our neighborhood. But true respect for the participants as agent-subjects requires us to have our actual questions at this stage be more open ended, including space for other possibilities and for Block's dissent conversation. We will discuss in small groups the question, Where should we go from here to tell our new story? Possible outcomes might include a community service project, an attempt to expand the group or multiply such groups, or something as of yet unseen in my imagination. And of course, as disappointing as it would be, the option to end here without any attempt to move forward must also be on the table. Once again, listening prayer would be appropriate, but how it is engaged on a group level will need to be thoughtfully planned.

Once a clear direction emerges, all participants will have the opportunity to commit to participating in the chosen experiment or to decline. Assuming we do end up with a group committed to a new experiment, a date will be set for a follow up gathering at which we will begin to plan that experiment in more detail.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

A visiting pastor who came to see CVC's panel discussion on whether Muslims, Christians, and Jews believe in the same God objected, "There is nothing we can say to a Muslim except 'Repent!'" This sectarian approach ends the conversation after only one word. It is my hope instead that confidence in Jesus can lead us to a radical stance where we have no fear of questions because authentic inquiry can only thwart the dehumanizing plans of our true enemy and lead us to deeper freedom. As Freire says, "Problem posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor. No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question."<sup>58</sup>

With this in mind, I hope to invite our Muslim neighbors into a dialogue in which agent-subjects in relationship speak to be understood, listen to understand, and are willing to change their minds in the face of compelling evidence, not with the purpose of calling the other to repentance, but with the purpose of listening, learning, and developing humanizing relationships through which we might pursue the good of the whole community and, in so doing, draw near to God.

What is described here is a preliminary sketch of what it might look like to begin this conversation with our immediate neighbors. It is an experiment whose outcome is unknown in a time of many similar experiments all around us. Not long ago, I invited the pastor who five years ago had only one word to speak to an imam into one such experiment. This time, he said yes with eagerness and excitement. I look forward to someday writing about what all of us have learned together.

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<sup>56</sup> See Branson's discussion of provoking imaginative change. Branson, 77-84.

<sup>57</sup> Depending on the plan that emerges, it may be helpful at that meeting to start the whole cycle from the beginning. For example, if we do want to proceed with community service of some kind but don't know what we want to do, we could begin by addressing our present activities in the neighborhood as the new present praxis. Alternatively, if we choose to expand or multiply these gatherings, the first round of gatherings would become the new present praxis.

<sup>58</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy*, 86.

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