

# Friendship and Dialogue

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*Paper originally given at international ecumenical conference in Assisi: "Where we Dwell in Common: Pathways for Dialogue in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", 17-20 April 2012.*

*Expanded as article for Conference edition of the 'Journal of World Christianity', Vol.7, No.1 (Penn State University Press, 2017) pp.28 – 46. ISSN 2377-8784*

## Abstract:

This article explores links between Christian love, friendship, and dialogue in the context of inter-faith encounter. It discusses Christian love, *agapē*, as having the nature of open friendship-love, which motivates dialogue. A practical example of dialogue is presented: a Three Faiths Encounter program that has succeeded over the past three decades to bring about deeper understanding, overcome fears and barriers, and create friendship between Jewish, Christian and Muslim participants. Strengths and weaknesses are discussed, and some further examples of initiatives that express and create friendship are introduced.

## Introduction

The formation of friendships across barriers has characterized both inter-church ecumenical dialogue and inter-faith dialogue. Friendship is fundamental to reducing inter-group conflict and prejudice. The existence of friendships promotes understanding and cohesion. A model of Christian love that understands *agapē* as having the nature of friendship-love can encourage, motivate and support dialogue. This article briefly sets out why and in what sense we can understand *agapē* to be the love of friendship, and then presents a current model of inter-faith encounter, a unique week-long summer school/encounter that has brought about understanding and friendship between Jewish, Christian and Muslim participants over the past three decades.

## Understanding *Agapē* as friendship-love

In the Last Supper Discourses in John's Gospel, Jesus gives his followers the new commandment to 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34, NRSV). He is specific that he has loved them with the love of friendship:

"No one has greater love [*agape*] than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:13-15)

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus' detractors charge him with being 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt.11:19; Luke 7:34), a charge that, with its ironic truth, is also central to understanding Christian love as friendship-love. The love of Jesus reaches out to strangers and wherever there is a response it enlarges a new universal community of friends.

Christ's friendship is comparable to the 'perfect friendship' described by classical writers, most fully by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero in his dialogue on friendship, *De amicitia*. This is love springing from goodness of character. Grounded in virtue, it is strong and steadfast, desires good for the other for their own sake, and involves a willingness even to die for them.

The friendship of Christ, however, transcends the limitations of classical friendship in that it is not directed only toward those who are good. It also goes out to those who are estranged. Paul, writing to the Romans, will have been well aware that the ultimate test of true

friendship in classical thinking was the willingness to die for one's friend.<sup>1</sup> He will also have known, and before he encountered Christ he had no doubt formerly shared, the assumption that true friendship can occur only between the good. Paul therefore records his astonishment at Christ's action: 'Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.' (Rom. 5:7-8). Christ died as our friend, to draw us into his friendship. His death and resurrection open the way for enemies to become friends, and thus to draw all people into a universal communion.

Friendship-love is not just a one-way love. It goes both ways. It is a love that goes out towards the other, it is altruistic, seeking to give and to do good, and at the same time it is receptive, desiring to receive and enjoy the other. Thus it is the love on which reciprocal relationship is built. It is not 'cold charity'. It is oriented towards the creation, if possible, of mutual relationship. It freely offers, and hopes for, the joy of reciprocity. So friendship-love does of its nature desire reciprocity, but only in mutual freedom. Thus in the case of divine friendship, the divine gift of human freewill means that God does not demand our reciprocal love--unless perhaps, as may well happen, we find ourselves as wedding-guests who have been compelled to come in from the highways and the byways! But even then we meet a persuasive, not a coercive, host: God invites us in, and seeks our reciprocal friendship. God's love in Christ has been aptly named 'open friendship'.<sup>2</sup>

Divine love suffers no limitations of place, time, and capacity. For human beings, limits to our capacity for practical friendship are imposed by our finite possibilities, although as Augustine and many later writers have pointed out, in prayer at least we can show friendship to all. God nevertheless made us for reciprocal love with him and one another. If the love that God shows us in Jesus is the love of a friend, then we too are called to relate to others as a friend. We are made for friendship.

### **Love as the great virtue**

In classical times love was scarcely, if at all, conceptualized as a virtue. Instead, it was very fully recognized that a good and virtuous person would be capable of loving and would be a good friend. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle begins his section on *philia*, love, or, more precisely the state of harmony and friendship, by saying that it 'is a virtue or involves virtue' (*NE* 1155a3-4).<sup>3</sup> He does not go on to develop the proposition, so briefly made, that it [*philia*] is itself a virtue, but instead explores loving (he uses the verb rather than the noun) as involving virtue. Loving is the activity of the good person who possesses the recognized virtues, the chief virtues being justice, fortitude, temperance and prudence. Ambrose later called these the four 'cardinal' virtues. The activity of loving is goodness in action, the virtues acting together in concert to produce the state of harmony, *philia*.

In Christianity, love comes to the fore and acquires a new name, *agapē*, a noun that had emerged in Hellenistic Greek after the classical period and was capable of unequivocally denoting love itself. In the New Testament *agapē* exclusively denotes virtuous love, springing from goodness. This *agapē* is the love that Jesus commands, and which Paul proclaimed as the greatest divine gift (1 Cor.13:13) and as 'the fulfilling of the Law' (Romans 13:10). This love marks the mature Christian character, and in the first Letter of John it is recognized as the nature of God himself: 'God is *agapē*' (1 John 4:8,16).

It still took three centuries before love was finally named as the prime Christian virtue. About the year AD 390, Ambrose in his *Duties of the Clergy* was the first to call friendship 'a virtue' (*virtus est enim amicitia*).<sup>4</sup> A few years later, in AD 415 in a letter to Jerome, Augustine named love, *agapē*, translated as *caritas* in Latin, as 'the great and true virtue (*magna et vera virtus*)'.<sup>5</sup> He had very early in his career as a Christian writer recognized that *caritas* involves the summation of the classical virtues, containing them all within itself.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine's doctrine of love is quite complex and was hugely influential. Love (*amor*) is the fundamental orientation of our whole being, and it is dipolar, capable of being directed

either to God or to our self. *Caritas* is love directed to God for God's own sake, and to our self, our neighbour and all creation for God's sake. *Cupiditas* by contrast is love directed to our self, our neighbour and any other material thing for the sake of something other than God.<sup>7</sup> This linear conception of love sees love as a choice, a fundamental orientation rather than a reciprocal relationship, and thus is not immediately conducive to an interpretation of Christian love as the love of friendship. Unsurprisingly therefore, Augustine did not theorize about *caritas* as friendship-love, although he thought of conversion in terms of becoming a 'friend of God' and looked forward to heaven as a state of perfect communion, universal reciprocal love, where we shall enjoy God and one another in God (*De civ. Dei* XIX.17).<sup>8</sup> In practice moreover, the experience of friendship and communication with friends were immensely important to him, and the identity of friendship-love and neighbour-love breaks out in scattered passages throughout his correspondence and his pastoral writing. He writes to one of his female friends, Proba, about friendship:

The claims of friendship [*amicitia*], moreover, are not to be confined within too narrow range, for it embraces all to whom love and kindly affection [*amor et dilectio*] are due, although the heart goes out to some of these more freely, to others more cautiously; yes, it even extends to enemies, for whom also we are commanded to pray. There is accordingly no one on the whole human family to whom kindly affection is not due by reason of the bond of a common humanity [*communis naturae societate*], although it may not be due on the ground of a reciprocal love. But in those by whom we are requited by a holy and pure love, we find great and reasonable pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, when commenting on the Sermon on the Mount Augustine simply says, 'where there is goodwill, there is friendship';<sup>10</sup> and on the First Letter of John he comments that we must love all with 'a certain friendship of goodwill'.<sup>11</sup> There are numerous other such instances in Augustine.

### **Christian love as friendship-love**

It was not until Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in the mid C13th that a systematic theologian reconciled the two strands in Augustine's thought: his doctrine of love as *caritas*, a fundamental choice for God, and his knowledge of love as also being *amicitia*, friendship.

Shortly before Aquinas's birth, scholastic theologians had begun to recognize faith, hope and love (*caritas*) as the three "theological" virtues", gifts of grace which, added to the four "cardinal" virtues", complete the Christian character. Aquinas argued consistently, in all his major works throughout his career, that the love between God and ourselves, *caritas*, is the same as the love found in friendship, *amicitia* – or more precisely, that *caritas* is friendship-love, *amor amicitiae*. We choose God and then, through grace, by pouring the gift of love into human hearts, God raises us to mutual friendship with himself. And if we are friends with God, then we must also be friends to all that pertains to God, that is, we shall embrace the whole of God's creation in our friendship—even including sinners and enemies.<sup>12</sup>

This theology of friendship with God is daring, and in the succeeding centuries it proved rather too daring for the Roman Catholic church to pursue except in a very formal manner; but it has had something of a renaissance in recent decades. Meanwhile, down the centuries there has been a succession of writers, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, who have read their New Testament and have, often independently, rediscovered the theme of God's friendship.<sup>13</sup>

In modern times, the German Protestant theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel have been influential exponents. In the mid 1970s Jürgen Moltmann discussed Jesus' friendship as a mark of the church, putting forward the suggestion that the three traditional titles of Christ – Prophet, Priest, and King – should be given the overall

interpretative title “Friend”. Thus it is as Friend of tax collectors and sinners that Christ the Prophet brings good news to the poor, and as Friend that Christ the Priest offers himself for us on the cross, and as Friend that Christ the King rules humbly, liberating us and making us friends for others. The freedom that Christ brings is freedom for friendship. A life of Christian love then becomes a life of “open friendship”, welcoming all into the festival of God’s love.<sup>14</sup>

According to Jürgen Moltmann, in considerable contrast to classical writers, the special quality of friendship consists in needing the other just as they are, offering a welcome so natural, so warm and informal, that it introduces the guest immediately into the heart of the home. In this unselfconscious sharing of life there is a simple human equality, with no need to adopt postures of inferiority or superiority. It is not necessary to demand that friends should conform to an ideal, in the way that Aristotle and Cicero expected ‘true friendship’ to occur only between the virtuous: “In friendship we experience ourselves for what we are, respected and accepted in our own freedom. Through friendship we respect and accept other people as people and as individual personalities.”<sup>15</sup> The Christian perspective on forgiveness and redemption makes it possible for Moltmann to claim that ‘a friend remains a friend even in disaster, even in guilt.’<sup>16</sup>

This more open concept of friendship also introduces the possibility of real friendship between those who do not completely agree on every matter. Classically, a friend was “another self”, and friends could be described as having one mind and heart in two bodies. Cicero’s definition of true friendship is: ‘nothing else than an accord [*consensio*] in all things human and divine, combined with goodwill [*benevolentia*] and affection [*caritas*].’ (*De am.* 20).<sup>17</sup> A present-day understanding of human personality and human relationships allows for meeting the other “just as they are” in an I-Thou encounter that respects and embraces difference.

With this kind of input from Moltmann and others, there has been a significant rebirth of the concept of Christian love as friendship-love. Particularly insightful among recent works is Brother John of Taizé’s *Friends in Christ*, a practical theology of the church and its mission reflecting on the experience of Taizé.<sup>18</sup> Over the past decades thousands of young people from all over the world have arrived on the hill in Burgundy, to pray and to share, seeking meaning in their lives. The community has welcomed them, adapted its prayer, facilitated their discussions, and sent them out to be, not a separate movement but a leaven of prayer and friendship within the churches. Wherever the brothers travel, there are friends. The experience is one of a universal communion of friendship in God, offering friendship to all. Brother John defines the church’s calling succinctly: to *be friends* (loving one another) and to *make friends* (loving the other, even the enemy). The church’s task is to understand this identity more deeply, and to reflect and express it in its structured organization.

The church will always have its evangelistic calling but in our globalized world it is also increasingly called to build interreligious understanding and peace. How do these apparently conflicting endeavours relate to one another? Both, Brother John suggests, are grounded in disinterested love. In mission, Christians openly live and share the good news of the universal friendship that Christ brings, a gift that has its own inherent attractiveness. Equally, in interreligious dialogue those who take part do so without ulterior motive, not to prove who is right or wrong but to listen, learn and share, willing to be open to seeing reality from the viewpoint of others. Not only will they increase their understanding but also “by listening to others, even those with whom they have apparently nothing in common, they will inevitably learn something to deepen their own faith, something that will help them better to understand the Christ whom they proclaim and whom they claim to live by”.<sup>19</sup>

If you have been involved in ecumenical intra-Christian, and inter-faith, encounter, this approach probably resonates with your experience. Friendship-love accepts my self and the other in our commonality and our difference. It seeks neither syncretism nor a lowest common denominator. It is steady and reliable, grounded in the goodness of character in which Christians—and others—seek to grow. It wills good to the other for their own sake. It can be

extended to those who seem estranged and even inimical. It both gives and receives, in mutual freedom. It takes an interest in the other, welcomes them into relationship, shares out of its own depths, and seeks to understand and to create communion.

The Christian attitude in dialogue is essentially an attitude of open friendship, living out the Christian vocation as Brother John of Taizé describes it: to be friends and to make friends. Hence a theology of Christian love as friendship-love can appropriately ground the Christian theology of dialogue within Christianity and beyond; and it is a theology for wider community-building and peacebuilding. Where friendship-love motivates dialogue, friendship is likely to be the fruit of dialogue.

## **2. Experiencing Inter-faith Friendship: The Ammerdown Three Faiths Encounter, Biennial Summer School**

In illustration, I would like to share one concrete example of a method of inter-faith encounter that has been effective in promoting inter-religious understanding and, crucially, in creating friendship.

Every two years, for the past two decades, a unique Three Faiths Summer School has taken place in England in July or August for the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths. Others are welcome but the focus is on the three major related monotheistic faiths. It is a school but also a place of meeting the other, and the title recently expanded to acknowledge this: “Ammerdown Three Faiths Encounter, Biennial Summer School.”

This programme has enabled people of different faiths and backgrounds to experience an in-depth encounter with one another as individual persons, as well as with the beliefs and ways of worship of the different traditions. It lasts for just one week, including a complete weekend, and has been held at the Ammerdown Conference Centre in the rolling Somerset countryside about twelve miles from the city of Bath. This week is not just a meeting of leaders, theologians or academics, but also a gathering of ordinary people of different ages and backgrounds. The aim is neither proselytism nor syncretism, but rather that each faith presents itself authentically and in a way that increases understanding.

The idea was conceived in the mid-1980s out of the friendship of three men who had met one another at the “Bendorf” interfaith gatherings in Europe. The three shared common interests in scholarship, and a common concern for teaching, pastoral work. They ultimately developed an interest in sharing with others the friendship they had discovered among themselves.

The three were a Jewish Reform Rabbi named Michael Hilton who is a scholar of the historical links between Christianity and Judaism and heads a synagogue in north London; a Scottish Dominican Catholic priest (a follower of Thomas Aquinas!) named Fr Gordian Marshall who was lecturing in Glasgow to trainee teachers for Catholic schools, and Sheikh Bashir Dultz, a German Muslim from Bonn who heads a network, the Deutsche Muslim-Liga Bonn, which includes a commitment to inter-faith dialogue in its constitution. Bashir is perhaps the most colourful: he recounts how he ran away from Germany to Libya at the age of 17, arriving clandestinely in a small boat from Italy not long after World War II, determined to become a Bedouin. He progressed to becoming a Sufi sheikh. He has been ably assisted in recent years by Karimah Stauch and a new co-leader Wilhelm Sabri Hoffmann.

Michael, Gordian and Bashir became the founding leaders of the summer school. It began in 1986 as a Jewish-Christian encounter, and from 1991 it embraced all three faiths. Michael Hilton remains involved, bringing members of his family and synagogue. Fr Gordian died in 2007 and the Christian leaders in recent years have been, variously, Professor Tina Beattie, Professor Ursula King, and myself. Bashir Dultz and others from Germany and Switzerland including some of their Christian friends—Protestant, Catholic and Old Catholic—were a constant feature until 2014, adding a European dimension. Now,

conversations are being held to find British-based Muslim leaders and also to identify ways to attract more students and young people to take part in this encounter.

There has been a simple, effective practical formula for programming the week. About nine months prior to each Encounter the leaders and Ammerdown staff have met to agree on an overall theme, a topic that can be explored from the viewpoint of each faith. Themes have included: “Who is My Neighbour?”, pilgrimage, festivals and feasts, forgiveness, fasting, worship, places of worship, the ethics of warfare, the environment, and the significance of Jerusalem to each of the three faiths.

The school runs for six nights, with participants arriving on Tuesday evening and departing on Monday morning. This affords the important opportunity of experiencing the regular weekly worship of each faith over a complete weekend, after several days of building trust and friendship and experiencing something of the different worship traditions through short daily prayers.

To initiate the process of building trust and friendship, upon arrival, there is an introduction after supper by the three leaders, who reflect on the week’s theme from a personal perspective, followed by time for all to begin listening to one another in small groups, each person invited to share something that is related to the theme from his or her own experience.

Each day’s programme features some input from each faith, with a mix of prayers, meeting one another, activities, social time, and opportunities to learn more about the other faiths and one’s own. At 8.00 am, before breakfast, there is a simple meditative morning prayer using songs, silence, readings and prayers, led by one of the three leaders and springing out of their own tradition but easily accessible to all. It is significant that the custom for the times of prayer in these weeks is not to seek a common denominator (except perhaps for one or two short times of prayer led by members of the three faiths together) but for each faith to use its own authentic prayers and traditions, giving introductions and explanations and welcoming others to be present and participate as much as they wish. Ammerdown has a private chapel, not under any ecclesiastical jurisdiction. By choice, it has the Roman Catholic Reserved Sacrament in a discreet alcove, but the main part becomes a synagogue or prayer hall with very little moving of furniture.

Breakfast follows. The food that is offered during the week has been vegetarian in order to be inclusive—a sign of respect and friendship, but it is perhaps the most trying aspect of the week for those of us who are not vegetarian-inclined! The week is also alcohol-free.

Each morning for the first three days, a keynote talk is given by one of the leaders in which they present the meaning and practice, in their own faith, of the selected theme for that year. So one hears about the theory and practice, respectively in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, of the yearly calendar of festivals, or the practice of pilgrimage, worship, or love of neighbour, and so on. After coffee there is a time for sharing on the theme in small groups, followed by a short plenary for further questions and discussion.

The afternoon programme varies with the theme and the possibilities for different optional activities and workshops. Participants as well as leaders may be invited beforehand to offer or suggest workshops. There might be calligraphy, singing, sacred dance, creative writing, introduction to walking the labyrinth (the “Pilgrimage” week introduced the idea of the labyrinth to Ammerdown, and one on the pattern of Chartres Cathedral was subsequently created in its garden) and forms of social action.

There is time for relaxing, playing Frisbee, going for a walk, or a swim in the heated outdoor pool, a leisurely tea, and usually an evening prayer in one of the three traditions. There is also a film or two with some relevance to the week’s theme, and further opportunities to meet in groups. Later in the evening there may be a prolonged Sufi meditation (*dhikr*), open for all to witness or to take part. Anyone who wishes could also join the daily Sufi pre-dawn prayer. On Friday a traditional star attraction is the making and plaiting of the *challah*

bread for the Shabbat meal by Rabbi Michael's lively teenage son, with audience participation and full explanatory commentary.

On one day there is an outing. The topic "Places of Worship" took the school to a synagogue and mosque in Bristol - and on to Sung Evensong in Wells Cathedral. The theme of "Pilgrimage" meant a visit to Glastonbury, to hear about it as a place of pilgrimage, to meet those who exercise a pastoral ministry there, to take in the multiplicity of alternative shops, and to walk up the Tor, once again rounding off the expedition with Evensong in Wells Cathedral.

In 2014 the theme 'Who is My Neighbour?' opened up a new facet, that of humanitarian outreach by each faith and the faiths together. This is friendship-love reaching out to people in need. There was a fascinating presentation by the Christian-based charity 'Send a Cow', which was begun by local farmers in Somerset and now works in several parts of Africa to develop sustainable farming, and a moving film and talk by the Bereaved Families Forum, which brings together Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost members in the ongoing conflict. Participants had an opportunity to present projects in which they themselves are involved; and the final input of 'Who is my Neighbour?' was a lively talk from Friends of the Earth, Middle East.

On the practical side, one afternoon a hastily-rehearsed choir including a female Old Catholic priest from Zurich, a German Lutheran pastor, a lively Welsh Methodist and assorted Anglicans, Jews and Muslims, travelled into nearby Bath to sing "The Happy Wanderer" and other uplifting songs to the residents of a care home, followed by tea and conversation with them. It was a hit. We were invited to come back again! Back at Ammerdown other participants spent the afternoon knitting blanket squares—Pearl from the synagogue, in her eighties and game for anything, proved to be the champion producer of squares—or digging and planting a modest 'Peace Garden' to be inaugurated on the Sunday.

At the weekend, each day from Friday to Sunday the three faiths celebrate, explain, and invite all, insofar as possible, to share in the ceremonies of their particular holy day. Muslim Friday prayer in the afternoon, is followed in the evening by Jewish Shabbat prayers, the Shabbat meal and an evening of informal entertainment, "Oneg Shabbat". It has become a rare experience for a family or house-party to find entertainment from within itself, so the Oneg Shabbat can feel like a daunting challenge, but there is no obligation to do more than enjoy being part of the audience, and it does reveal unexpected talents for music, comedy and poetry, among one's fellow participants, affording a fresh opportunity to see people in a new light. Remarkable at a recent encounter was the rendering of a Bach toccata and fugue on two piano-accordions. The Shabbat celebration continues with the morning prayer between breakfast and coffee on Saturday. Then the Christian celebration takes over with evening prayer on Saturday.

On Sunday morning the Eucharist is celebrated. How to include everyone? In the first part of the service there is scope for imaginative liturgy. At Communion everyone is welcome, at the least, to receive a blessing. When the theme was "Festivals" and the Christian talk had focussed on Holy Week and Easter, it seemed appropriate to invite everyone to take part in a Maundy (Holy) Thursday foot-washing ceremony. An expedition went to the nearby small town to buy washing-up bowls, and after the appropriate Gospel the foot-washing was done in small groups, each group with a bowl, soap and towel so that everyone could wash their neighbour's feet. Everyone felt able to join in, and found it an intriguing experience! When the theme was "Pilgrimage" the readings and intercessions took the form of a processional walk round the grounds following the stations of the cross and resurrection, with short readings, meditations, and prayers for the world

Sunday continues in a relaxed celebratory mode, with Christian evening prayer, drinks in the garden before dinner, and time in the evening and on Monday morning for reflection, feedback, and preparing to live what has been learnt in daily life back home.

The provisional theme for the next encounter is 'How to build Peace', including reflection on extremism and responses to it, recognizing that peacebuilding is a world-wide endeavour in which religious actors have a crucial role to play—and friendship-love is an essential motive.

Here are some of the comments from feedback. Note how frequently friendship is mentioned as an effect of the experience:

I felt that the opportunity to get to know each other was perhaps the most valuable and lasting effect of the Ammerdown experience. Over the course of the week friendships were undoubtedly formed, and such personal contact makes it impossible for people to continue to hold the many misconceptions and narrow blanket views of other faiths which contribute so greatly to the animosity between the religions.

The programme was ideally structured to allow these friendships to develop. The small group discussions wherein the same group met several times allowed discussions to develop and deepen at a natural pace. It became very apparent to me that while interfaith events which meet for a day or less are too very valuable and necessary, they lack the time needed to allow people to relax – an essential component in successful dialogue. When the time is limited people are often focussed on making sure that their voice is heard, and this makes it difficult for them to listen and to learn from others.

Being able to attend and participate in the prayers and services of the different faith groups present was also a hugely beneficial element of the week, and an experience which would not otherwise have been available to most of us who attended. While learning about the practices of others I noticed that many were moved by the deep faith of those of differing beliefs .... Recognising the genuine faith of 'the other' and the positive effect it has on their life is, I believe, a key step towards achieving peaceful and loving interfaith relations. (Magdalen, Christian)

I have learnt much about other faiths while I have been here, and have made contacts and friendships with students of other religions. I feel that I will be able to go home and communicate with and build up relationships with Muslims and Christians in my local community. Furthermore I have found the past week spiritually rewarding. Overall this week at Ammerdown has been a lovely, rewarding experience which will continue to affect me and those around me throughout my future. (Samuel, Jewish)

It's important to keep hope that people who participated in this conference will speak about it with their friends and that in this way the knowledge and the experiences obtained during this week will disseminate like a spiral. In discussions with participants I was surprised that most of them didn't ever have contact with people of other religions. They seemed to be positively surprised that dialogue with another religion can be peaceful and that similarities can be found. I think that shows the importance of interfaith conferences. (Sarah, Muslim)

The highlight from my perspective was the opportunity to attend Christian, Jewish and Islamic worship. Praying together emphasises the vast similarities between the three faiths and made the whole atmosphere really positive.... This has been a 'life-changing' experience. The best mechanism for Muslims, Christians and Jews to integrate and to co-exist in peace, and more than that, to actively offer each other empathy and support, is for members of the communities to meet. This has been an immensely positive experience for me. (Adam, Jewish)

I learned much about the other two faiths (Judaism and Christianity) about the way they pray and how they conceive the world today. The week gave me the opportunity to enlarge my experiences in this field and to get in contact with new ideas and personalities. I am very grateful for the experience. (Ismail, Muslim)

I consider myself a very ordinary person who has not had much of an education. I think I speak for the majority of ordinary people in my generation that only a decade ago (especially before 9/11) we hardly knew what a Muslim was! We also know very little about Jews except from what we learned about the Holocaust. So it was a real voyage of discovery that I embarked on when I signed up for the week. To be honest, I was a bit worried about it as I was not quite sure what to expect and feared I might feel ill at ease at times. But what happened on 9/11 made me realise that, if we ordinary people in the street did not try and understand more what ordinary Muslims believe in, our whole world as we know it might descend into chaos because of fear and bigotry.

Looking back, I now know that I need not have worried. Meeting people from other faiths was wonderful—however open one thinks one is, actually meeting the people and getting to know them is a very deep and meaningful experience. Quite simply, love made itself known that week. It has made me a better person, and I hope I can carry it through where I live. (David, Christian)

The week encourages people to share in an intimate and personal way, rather than as representatives of a particular faith group. This fosters deeper sharing which enables participants to see the full humanity of “the other”, thereby developing understanding and friendship. Encounters at this depth, I would suggest, are likely to produce lasting cohesion, even in the face of societal changes and rising tensions. Participants year on year report that attendance has changed attitudes and helped the development of relationships across faith groups as well as nourished personal spirituality. Sharing in the worship of other faith traditions is highly valued and not easy to access elsewhere. (Heather-Jane, Ammerdown assistant)

Meeting people of other faiths in a meaningful way over a whole week can truly enrich one’s faith and one’s life.... It takes courage and a spirit of openness but rewards can be great. It also helps people to encounter people from their own faith tradition, whom they may not usually have the opportunity to meet—people who hold different theological perspectives and have different faith practices from their own. (Bénédicte, Ammerdown Director)

I have learned that if you can respect the person you can then respect what they believe. If you try to understand the religion first it can lead to making assumptions about the people who follow it. However, if you make friends with someone, the points on which you disagree do not matter. This is a very good way to bridge the gaps religions can sometimes create between people. (Anon)

“The tone was set by the obvious friendship between the leaders.” (Anon)

### **Comparisons and contrasts**

Many local inter-faith encounters now occur. Ammerdown remains unusual in that it combines and includes, in one sustained programme, many of the different activities and aspects of meeting the “other” that may be experienced singly elsewhere.

It is a particular tragedy that today many places in the Middle East where different religions had found ways to live together such that neighbours naturally formed friendships,

have been riven with violent conflict and the fabric of old village and city communities has been torn apart. Heroic efforts to maintain and build relationships nevertheless do continue even in places of acute suffering, and they appear in many threatened areas: there are good stories of interreligious peacebuilding in Nigeria, the Central African Republic and Kenya.

In UK cities there are now likely to be neighbours or near-neighbours of different faiths who do not normally meet, and deliberate initiatives are indicated to promote encounter. Oxford is a city of many churches and varied faiths. A few years ago an annual “Friendship Walk” was instituted. It begins late on a summer afternoon with a gathering for prayers outside the synagogue. Leadership from different faiths, people of all ages, and families and children, are all present. The procession moves in carnival fashion, with banners and balloons, to the University Church for tea and cakes, and then into multicultural east Oxford for a generous supper at the largest mosque. It is a procession of witness to interfaith friendship, and it affords a fleeting annual opportunity for personal encounters. As an event that is open to everyone it secures grassroots involvement, and the potential exists for striking up ongoing relationships although there is no structured provision for this. The walk affords glimpses of the different places and styles of worship, but does not include any formal sharing of the content of the different faiths.

The ongoing effect of the walk is probably most marked on the organizers and leadership. Meetings between the religious and community leaders in east Oxford, including councillors and police, occur in the intervening months, it may be over a lunch in one of the Indian restaurants. On Remembrance Sunday every November leaders of several faiths contribute prayers to the city’s Service of Remembrance. Such ongoing contacts have proved vital for maintaining community cohesion. They are a public sign of cooperation, and make it easy and natural to arrange ad hoc interfaith gatherings for prayer and to make common statements at moments of increased political tension. But they obviously do not in themselves produce the kind of in-depth understanding of the other, either for the leaders or for the grassroots, that a week’s programme may achieve.

Official interfaith dialogue, like official Christian ecumenical dialogue, takes place at a high level involving academic theologians and those in positions of leadership, representing the standpoints of the various faith groups. The spread of ‘Scriptural reasoning’ has, over recent years, afforded an entrée for many more people at different levels to experience an intellectual interfaith encounter on a voluntary basis; but this clientele is still essentially limited to academics and clergy, and if friendships blossom they do so as a by-product, the primary objective being intellectual understanding of the other’s theological methodologies and belief-system. In a similarly intellectual context, there is growing cooperation between academics through the teaching of religion and theology, as departments have expanded to include a range of religions.

As Michael Hilton comments in a recent internal evaluation of the encounters at Ammerdown, there has been an encouraging growth in the United Kingdom of shared faith-based social action, such as running food banks, and this “is a very welcome trend, but it is not the same as the kind of theological dialogue and prayer experience which have been the cornerstone” of the residential weeks.<sup>20</sup> He also compared the Encounter experience with the activities of the Three Faiths Forum, which is “engaged in fascinating work—sports, choirs, art exhibitions, training programmes in schools and universities, medical work in Israel”, but what is not evident are dialogue groups, either locally on the model of the Council of Christians and Jews or in these residential conferences.<sup>21</sup>

The Ammerdown example is clearly unusual in that it affords an opportunity to “dwell in common,” sharing together in a week-long programme that is open to all ages and a wide range of levels of education and incorporates a wide variety of experiences and activities—intellectual, cultural, recreational, and liturgical. It enables in-depth reflection and meeting with others, in a residential retreat that takes the participants out of their usual environments into a pleasant safe place and promotes new beginnings. Some participants come from urban

environments that are multicultural but where neighbours do not easily meet. Others come from smaller towns and rural areas where, in comparison with large cities, they have had little chance locally to meet people of other faiths.

### **Reflecting on Ammerdown**

The Ammerdown Centre is of modest size, accommodating a maximum of fifty to sixty. Typically, attendance at the Encounters has been thirty to forty, with possibly some day-visitors. While the week is advertised by the Centre and elsewhere, the very idea of an interfaith meeting is still a challenge to the majority of people and new participants usually come as a result of personal contact with those who have attended previously. It is seen as a strength that a number have returned frequently—Michael’s family and synagogue members, some of the Muslim and Christian group from Germany, and a number of individual Anglicans and Methodists. These have provided continuity, as an experienced core group that is not a clique but an ongoing community of welcome.

There are logistical challenges. For working people, a programme that overlaps the weekend and ends on Monday is obviously problematic. A residential week involves an appreciable financial investment: the full cost of the week in 2014 was £499. The Centre has supported the Encounters by offering subsidies to those on low incomes and a few free places for young people and students up to the age of twenty-five. Young people of the three faiths have participated, coming as friends or family members of others taking part, but it is recognized that the programme has not been oriented specifically to youth and this is a matter for ongoing discussion. The programme is very flexible, around the central element of personal encounter and friendship-building. An idea currently being explored to attract participation by young people is to include an element of skills training: for example, to explore the theme of “leadership” in the three faiths.

The Jewish participants have tended to come from the liberal wing of Judaism, and Michael notes that the present arrangements “would make participation from fully Orthodox Jews difficult—they would need different Jewish prayer services and would probably need to bring all their own food.”<sup>22</sup> Among the Christian participants, Catholics predominated at first during the period when Ammerdown was run by the Sisters of Sion and Fr Gordian was among the leaders. In recent years the predominant denominations have been Anglican and Methodist. Among Muslims, Sufis have predominated—and are often found at the forefront of inter-faith initiatives. How broadly representative can a residential week hope to be?

### **Replicating the experience?**

It is worth pondering on the fact that when the Ammerdown weeks began more than two decades ago they were devised by scholars, indeed the first two encounters were serious text-based Jewish-Christian study weeks. The third week embraced all three faiths and was open to all but still emphasized scholarly intellectual encounter. From there the weeks have matured, developing a much more varied programme. There is food for mind, body and spirit. The intellectual element is still included in the informative talks by the leaders and other speakers, and the discussions that follow. But there is also personal sharing - and time for shared participation in casual conversation, arts and crafts, films, music and singing, walks and outings, swimming and games, and meals and worship. Over the week every person experiences many different facets of their fellow participants and their faiths. Time is important: a week is an appreciable time in which to acquire some understanding and appreciation of the other, to be intrigued and exasperated, to ask questions, to reflect on one’s own faith, to pray and to form mutual friendships.

Some years back, in 1979 when I worked in apartheid South Africa, I was involved in a church-based contact programme between Christians in ‘white’ Johannesburg and its vast ‘black’ township of Soweto. It followed on a five-day multiracial ecumenical gathering of about 5000 that had been held in Pretoria, so there was already a commonality of experience.

We devised the ongoing local programme by holding a *braai* (barbecue) and workshop with a mixed group of about 100, where we posed the simple question: “What do friends do together?” We listed all the suggestions on a flipchart: sharing meals, going to various kinds of entertainment, playing games and sports, and so on. We selected those things that we could do in groups together even under the restrictions imposed by apartheid, either within the law—there was no restriction on sharing the Lions Club rowing boats on Zoo Lake—or ignoring laws where that was a practical possibility—such as refusing to apply for permits for ‘non-Bantu’ to visit homes in Soweto. In the event, no one was arrested. So we created an ongoing programme for more than 200 participants, based on bring-and-share meals for groups of about thirty at a time in people’s homes, which lasted for two years. It contributed to the many seeds of friendship that finally, a decade later, burst through in the new South Africa.

To make the Ammerdown pattern fruitful in new contexts, it might be a helpful first step simply to pose the same question: In the context of those we hope to attract, what do friends do together? The programme would then fall into place, along with the intellectual element and the worship.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Christians are commanded to love God, to love our neighbour as our selves, and to love one another as Christ has loved us. These commandments have been interpreted with different emphases at different times. In a world where we increasingly have to “dwell in common”, it seems not only right but particularly appropriate to explore this command to love in terms of friendship-love. This understanding of love takes us beyond any kind of one-way charity. It is essentially an attitude of positive regard towards others, with an offer of positive reciprocal relationship. The practical means and methods that have been described above, have enabled individuals and groups to express friendship-love across confessional boundaries, and to grow in friendship and understanding.

Human unity and co-operation thrive on an attitude of genuine interest in, respect for, and goodwill towards others, and on the formation of networks of friendship. One of our greatest needs is surely for wise leaders, including religious leaders, who understand the love of friendship and are able to encourage people to transcend their fears and make friends out of strangers and enemies. Each of us in our varied contexts, can adapt these methods and seek further ways to practice dialogue, increase understanding, and create friendship.

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, M. Tullius, *De Amicitia*, (trans. W.A. Falconer; Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1923, repr. 1964)

<sup>2</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. Trans Margaret Kohl. (London: SCM, 1977), 114-121 (Original: *Kirche in der Kraft der Geistes*, Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1975), 119-121. See also Jürgen Moltmann, “Open Friendship”, Chapter 4 in *The Open Church* (London: SCM, 1978), 50-63; in USA: *Passion for Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) - a freely adapted translation by M. Douglas Meeks of *Neuer Lebensstil, Schritte zur Gemeinde*, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1977).

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- <sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann 1926) 1155a3-4.
- <sup>4</sup> Ambrose, *De officiis*, ed. and trans. Ivor J. Davidson (Oxford: OUP 2001) III.134.
- <sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 167.11 to Jerome, AD 415, Trans. J.G.Cunningham in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, ed. M.Dods, Vol XIII.2 (Edinburgh, 1875), 326. “Love, then, out of a pure heart, and a good conscience and faith unfeigned, is the great and true virtue, because it is ‘the end of the commandment’ (I Tim. 1:5)”.
- <sup>6</sup> Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae* 25, trans R. Stothert, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol 4 (1887) 48
- <sup>7</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* [*De doctrina christiana*], III.x.16, trans D.W. Robertson Jr., Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958; repr. 1978) 88.
- <sup>8</sup> Augustine, *City of God* [*De Civitate Dei*] XIX.17 trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1972).
- <sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 130.vi.13, to Proba, PL33.499, trans. M. Dods (Edinburgh 1875) 151-2.
- <sup>10</sup> Augustine, *ubi benevolentia, ibi enim amicitia*. Augustine, *De Serm. Dom. in monte* XI.31, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina CCSL 35, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher (Turnhout: Brepols, 1967).
- <sup>11</sup> Augustine, *amicitia quaedam benevolentiae*. *Tract. in Ep. Jo.* VIII.5, Augustine Vol 3, Part 2, ed. J-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina PL35.2038 (1845).
- <sup>12</sup> See for example Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.23ff. A useful translation is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols (London: Burns & Oates, 1947) First edn 1911, second edn rev. 1922.
- <sup>13</sup> For a full study from the classical background to the present day, see EDH (Liz) Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: Continuum (now Bloomsbury), T&T Clark, 2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977),114-121 (Original: *Kirche in der Kraft der Geistes*, Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag,, 1975).
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Cicero, *De amicitia* 20.
- <sup>18</sup> Brother John de Taizé, *Friends in Christ: Paths to a New Understanding of Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2012).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. 162
- <sup>20</sup> Internal review of the Three Faiths Encounter/Summer School, Ammerdown Centre, Radstock, UK, 2014.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.