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Bridging a divide

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

Sitting in a circle, warily facing one another, were women representing Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu traditions. It was a rocky beginning to an interfaith planning committee. The tension was palpable.

More than half an hour into the meeting, the Muslim women hadn't spoken. Their clothing covered all but their folded hands and sullen faces. My efforts as moderator to encourage their input were unsuccessful.

An East-West divide was apparent. The Christian and Jewish women felt comfortable sharing ideas, while the Eastern representatives, including the Hindu woman, drew more silently defensive by the moment.

I'd prayed before the meeting. I'd sought God's guidance earlier, too, in order to identify women who'd be willing to serve for almost a year on this steering committee. The idea for the conference we'd be planning had also been a result of prayer. And I was turning to God again now during the meeting to ask Him to unite us so we could work together happily and productively and to remove whatever inhibited us from working together for the benefit of all people.

God answered me by inspiring me to stop the discussion and ask the Muslim delegation if something was bothering them.

During the moments of silence that followed, I continued to listen for divine direction. I tried to fill the silence with love. I so earnestly wanted to let love fill my heart and soul and mind - to shine through the very pores of my being - so that these women *felt* love. I wanted

everyone there to feel the presence of divine Love, right there with them in the meeting.

Finally, one woman spoke angrily, then another, until they had all voiced their feelings. Like water over a dam, short bursts of words spilled out, revealing their concerns. They felt marginalized and felt that their views would not be respected. The Hindu woman seemed to silently concur.

With a conviction that divine Love, was already filling the room, I assured them that every voice was vital and must be heard. No individual was more valuable and no one's view carried more weight than another's. The purpose of being together in the first place, I reminded them, was to arrive at decisions that would be workable for all.

I asked the Muslims' view on the last few suggestions made by other representatives. They had strong objections based on their religious practice. Now the Christians became visibly skeptical. Once again, silence set in.

My next task was to affirm in my heart that God was the source of good ideas. There weren't Jewish ideas or Muslim ideas or Christian ideas or Hindu ideas. They were God's ideas. And if the ideas shared to that point were unacceptable to some, I was convinced that God was an unlimited source of ideas workable for all.

I said, "There are lots of ideas and lots of possibilities. We just haven't come up with the right combination yet." Slowly the walls of the dam lowered. A few suggestions trickled through here, a few more there, until momentum built, and suddenly everyone was sharing ideas. An idea would be suggested. No, that won't work. How about this? Or what about...?

By the end of the meeting, a foundation for productive interaction was laid. Instead of reacting negatively to suggestions, the representatives used them as steppingstones to a solution.

The meeting was ultimately a success with women from more than 20 religious traditions participating. An atmosphere of respect, cooperation, and spontaneous inspiration carried throughout the planning sessions and later during the conference itself.

It is possible to unite in productive action with those who have widely differing views and practices. God is the source of unity.

*We see eye to eye
and know as we are known, reciprocate kindness
and work wisely,
in proportion as we love.*

Mary Baker Eddy

(Founder of Christian Science)