

# INTERCEDE

## Hospitality's Role in Reaching Muslims



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*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:2)*

The response to my question, “What comes to your mind when you hear the word “Muslim” or “Islam”, rarely elicits the answer “hospitality.” Yet, the practice of hospitality is an integral and endearing part of Muslim culture that Christians and Muslims can share. It is adopted from ancient practices that predate Islam.

An Afghan refugee woman was living on a plastic tarp in front of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Pakistan with her five children and their meager belongings. My church in Islamabad heard about her and went into action. A man offered her temporary lodging in an empty upstairs room he owned in a nearby city. Ladies spent the afternoon collecting essentials. They drove a van packed

with mattresses, utensils, food and a two-burner stove to the room of their new friend. As everything was being unloaded, she sent her oldest son downstairs and started sweeping the dusty floor. She laid the mattresses on the floor and motioned for us to sit down. Her son returned with a kettle of hot tea made with water boiled by a downstairs neighbor.

I was overwhelmed and deeply humbled by this woman's hospitality. She had lost everything. She saw her husband shot point blank, fled with her five kids to a foreign country, moved from a sheet of plastic to this empty room and yet hospitality was so deeply engrained in the heart of this precious Muslim woman, that her guests were her first priority. Now she is a refugee somewhere. She may be your neighbor.

If you are reading this article, you probably intercede for Muslims on a regular basis. Have you taken the next step to

personally get to know a Muslim neighbor, co-worker, fellow student or refugee? If not, ask Jesus to bring a Muslim friend into your life. Many are curious about how Christians live. Would you consider inviting a Muslim to your home? A dear friend who lived in Jordan for many years said, “We make it so complicated and really, it is easy”. Love opens the door of our hearts and our homes. Our hospitality creates sacred space for faith interactions when we ask Jesus to be part of our conversations.

### As a Host

Women's magazines send the message that in order to invite guests one must have elaborate table settings, beautiful dishes, gourmet meals, and a spotlessly clean house. The thought of entertaining guests with the focus on performance brings on anxiety and trepidation. Hospitality, in contrast to entertaining, focuses on the guest. Open your home and share what you have. It can be scary at first. What should I serve? Will they like my food? Will I offend them?

Amy Oden states, “While hospitality can include acts

of welcoming family and friends, its meaning within the Christian biblical and historical traditions has focused on receiving the alien and extending one's resources to them.” (Oden 2001, 14) Is your friend a student in your class at university? Are they refugees who have just arrived after fleeing war in their homeland? Is your doctor a Muslim who has immigrated here and raised a family? Is she the mother of your child's friend at school?

Muslims have dietary restrictions similar to Jewish *kosher* restrictions. Food is *halal* (clean or allowed) or *haram* (unclean or forbidden). Pork and pork products including lard and gelatin are considered unclean or *haram* and should be avoided. Chicken, beef or fish are good choices to serve with rice, vegetables and fruit. Some Muslims are very strict about the dietary practices and will not eat at a house where these laws are not practiced. Don't be offended if they refuse your invitation.

Generally, Muslims consider dogs unclean, so put your pets away when guests come to visit. Always serve something to drink and eat when a guest arrives, even for



an unexpected visit. Eastern politeness demands that you refuse food or drink that is offered at least three times, so it is normal to refuse the first offer. A Muslim college student said that when he first arrived in America, a fellow student offered him a Coke. He was thirsty, but politely declined the first offer. The American did not offer a second time so the student went away thirsty and wondered why the American was not more insistent.

Do you wonder what to talk about? Family, culture and customs are good conversation starters to help you get to know your new friend. Muslims are family oriented and experience loneliness when separated from large extended families and communities in their home country. Conversations about God are natural.

Include your guest in your normal activities. If you pray before your meal, say “It is our custom to pray in the name of Jesus to ask God's blessing on our food.” Ask God to bless your guests as well. Muslims often offer thanks to Allah after a meal is finished. They will appreciate your desire to honor God.

#### As a Guest

Our Turkish neighbors prepared a dinner for my husband and I on the night we returned from a trip and left a note on our door inviting us for dinner. Not aware of this invitation, we had already made arrangements to eat with the friends who had picked us up from the airport. When we told our neighbors they said, “your friends are welcome too!” whereupon they opened their door and fed all of us spontaneously.

A Muslim woman's home is her sphere of influence and hospitality is an integral part of her life. Accept your friend's invitation to come to her house. Pray for God's blessing and direction for your visit. Muslims see guests as a blessing from God. Hospitality, a measure of the host's honor, dictates that the table will be full of many different dishes with more food than the guests can possibly eat. My friend Selma says that every piece of food has someone's name written on it, so even if you arrive unexpectedly, that food was meant for you.

A small gift of flowers, candy or fruit is an appropriate gift, especially for your first visit. If you notice that your host does not wear shoes inside the house, take your

shoes off at the door. Conservative Muslim men will not shake hands with a woman. Men greet men and women greet women.

In some Muslim homes men will sit in one room and women in another due to the practice of *purdah* or gender segregation. For conservative Muslims it is inappropriate for women to interact with men outside their family and for this reason Muslim women wear a veil in public.

#### Sharing Holidays

Holidays provide perfect occasions to invite your Muslim friends to your home and to visit them in theirs. On Christmas and Easter the stories about the birth of Christ and His resurrection become a focal point of con-



versation. Thanksgiving provides an opportunity to share the history of this nation and treat your friend to turkey, pumpkin pie and all the traditional favorites. These may be unusual foods to your Muslim guest. My Pakistani friends were not used to eating sweet and salty dishes at the same time and thought it strange that cinnamon, a spice they add to rice, would flavor a dessert made of a vegetable like pumpkin. Birthdays and weddings are also times that your Muslim friend would enjoy sharing.

My Pakistani landlady invited me to her home for her Muslim holidays of *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Adha*. She said they were just like my Christmas and Easter. However, at *Eid-ul-Fitr*, Muslims celebrate the coming of a book, the Quran, while at Christmas, Christians celebrate the coming of a Savior. On *Eid-ul-Adha* Muslims celebrate Abraham's obedience to sacrifice his son by sacrificing an animal and sharing the meat with family, neighbors and the poor, while



at Easter Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the final sacrifice. As we share our holidays, lives and beliefs, opportunities arise around the table to share about Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God.

### **The Greatest Invitation**

God's generous heart of hospitality is woven through the Bible. Dramatic stories of miraculous provision, divine healings, deliverance from demons, and life-changing conversations occur in the context of hospitality.

I am a grateful recipient of gracious Muslim hospitality. A foreigner always remembers acts of kindness and a welcome. Whether hospitality happens among friends who sit on a Tajik *dostarkhon*, a Pakistani *charpai*, an Afghan *toshak*, a Persian carpet, or a sofa in an American living room, it always opens hearts — even when communication is limited to gestures, signs, laughter, and shared bits of broken language. As Christians, our hospi-

tality is transformed into sacred space when Jesus is present. He answers prayer, heals people and changes lives.

However the greatest hospitality we will ever receive is yet to come. God has invited us to His home in Heaven. Jesus Christ is preparing a banquet for His bride — the Church — which includes people from every tribe, tongue, and nation who have believed in Him for eternal life. Your neighbor is an invited guest but they need to receive the invitation. Will you deliver it? ☺

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*Oden, Amy. And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.*

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