

COMMITMENT TO BE CROSS-CULTURAL (Spring 2006)

Modern travel has made it easy for many of us to cross the ocean and see the world. But crossing cultures and seeing the world through the eyes of other people is much harder.



These days, when we in the West hear more about Muslims and Islam, we continue to be baffled. How can any religion justify terrorism? Why would a few Western cartoons making fun of Mohammed generate such violent reactions from Muslims around the world?

What would it take to bridge these gaps of understanding that divide peoples and cultures? In "Clash of Civilizations?" Samuel Huntington of Harvard appealed to the West "to develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the ways in which people in those civilizations see their interests." This is a call that world leaders must heed in the face of escalating interracial and intercultural conflicts.

To bridge our different worlds, we must commit to be cross-cultural: to take an active interest in people who are different from us, to understand their hearts and minds, and be willing to see the other point of view. It is easy to write off half the Muslim world as fanatics, "failed children of failed societies" as a Newsweek article puts it. But in so doing, we betray our arrogance and presumption. Let us not forget that some of these peoples had a glorious past, a rich heritage, and a sophisticated civilization in antiquity.

If we think that our society is superior to others, we must be reminded that our achievements - the political and economic systems we have - are possible because of historical opportunities and natural resources given to us, above and beyond sheer human effort. If we are proud of who we are, we need to remember that we did not choose to be born into a particular family, socioeconomic class, race or country. None of us worked to be born with a certain IQ. If we are indeed better endowed than others, who has made us so? What do we have that we did not receive? Yes, we may have worked hard, but how many smarter people in this world have worked harder and do not enjoy a fraction of what we have?

We are who we are, we think the way we do, and enjoy what we have, because we have been graced with particular circumstances. If you and I were a Saudi or an Egyptian, born in a different time, lived in a different land, and taught a different creed, could we not have been among the 19 terrorists who chose to be martyrs for *jihad* on September 11? And could we not be among those throwing rocks in the streets of Baghdad?

It is easy to stereotype and condemn Muslims when they are a monolithic and nameless entity. But when our neighbor down the street or our colleague in the next cubicle is a Muslim, we realize that we have a lot in common. They, like us, want peace and happiness. They may not like the foreign policies of the U.S., but many of them aspire to the American way of life and see Americans as friendly people. To bridge the gaps of understanding, people across cultures need to meet

one another as individuals, as friends.

Since 2003, we have been bringing young people from the U.S. to meet young people in a friendly Muslim country. In this issue of the *Networker*, we would like to introduce you to one corner of the Muslim world.