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# Missional Discipleship: following Christ the Lord in a Multi-faith Society

**Richard Sudworth provides two scenarios that propose a challenge to Christian discipleship in our multi-faith context and to the nature of mission at a time of increasing suspicion of claims to religious exclusivism. Drawing on the work of Michael Barnes, he outlines a model for dialogue with other faiths that provides a way forward for discipleship which affirms both the missionary nature of the Christian faith and the need for vulnerable and open encounters with the religious other.<sup>1</sup>**

## Introducing Alice and Lauren

Alice is in her 70s and has never lived more than a mile from the house she grew up in. She will tell you of the day when she saw her first non-white person, a girl from Kenya who came to be in her class at school. Alice is full of wonderful stories about her home parish that I now live in: stories of picking fruit from the allotments along the riverbank and hiding in shelters during the night-time raids on Birmingham's munitions factories in the Second World War. She will talk of the Sunday School that used to meet in the local primary school because upwards of 500 children could not be contained in the church hall.

Times have changed. The past is indeed a different country; they do things differently there. This same parish is now home to a large Pakistani-background Muslim community. Alongside the majority Muslim neighbours, Sikhs, Hindus, Irish, middle class and working class and now Polish and Ukrainian, all rub shoulders together. We each enjoy the fruits, flavours and spices of the cultural mix that is not untypical of a British inner city. The vicar, preparing his sermon on a Friday afternoon from his study, can watch the hundreds of men pouring into the mosque opposite the church during Ramadan. Alice, as she has done for years, helps with the Sunday School. Our Christian youth and children's work runs into dozens not hundreds, these days.

What kind of missional discipleship makes sense of this landscape? Indeed, is it sensible to continue to talk of discipleship as 'missional' in such a mixed context, attuned as we are to the background noise of fundamentalist violence?

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the Anglican Consultation on

Mission and Covenant in July 2007 at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

Lauren is fourteen. She is from a Christian family and lives in a market town that now serves as a comfortable commuter settlement for professionals. She knows one non-white person and no one, as far as she is aware, who holds to another faith. Lauren reads the occasional newspaper, watches the news, and has this nagging fear about the nature and intentions of other religions. She will tell you that other religions are a little scary and off-limits! Visiting family in Birmingham, the smells of spicy food, the appearance of women in veils and men with long beards leave an impression of discomfort and unease. How is the church that Lauren is part of meant to disciple her for the wider reality of life in Britain? Before long, Lauren will be going away to university, mixing with Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists. We hope that before then, she will be praying for the country she lives in, and for the world; not just her corner of it. What do we model and form in the lives of Christian young people like Lauren?

Implicit in these questions is the belief that these contexts indeed demand a considered reflection on missional discipleship. A friend told me recently that at his organisation's staff conference, he stood up to emphasise the importance of the new strategy's engagement with other faiths by announcing the following numbers: '9/11, 7/7. This is why this strategy is vital.' Ten years ago, as he points out, declaring those four numbers might have suggested a Lottery win or a Bingo call. Today, those numbers provoke images, fears, stories and challenges in all of us; especially to people of a missionary faith. Aside from a re-appropriation of the imperative to stewardship of creation in an era of perilous climate change, there surely can be no greater priority for the church than to be equipping itself for a Christ-like engagement with other faiths.

## Staying and Following

Archbishop Rowan Williams has suggested that discipleship is composed of two interrelated dynamics: 'staying' and 'following'.<sup>2</sup> The 'staying' is that dimension of our Christian life that endeavours to be continuously rooted in Christ, praying at all times, attentive to God's presence and his Word and sharing in his Body in the sacraments of the church. This rootedness shapes our sense of identity as Christians, gives us an awareness of ourselves and our story; the distinctiveness of the church, universal and historic. The 'following' suggests the costly movement outwards in self-giving love, ultimately modelled and enabled by the cross. In the manner of Jesus who 'knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God' and then washed the disciples' feet (John 13:3-4), our vulnerable service is propelled and enabled by a deep sense of who we are, in Christ.

This tension in discipleship echoes something of the Catholic scholar Michael Barnes' seminal work on the nature of the Christian encounter with other religions.<sup>3</sup> There is a crucial interplay between our identity and tradition as Christians, and our movement outwards in relationship. Barnes draws on Levinas' analysis of liturgy as the maintenance of the tension between the 'Said' and the 'Saying'. The 'Said',

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples*, 2007 Fulcrum Conference, St Mary's Islington, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2007, downloaded from [http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons\\_speeches/070427.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/070427.htm) June, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Barnes 2002: 133-156

like the 'staying', are those things that involve a retelling and reaffirmation of the Christian story within the church. The 'Saying', like the 'following', encompasses the practice of the Christian life in mission.

Our creeds and our worship mean nothing without encounters with difference. Our encounters become redundant and impotent without our creeds and our worship. There is a deep and vital mutual informing in working out our faith in the melting pot of diversity. Worship and Bible reflection become re-energised and transformed by the challenge of the person of another faith. Relationships with those of other faiths become charged with the presence of Christ and the comfort and challenge of the Gospel when Christians bring their hope to bear in day-to-day encounters.

What this interplay does is offer a risky and unpredictable discipleship that steers a course away from the bland and toothless pluralism that seeks to neuter the story of Christ's work of redemption in our lives. Pluralism relegates any universal claim by a faith to the level of the individualist and consumerist, thereby denying the right of any personal truth to be public truth. Equally, the arrogant isolationism that cocoons our testimony from the challenge and rigour of another person's faith story is insufficient for a Christian faith truly posited in the public square.<sup>4</sup> We bring our convictions and stories into play as we relate to the religious other, offering an encounter charged with the distinctiveness that is deeper than simple assent to a particular system of beliefs. The lordship of Jesus in a Christian's life shapes values and behaviour, colours memory and determines the future. There is no need, and we can surely agree with postmodern thinking here, no possibility even, of approaching relationships by offloading our convictions and attempting to present a slate clean of experience and story.

For Barnes' theology of inter-religious dialogue, there is thus a repositioning of emphasis away from questions of 'theories of meaning' raised by the religious other (the object). The emphasis is instead on the 'skills, dispositions and virtues' to be fostered in the church community (the subject) in response to the encounter with otherness.<sup>5</sup> In essence, this theology of dialogue brings the interfaith discipline into the very heart of Christian discipleship. Alan Race reveals the pluralist emphasis on the search for what Barnes calls 'theories of meaning' when he says that 'the belief that it is permissible for a Christian to recognize the love that is bound to exist elsewhere only in terms of its Christian definition seems to me to be frankly odd'.<sup>6</sup> Race's underlying motivation for dialogue is evidently to seek out the unifying understanding of love that bridges all religious systems. This ignores the fact that an objective 'view from nowhere' capable of answering that question is impossible. Furthermore, it renders dialogue a means to an end that, despite the best of intentions, actually serves to totalise the religious other, disqualifying them from being true to their own story.

The task of faithful discipleship in a theology of the dialogue of religions would rather be provoked to ask questions such as 'Have I found love in this person of another faith that is indicative of the love I understand to be fully exemplified in Jesus? What have I to learn from this? And, supremely, how should I respond to this person as a follower of Christ?'. Christian discipleship requires all human

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4 Newbigin 1989: 39-65

5 Barnes 2002: 183f

6 Race 2001: 35

experiences to be understood in the light of the fully human Jesus. Dialogue as discipleship is an action flowing from the profoundest commitment to the Christian faith. Our understanding of Jesus, though, will be deepened and enhanced as we alternately step out in vulnerability and re-orientate around Christian worship and teaching.

In more prosaic terms, dialogue with other faiths requires us genuinely to listen. If our listening does not change what we say or do in conversation, it is not listening but a pause before we make another predetermined pronouncement. This is something of the *'double listening'* encouraged in the Mission-Shaped Church document as a means of contextualising church to culture: listening to both the culture and to the inherited tradition and gospel of the church.<sup>7</sup> This is the very practice necessary for faithful Christian living in a multi-faith context.

Veli-Matti Kärkäinen says of a thoroughly Trinitarian understanding of dialogue, 'It is not about denying differences nor eliminating distinctives, but about encountering the Other in a mutually learning, yet challenging atmosphere'.<sup>8</sup> The Christian vocation charges us with entering into relationships that become transformative for us in the terms of the story we have chosen to be a part of. As in the best friendships and the best marriages, remaining the same is not an option.

### Colossians as a Tract of Distinctive Faith

It might seem odd to highlight Colossians as a helpful guide to the sort of discipleship that seeks to engage and be transformed in the encounter with the religious other, containing as it does the great hymn to the lordship and centrality of Christ. However, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat's creative commentary *Colossians Re:mixed*, offers a contextual analysis of the epistle that corresponds to our understanding of dialogue as a discipline requiring subjective commitment or 'distinctive faith'.

Walsh and Keesmaat scrutinise the language of empire in Paul's letter, noting the explicit and very deliberate re-appropriation, for the gospel of Jesus, of words that would be readily understood to speak of the supremacy of Caesar and the *Pax Romana*. So, when Paul speaks of Jesus as the 'image of God', 'firstborn' and having 'first place' (Col. 1:15), there is an immediate subversion of Caesar who was 'equal to the Beginning of all things'.<sup>9</sup> If you understand an allusion to Caesar's authority as qualified by the supremacy of Jesus then the following 'thrones or dominions whether rulers or powers' created by and for Jesus (Col. 1:16) would leave you in no doubt where the would-be gods of Rome stood. The word 'gospel' itself (*euangelion*) appropriates the word that was used as the announcement of the military victories of the Roman Empire. And this gospel is 'bearing fruit' (Col. 1:6), another subversive dig at the images of the fruitfulness of the Roman Empire whose fertility and bounty were proclaimed on public buildings.<sup>10</sup>

In the epistle to the Colossians, though, the gospel as a counter to the Roman Empire is not merely another regime competing for power. The very nature of the gospel and the source of its life and character, Jesus, mean that it is vulnerable love that is taking on the might and wealth of the empire. The death of Jesus on

7 *Mission-Shaped Church* 2004: 104f

8 Kärkäinen 2005: 127

9 Walsh & Keesmaat 2005: 89

10 Walsh & Keesmaat 2005: 74f

the cross, an act of self-giving love at the hands of violent power (Col. 1:20,22), has brought us reconciliation with God. This good news of reconciliation works through the entirety of creation and is available to all (Col. 1:20, 3:11) in stark contrast to the totalising and exclusionary empire. The alternative kingdom that Paul is talking about means that all other demands are penultimate to those of Christ. But Christ demands lives of vulnerability, of non-violence and of gracious welcome and inclusion infused with humility: 'a story rooted in and radically attentive to suffering is a story of liberation from violently imposed regimes of truth, not a story that legitimates newly imposed slavery.....a story with the redemption of all creation as its focus subverts any partisan, self-justifying co-option of its message'.<sup>11</sup> This is, in essence, a call to love the other and this love demands of us that we journey out, in risk and vulnerability.

Paul's argument that began in a hymn to Christ's supremacy inevitably leads him to address practical issues of diversity and unity within the church because the gospel that is bearing fruit turns us outwards to embrace the stranger and calls us to overcome the divisions of gender, social class and race (Col. 3:1-4:1). The God of love whom we discover at the cross does not coerce, does not pre-judge and graciously gives freedom to accept or reject the embrace of the Father. As Tom Wright says, 'The lover affirms the reality and the otherness of the beloved. Love does not seek to collapse the beloved in terms of itself'.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, then, the epistle to the Colossians roots the church's story in the cosmic implications of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We may see the affirmation of Christ's supremacy in Col. 1 as one part of our 'staying', our self-definition, our own story telling. The supremacy of Jesus that is directly juxtaposed against the power of the Roman Empire gains its authority from the ultimate act of love: death for the stranger. The love that is tangibly offered at the cross of Christ models our 'following'. The kingdom of God is characterised by love, suffering, vulnerability, and, when experienced in God's people, the church, resonates with the humility commensurate with being sinners forgiven by grace.

I believe that in Colossians we have patterned a missional discipleship that is engaging and challenging a plural context. The engagement and challenge are not ideological or hectoring but rather model the 'staying' and 'following', 'said' and 'saying' of authentic Christian witness. The church is to be distinctive: it is to know its source, story, traditions and texts. And the church is to understand these more fully, discover them more richly as they are informed by a loving encounter with the world, with the stranger, with those of other faiths.

Missional discipleship in this fashion becomes less a matter of dispensing timeless truths and more a matter of equipping for Christian praxis, fostering a journeying out that is characterised by repeated journeys back 'home' into the church community.

The decisive challenge we then have, as we engage the person of another faith with all the riskiness that an authentic Christ-like encounter entails, is how to stay rooted in our most defining relationship, in Christ.

## Distinctive Faith as ‘Staying’ in Scripture

It would seem to me that an integral part of our ‘staying’ has to be our attentiveness to the Bible. As we equip and form Christians in our churches, a rediscovery of the multi-faith world of the Bible needs to be a key thread of discipleship. There has been a burgeoning corpus of theological commentary on the Old Testament themes of exile and lament. These reflections need to be brought into specific use by churches facing the bewildering diversity of Western society and the vigorous and articulate faiths of many of our neighbours. There is grief work to be done; the loss of safe and secure realities to be lamented.

This is part of Alice’s story that we heard at the outset; but it is not the whole part. For in the experience of exile, there is hope and the vision of a new future and a transformed city that is not a rewind to the ‘good old days’. Christian discipleship is incomplete without the grief of death; it is perverted if it is a shrill and bitter call to wind the clock back. During an average week, you will find Alice serving cups of tea to Muslim, Sikh and Hindu mums in the church nursery project; listening to them, praying for them. In the ashes of the privilege we have lost, we can claim a rediscovery of our call to be a blessing to all people, to invest our lives in loving the entirety of creation and being good news for the strange ‘city’ that we are now a part of. This was Jeremiah’s experience in Jer. 29. Having rebuked the prophets who would counsel Jerusalem that the glory days were once again just around the corner, Jeremiah’s grief allowed him to be the bearer of a new message that tied the fortunes of the faithful with the fortunes of the alien and idolatrous city in which they found themselves: ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper’ (Jer. 29:7). God’s call to His people to be a blessing to all creation first instituted in Abraham is reiterated through Jeremiah. It seems that in the experiences of liminality and suffering, God has a habit of reasserting our true vocation: to be faithful as both a worshipping community and faithful as a blessing community.

Walter Brueggemann, commenting on the promise in Jer. 29 of a ‘future with hope’, notes that this ‘functions as a powerful assurance: Israel is not to resign itself in its despair. But the assertion is also a summons to remember its identity as Yahweh’s people, and to act in the risky ways congruent with Yahweh’s intentionality.....which is a consolation and assurance.....also a summons to dangerous obedience.’<sup>13</sup> The motif of God’s people pushed away from the comfort zone of Jerusalem, surrounded by a plethora of false gods and suffering the rebuke of a once glorious past seems redolent for the church in the West and worthy of mining scriptural resources for faithful discipleship.

The gospels, too, offer us resources for serious reflection on our multi-faith context. Jesus’ specific ministry to Israel is littered with intriguing exchanges with a Roman centurion, a Canaanite woman and Samaritans that begin to point to the global trajectory of the kingdom that he is inaugurating. These exchanges reveal Jesus unafraid to root himself in the story of God’s exclusive relationship with Israel but radically and provocatively welcoming and embracing faith and grace wherever it is evidenced. So, in the striking encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well

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13 Brueggemann 1997: 356

in John 4, Jesus begins the conversation from the simplicity of shared humanity and a thirst that allows him to be the recipient of hospitality from the woman. As they talk, Jesus confidently states that 'You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews' (John 4:22). The distinctiveness of the story of God's chosen people is not compromised but the exclusivity is authenticated by the boundary-crossing vulnerability of the Jewish rabbi such that God's intentions to include are effected.

In Acts and in the epistles we see the early church grappling with the challenge to communicate and embody the Lordship of Jesus – a Jewish man, scandalously crucified in a backwater of the Roman Empire that is in hock to gods and goddesses, superstitions, philosophies and the cult of the Emperor. The great evangelist Paul is witnessed speaking of other faiths with respect (Acts 19), reading and quoting their poets and philosophers (Acts 17) and building on truths that can become steps towards faith in Christ. The celebrated sermon at the Areopagus seems to be a systematic listening and challenging of culture and religion, responding with affirmation and distinctiveness to Academic, Stoic and Epicurean understandings of God.<sup>14</sup> Paralleling our own experience of God's exclusive story and its universal goal<sup>15</sup> in the 'pic-n-mix' consumer society of postmodernity with the early church's own experiences arguably offers us a rich vein for applied exegesis.

### Distinctive Faith as 'Following' in Mission

If an important element of our 'staying' in discipleship is to be a considered re-appropriation of the multi-faith context of the Bible then our 'following' may be of an especially missionary nature. That must never preclude the proclamation of the good news that is available to all. An embedded commitment to our distinctive Christian faith demands that we share the challenges of our faith as much as we are prepared to hear the challenges of the religious other. However, our proclamation of the gospel, as Chris Wright has so persuasively argued, must never be *reduced* to a narrow 'personal exit strategy to heaven'.<sup>16</sup> If, as Wright maintains, building upon the seminal work of Bosch, mission belongs to God and the church is to be shaped by God's mission rather than the church programming, containing and possessing that mission, then we are bound to share in an altogether more costly and unpredictable vocation. Mission no longer becomes a task that serves to guarantee the financial and demographic future of the church. It is in fact only self-serving in authenticating our character and deepening our relationship with Christ. Mission strategy as success-seeking ought rather to be reframed as mission as obedience to Christ.

A holistic and integral model of mission, the cosmic good news of a new creation, must then have an underpinning of relational, self-giving commitment to communities, after the manner of the Father's love shown on the cross. No less a mission ethic embodies the proclamation that we bring. In a world shuddering with

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14 Wright 1997: 91f

15 Bauckham 2003: 84

16 C J H Wright, *An Upside-Down World*, January 2007, available from [http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/01/an\\_upsidedown\\_world.html](http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/01/an_upsidedown_world.html) downloaded June 2007. For a fuller analysis by C J H

Wright, see Wright 2006. This offers a mission theology, a mission hermeneutic and ultimately a missionary God through the Old and New Testaments. See *Anvil* 24:4 (2007) for dialogue with this volume and Chris Wright's response.

revulsion at violent religious extremism, missional discipleship that fails to equip Christians for relational encounters with other faiths is arguably no discipleship at all. In following Christ, we follow Jesus as he risks the wrath of the establishment by crossing boundaries of culture and religion: to Samaritans, leprosy sufferers, Canaanites, tax collectors and prostitutes. By deciding to reach out in love and service, in word and deed, towards those of other faiths, seeing beyond the labels and stereotypes, the systems and dogma, we are sharing in Christ's ministry of reconciliation and being tangible expressions of the Kingdom of God as peacemaking.

Now, more than ever, the dirty 'D' word of 'Dialogue' needs to be reclaimed by evangelicals serious about mission and serious about discipleship in a multi-faith world. And it is a dialogue that will be intrinsically different to the neutered and benign dialogues of commonality, where all differences are overlooked and nothing of discomfort is ever expressed. But it will begin in some shared aims and some common experiences and it will be under-girded by a determination by Christians to love the person of another faith unconditionally, without guile, without self-interest. What Tom Wright describes as the 'hermeneutic of love'<sup>17</sup> allows mission to be an outflow of compassion and worship from the heart of God to his creation rather than an abrasive totalising of the other: 'The word of the cross is unique in the modern or postmodern world, as a discourse or metanarrative unlike any other. It will not allow Christians to impose their faith forcibly on others, instead waiting patiently for its truth to be recognized, suffering misunderstanding and disdain'.<sup>18</sup>

Following Christ in such a missionary endeavour means we cannot package and box God. Our hands are looser, our knowledge more limited, the self-consciousness of our sin more apparent. We are not the repositories of all the answers; the company of those that 'have arrived'. The church bears witness, as a broken and sinful people, to the forgiving and transforming power of Christ, a forgiveness and power that we point to in fragility and incompleteness.<sup>19</sup> As Bosch says, 'we know in part, but we do know'.<sup>20</sup> To a cynical and jaded world in a post-colonial, post-Christendom West, the church can no longer afford to proclaim its message with anything other than humility: a humility worthy of Jesus Christ crucified. Our mission momentum is thus decidedly eschatological; there are no past eras for us to pine for or reawaken. The church is in fact pointing forwards, welcoming, anticipating and, on our good days, being advance deposits of the new creation that is to come.

## Conclusion

In summary, then, missional discipleship has to include an encouragement and an equipping towards a faithful engagement with adherents of other religions. For Christians like Lauren, detached from the lived reality of multiculturalism, discipleship needs to include opportunities for serious reflection on other faith

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<sup>17</sup> Wright 1992: 64

<sup>18</sup> Tomlin 2005: 61

<sup>19</sup> Anthony O'Mahony calls this the 'original absence' of the Christian faith which is 'precisely this consciousness of a lack which is the condition of a relation to the other,

the stranger, the difference..... For each Christian, each community, and for Christianity as a whole, the goal is to be a sign of what is lacking', O'Mahony 2004: 86

<sup>20</sup> Bosch 1991: 489



encounters.<sup>21</sup> Projects, like Scripture Union's *Youth Encounter*<sup>22</sup> programme, that provide opportunities for robust, honest yet warm meetings between the youth of different faiths ought to be axiomatic to Christian formation. Models of dialogue and mission that offer visits to rooted and committed church communities involved with other faiths are required in all our churches. The dialogue has to have the authenticity of distinctive faith, of difference as well as commonality. It has to be released from the heady and worthy enclaves of religious leadership to be a normative aspiration and practice of all Christians. Training of clergy and other church leadership should include reflections from local contexts that are able to provide examples of long-term service and open up the diversity within religious traditions. As we consider our Christian response to the other faith neighbours, a discipleship that is confident enough to engage in vulnerability whilst unashamed of the universal call of the gospel will be most faithful to the God we worship.

What is exciting for me is that I believe there are so many untapped opportunities for exploring lessons from the Bible for our multi-faith age. Our Scripture was largely written by and for a people following God in the midst of diversity. As we read it anew from our increasingly marginal position in society, I expect we may reclaim anew a far more troublesome and prophetic presence, not hectoring from power, but speaking with the unguardedness of love.

Missional discipleship in this vein has the confidence to acknowledge our weakness, to recognise grace in the faith other; and it is always hopeful. At the beginning of Paul's famous sermon in Athens, he begins by saying, 'From one person he made every nation of people, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live' (Acts 17:26). It is no accident that in Britain, and in so much of the West, Christians are living as neighbours with people of all faiths and none. This is no aberration or oversight on the part of God. What good purposes, what future and hope are intended by God for our current situation? We are beginning to recognise that care for the earth is a part and parcel of our missionary mandate. Arguably, it has taken secular conservationists to reawaken Christians to the call to stewardship of the earth that has always been there in Genesis. God often seems to use people beyond the fellowship of the church to awaken us to truths we have forgotten or challenges we would prefer not to take up. To what truths and transformation is God calling the church in its encounter with other faiths? This is a question for bishops, clergy, lay leadership; in fact, all people determined to dwell with and follow Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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**21** It must be noted that at the 2001 census, 80% of all Church of England parishes had 10% or more residents of a faith other than Christianity. See *Presence and Engagement* 2005.

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**22** See <http://www.youthencounter.org.uk> for stories and guidelines on models of youth dialogue that embrace both similarity and difference.

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