

Living Faith in Afghanistan

Jane Thomson

In Afghanistan, as in other Muslim countries, religion and spirituality are ingrained into the daily lives of the people. As a Christian working daily alongside my Muslim colleagues in World Vision their faith really inspires and challenges me to greater devotion to God in my own faith. I've become used to the daily rhythms of the call to prayer five times a day and even utilise the Muslim call to prayer as a reminder of my call to love God and love my neighbour in a context such as Afghanistan.

Working in Afghanistan, my faith has ironically become much more living and vibrant. It's true that I can't worship openly, or 'go to church' in an Islamic State, but I feel the presence of God very profoundly as I observe and appreciate the beautiful landscape, the Afghan culture, the ancient art forms, hand laid mosaics in the beautiful 12th century mosque, and most especially through my relationships with the Afghan people. I feel very privileged to be daily in relationship with such kind, godly and hospitable Muslim people. Foundational to the tenets of their Muslim faith is their commitment to care for the poor and needy in their communities. So as Muslims and Christians, we partner together within World Vision projects to respond to the basic needs of the poor for food, water, education, health care and shelter. In a world where there is increasing misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians, it is good to focus on what we have in common, our commitment to the poor and to support the needs of society's most vulnerable citizens, and start from that foundation to understand each other and find ways to appreciate each others faith perspective.

Having lived and worked in contexts of poverty all over the world, I have always felt a strong calling to live out my faith in practical ways that demonstrate God's compassion and love. So in a way it's not difficult for me to live and work as a Christian in a Muslim country such as Afghanistan, because every day I have opportunities to demonstrate God's love in very tangible ways. Starting from a place of loving engagement with Muslims, I think we are better positioned to have opportunities to dialogue together about deeper issues of faith. When people know that you genuinely care about them and respect them, they are more likely to be open to talking about issues of faith. I have had several deep conversations with Muslims in Afghanistan about faith in God and issues of the soul, but they all started from a context of trust, mutual respect and shared relationship.

Living and working in contexts of insecurity such as Iraq or Afghanistan, has made me very grateful to be alive. Every day I thank God for the privilege of having another day to worship Him and love people in his Name. When danger is imminent you tend to treasure relationships more fully; you really value the gift of life. I feel sad that we don't maximise the freedom and privileges that we have in Aotearoa New Zealand. When something is free you tend to value it less than something for which you struggle.

My friends often ask me why I chose to work in dangerous places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. I believe very strongly in the work I am doing, and so I feel that the risks are worth taking in order to help poor people experience fullness of life and dignity. And if I die, I want to die doing something I passionately believe in. I feel privileged in my work with World Vision to daily commit myself to values and goals that reflect the essence of my faith in God and His love for humanity.

Life in Afghanistan is a pleasure and a privilege. I will never forget the Muslim people and Afghan culture that has impacted my life in such profound ways and drawn me closer to God.

Aotearoa New Zealander Jane Thomson lived in Afghanistan for over a year in 2005, working as Operations Manager for World Vision. Prior to this she worked in Sudan and Iraq. For more information about World Vision's programmes, go to www.worldvision.org.nz.

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