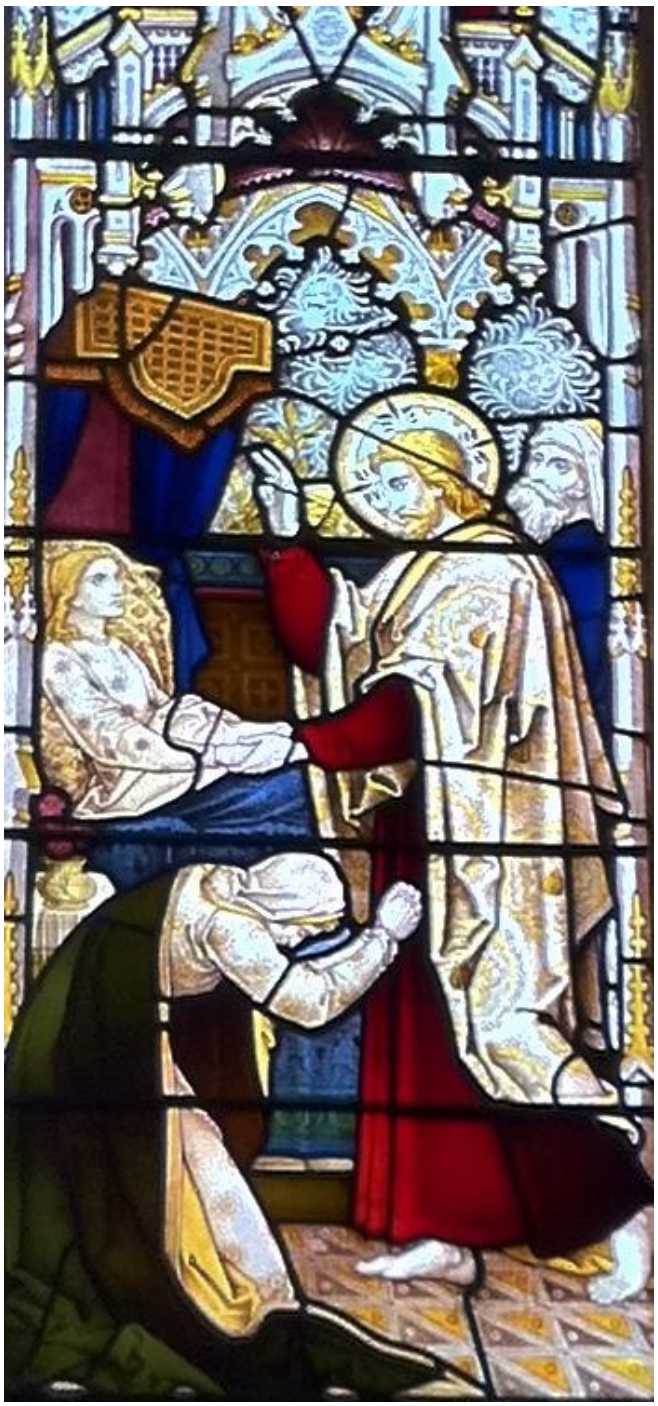
Talitha cum! Stand up, Girl!



Guidelines on
Gender & Inter-religious Dialogue

Prepared for a workshop at the WCC 10th Assembly
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Background

In 2007, a group of women came together to share a number of issues they found they had in common surrounding the practicalities of their involvement in dialogue with other faiths. Much of these had to do with what sacred space was off-limits, what attire they chose to wear, and whether or not they should even be present at all – and much of this was from their own (male) Christian colleagues rather than from anyone of another faith tradition.

A series of quandaries presented themselves surrounding good practice, faith identity and integrity. This led to questions about the space women occupy within the Christian and Anglican tradition, within the wider Christian Church as a whole, within religious structures and liturgically. Maybe these questions are too extensive for a short set of guidelines, but it is worth touching on those aspects which affect women's participation in dialogue, and also men's engagement with women of other faiths. How can we as a Christian community put into practice in our interaction with one another as well as with others, Christ's all-embracing love of us as children of God, equal in love before him?

When the Muslim document 'A Common Word' was launched, it was sent to recognised Christian leaders worldwide. No women were included on that list. And although there were women included in the Christian response, none of these women were in senior leadership positions within the churches – even though highly respected in their own right. This has more to say about the Christian community, our own religious structures and how they are perceived from the outside than it does about our Muslim colleagues who were addressing us.

Alongside these concerns it is must also be acknowledged that women may have more access than men in some situations. Women are able to participate in women's circles where men are forbidden to enter, and in this way have greater access to women's issues and those to do with family life and culture. How can women enable access to these circles for their male colleagues? How can men be encouraged to support and provide a space for greater women's participation? How would it be appropriate to approach some of the more sensitive 'gender' issues such as those surrounding LGBT lifestyles?

These guidelines do not seek to provide answers, but rather provoke a method of discernment for a context which is undergoing profound and swift change. Within each heading is a series of case studies, all taken from lived experience and accompanied by short reflection. At the end of each section are simple suggested guidelines gleaned from these experiences. These are meant to be just that, a guide, rather than hard and fast rules. They are applicable for those entering this world for the first time, and as a point of discussion for the more experienced. They can be used by ordained and lay Christians alike, by those

who are considered leaders in their faith communities and those who feel themselves to be simply members of a congregation. And although for the most part they address issues faced by women, all of these issues are of significance for men and women alike. In a recent discussion among a group of Muslims & Christians in the UK, in which there was a plea that Muslim women be welcomed into the mosques – the women were told to become scholars themselves and demand their place. The response from the women was that they had many scholars and were very well informed about their faith, but could not enter the mosques until the men welcomed them. At this point one of the Muslim religious leaders, with visible tears, told them they all, men & women together, have a jihad to bring women into the mosques. He later expressed his concern this endeavour continue. The men in his community are fathers, sons, brothers and cousins of women and have a religious responsibility to treat them as fellow human beings.

Gender issues are not those of pitting women against men and vice versa, they are about providing equality of opportunity for all of God's beloved children. This is an equality of opportunity not just for services, as in the public, secular arena, but opportunity to share in the reckless generosity of Christ's love sacrifice for us all. We are in this together.

The original group of women who came together were mixed in their reaction to a request to draw up the issues they faced into a separate set of guidelines. There were those who felt gender issues should not be separated out, making being a woman, or involving women in dialogue, into yet one more 'problem' area. When guidelines themselves suggest 'there is a problem', this presents the possibility of setting up yet another barrier rather than tearing them down. But those barriers are already up simply by the nature of our own Church's history. If we do not recognise them or try to ignore them, they will continue to be cause for frustration and a barrier to inclusion in the embracing love Christ has to offer. Do we as a Church demonstrate that all embracing love in our practice? This is the challenge these guidelines are meant to engage.

What does Scripture have to say?

The story of the Syrophoenician woman - *Mark 7:24-30*

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her,

"For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

During a session of Scriptural Reasoning at the St. Ethelburga Centre for peace and reconciliation in London, there was a discussion around whether or not Muslims could be friends with people of another faith tradition. At one point, a convert to Islam from a Baptist Christian background in the US cited this passage as proof that even Jesus did not advocate engaging with people of other traditions. A Christian woman, a convert from Islam, pointed out that this passage describes a point at which Jesus ministry underwent a paradigm shift because of the argument presented by the Syrophoenician woman – his ministry widened to include the 'other' rather than limited solely to the People of Israel. And it was here that a Jewish scholar made the argument that clinched the whole discussion. He reminded that Jesus had not only healed her daughter, but acknowledged the strength of her faith in God. In other words, Jesus not only expanded his ministry globally by healing someone not of the House of Israel, he acknowledged and accepted the faith people of other traditions have in God. And this acknowledgement is repeated many times over, in the stories of the Roman centurion, the Samaritan woman at the well and others.

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Gender issues, more publicly with regard to apparel, but especially the space women occupy in the world of the sacred, are one of the major issues of difference and dialogue between faith traditions and cultures. Within Christianity, women have been a powerful, painfully unacknowledged presence in the Gospels and in the history of the Christian Church. Throughout the early history of Muslim-Christian exchange, it is the women, married from Byzantium into powerful Muslim ruling families, who contributed a quiet Christian diplomacy and influence. It is said the best leader is the one who makes change happen without people realising it, so that when it is accomplished the people believe they have done it themselves. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge the contribution women make to interfaith dialogue and the future state of the world, both sacred and secular.

1 - Faith identity and integrity

When asked to attend the opening of a mosque on behalf of her diocese, a woman entered the mosque wearing a headscarf. Taken for a Muslim by those welcoming the visitors, she was sent directly to the women's section. She later noticed that all the other non-Muslim attendees were being directed elsewhere and given a tour. The other women were not wearing a headscarf, nor were they asked to wear one. Because she had entered with a headscarf she felt loath to take it off.

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A Christian woman attends an event at a mosque to which she has been invited. At the door she is instructed to wear a headscarf, but has not brought one with her – whereupon she is handed one.

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Two young Muslim women go into secondary schools, including Church of England schools, to talk about issues such as forced marriage, domestic violence and female genital mutilation. They are asked by the students what religion they are and are then challenged in their Muslim faith by non-Muslims who wonder why they don't wear a headscarf.

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When a group of Christian from Sussex and Blackburn dioceses went on pilgrimage in Turkey, the group from Blackburn remarked at how few women wore the burqa – in fact hardly any. They observed more women used the burqa in the North of England than they did in this Muslim country, even in the cities of Konya and Bursa, both known for their religious adherence.

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A Christian man visits a Sikh gurdwara and is asked to cover his head. He is handed a scarf and another man ties it on his head for him. The head-covering has a khalsa symbol on it that he does not understand. The men sit separately from the women inside.

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A young and highly articulate Hindu woman was invited to represent her faith tradition in a civic service. She wore a smart suit to the service, but was told by a male member of the Christian clergy he was disappointed she hadn't worn a sari, her national costume. She responded that she was wearing her national costume, she was British!

Many Muslim women in the UK are struggling with the headscarf, even the niqab, viewing it is less of a religious and more of a cultural necessity. Although sometimes arguing the headscarf is not necessary, they continue to wear it, believing their religious arguments will not be taken seriously by Muslims and non-Muslims alike unless they continue to wear this 'piece of cloth' on their head. And among those who choose to wear the headscarf through religious adherence, there is a frustration that such fuss is made, yet again, over a simple 'piece of cloth.' This term, 'piece of cloth', is constantly referred to as troublesome predominantly because of how it is perceived from outside the Muslim community.

This being said, that perception from outside, from the 'other', can have positive as well as negative influence. One young Muslim woman reports being shocked by Jack Straw's response to the woman wearing the *niqab* or face veil when she asked to meet with him. She had grown up in a close-knit family for whom the *niqab* was the norm. She hadn't realised the impact wearing the *niqab* had upon others whom she met. She said it took her two years of study and prayer, but in

the end believed it was the right thing to stop wearing it. She didn't want to give the impression that Islamic tradition oppressed her, that her family imposed anything upon her, and, more importantly, that she, a Muslim woman of faith, was unapproachable. This young woman now runs various charities in her city, including a programme that feeds the homeless. The Muslim community provides the food while a local church is used as the venue.

There is a fairly recent and growing phenomenon within the Muslim community in Britain and much of Europe that demands Muslim women wear the headscarf, and sometimes even the *niqab* or face covering, when quite possibly in the country of any particular culture's origin such covering is not necessary. This has been a cause for much frustration by the women themselves, who would really prefer their clothing to not be remarked upon or judged.

The assumption is sometimes made that women are forced into covering their hair or face because of the oppression of men. This in itself could be interpreted as a form of misogyny, an assumption that women do not chose it for themselves, that it is imposed on them by men, that they could not possibly choose this freely or have a mind of their own. Often women wear the *hijab* in defiance of families who would prefer them to conform to European or western fashion culture. Sometimes women wear it as a rejection of vanity and images of women projected by the fashion and beauty industry. There is a defining of self that seeks a life of chastity and modesty.

Taking all the above into consideration, the appropriateness of requesting people of faith to 'wear their native dress' is open to question. It is assuming faith is related to outward appearance or dress, and can be cause for accusations of wanting people to turn up in order to lend an exotic flavour to the appearance of an event, a 'photo op', rather than genuine presence.

Some mosques are starting to review what has been a standard practice of insisting women guests put on a head covering, wearing something that is not normally part of their own tradition. That churches do not insist Muslim women remove their headscarf or assume a Christian identity when they enter forms a share of the argument.

<u>Guideline:</u> When visiting others, don't assume a particular form of dress will be what is expected unless otherwise requested; but do turn up ready for anything – to take off your shoes, cover your head, legs or arms, whether you are a man or woman. First and foremost is to be comfortable in yourself, in your own identity, without feeling you need to take on the identity of another tradition in order to fit in or be respectful. But also be ready to conform if that is the cultural custom of those you are visiting and you are not being asked to do something which is against your own conscience.

When inviting others into your own space, don't expect them to be anything other than themselves. If they turn up in cultural or religious dress or turn up in 'western' dress, it is their choice.
Clothing and attire are part of our personal identity and as such an outward expression of who we are inside. It can also be part of our identity of faith. There are times when the request to conform to another religious tradition may feel too much of an imposition, especially when it is something that you don't understand. It is important at that point to make clear what you are and are not comfortable with, and to ask polite questions about what you are being asked to do.

2 - A question of solidarity

A group of ordinands was invited to visit a mosque as part of a course on interfaith engagement and ministry in multi-faith parishes. The participants were mixed gender but predominantly male. The group had been told previously that women did not use the mosque for prayer. One of the women wondered whether or not she should even go, and if she did, whether she should stand outside in solidarity with the Muslim women who could not enter, or go anyway as part of the exercise in hospitality. When she turned up she was told that she could only go into part of the mosque and not others. A good male friend of hers was sympathetic, but nevertheless went off with the men. She felt if he was truly sympathetic he should have stayed behind with her.

This case study is worth unpicking a little. If this ordinand had refused to visit the mosque at all, more than likely little notice would have been taken. Sometimes what is intended as protest can be taken as respect for practice. It may have been taken that she was respecting the practice of the mosque that women did not attend. If she did manage to register her non-attendance as protest, it would not have been taken seriously as the men still attended. The only means of impact for this type of protest would have been if the group as a whole refused to attend because women weren't welcome. It was also up to the organisers to ensure all ordinands attending would have been able to take full advantage of the event. A protest of this sort might have also been an effective means of furthering a much deeper dialogue. Readiness to dialogue implies a level of trust, that the difficult subjects be politely questioned with openness and honesty.

The female ordinand's non-attendance would not have registered with the Muslim women barred from the mosque. How would they learn of it? By attending and standing outside, she did the only action left to her disposal. That she was forced to wait outside quite possibly could have embarrassed the mosque committee welcoming the group. This may have given some back-up to those wishing to effect change, demonstrated by the fact she had previously heard the women of the community were unhappy at the situation.

Ideally, the men in the group should have registered their dissatisfaction if not for excluding her from the mosque where women did not normally enter, then for not providing any alternative accommodation for her. This is when the behaviour of her male colleagues could have demonstrated an effective model of religious unity, that we are all brothers and sisters. Instead they left her out in the cold.

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A woman was asked to speak at a Muslim function. She was then invited to a meal with the other speakers at the home of one of the members of the group. He was celebrating the circumcision of his son and would consider this a great honour for their family of the speakers accepted. She did accept and found herself travelling in all male company. She did not consider this a problem, until they arrived at the house. She was escorted with the men into the sitting room of the home where they were all waited on by two women who stayed in the kitchen the whole time. The female speaker didn't quite know what to do. She was told to sit and relax while the meal was served, so she accepted the hospitality. When she tried to speak with the women, she realised they did not speak English. She was torn between sitting with the men, who had invited her and with whom she was there to engage in dialogue, or try to visit with the women in the kitchen, who did not speak English and who were having to stand the whole time.

From this case study, we can see the quandary. Her hosts were the men who had invited her to a meal and with whom she was in the process of dialogue. And it was for this reason she decided to stay with the men. If she had gone to stand with the women in the kitchen, she would have insulted her hosts by abandoning them and embarrassed the women who wouldn't have known what to do with her, let alone be able to speak with her.

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A mixed group of male and female Christians and Hindus visited a temple together. The Christians were not aware of the background of the group that had built the temple, although the Hindus were very much aware of the religious practice expected. A Christian woman in the group noticed at once that the men and women were sent to separate rooms to remove their shoes, and also had separate entrances to the temple –something she had not noticed in any temples she had visited previously, even in India. When she asked whether she could take pictures, she was refused, but one of her male colleagues asked and it was accepted. The Hindu women began to enter through the women's door, but were told to accompany the men. They stated this was the first time they had been allowed to do this. During the visit the Christian women noticed all of the images in the temple were male – no female images were used. They were told that a female Christian architect had been responsible for the interior of the temple, but that when she met with their guru to discuss it, she had to sit the other side of a screen. He followed an 8-fold chastity that meant he could not

look at a woman. The Christian men did not notice the discomfort of both the Hindu and Christian women in the group.

This study is more of a call for awareness, to observe surroundings and take clues from the environment and the behaviour of those with whom you are engaging. Are they comfortable? Uncomfortable? Are some members of the group with whom you are in dialogue, either colleagues from your own tradition or those of the other, being excluded and why? Is this something you are comfortable with? There may be circumstances in which it is necessary to make those kind of compromises – as long as it is a conscious choice.

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A Christian priest related he had problems working with women colleagues because the Muslim men kept falling in love with them.

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One dialogue leader expressed recently he felt only men were able to relate fully to the Jewish community, particularly among the Orthodox. A female priest, however, has articulated she found no such difficulty.

These two examples are from experienced practitioners in interfaith dialogue and encounter. It just shows that sometimes even those with more experience can sometimes be blinkered when it comes to gender.

<u>Guideline:</u> It is always good practice to be aware of those around you, whether or not they are comfortable with what is happening around them, and of whatever tradition. It is important to never make assumptions about any given context or situation. If this is a new experience for you, it is more than like a new experience for all concerned. Be aware of the inclusion of everyone. Gender separation need not always be interpreted as isolation or that any one group is 'missing out'. But it shouldn't be assumed this is an everyday practice, nor that everyone is receiving an 'equal' experience. Care should always be taken between genders that there is an equality of opportunity, and if not – it is okay to question. Sometimes it is the best possible act of generosity you can make to insist upon the inclusion of the excluded. If equality of opportunity is a principle of Christianity, then that is something we should be demonstrating in our care for each other, for those of our own faith and of others. Asking tough questions will not insult, but rather build respect and trust.

3 - Not assuming we've got it right

A Christian leader expressed consternation that he could not get Muslim women to come along to any functions. He was then asked by his Christian woman colleague whether he had in fact also invited any Christian women. How could he expect Muslim women to come if Christian women didn't?

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A group of Christians visited a mosque on behalf of their bishop. They were asked by the Muslims about the hierarchy of their group – one, a man, was an ordained parish priest; one, a woman, was an ordained deacon, but also functioned as the area dean; and the third, a woman, was a lay person but also adviser to the bishop and part of the diocesan structure. They could not say who had the 'highest' position.

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As these and other previous case studies demonstrate, our partners in dialogue take their cue from our own practice as to the importance of gender in Christian practice and dialogue. If women are treated as equals by male colleagues, if they are included in dialogue events as equals, generally little or no difficulty is presented by those of other traditions.* When gender does present some barrier, such as Christian men wishing to relate to women of other traditions and practice, there are generally ways around these barriers through use of good humour and generous respect for one another's practice. For example, if a Muslim woman refuses to shake the hand of a man, or a Jewish male rabbi refuses to shake the hand of a woman – there is no disrespect intended. They are simply following the religious imperatives and expectations of their community. This is a line they cannot cross. Accepting the existence of those lines and adjusting behaviour accordingly in a spirit of good will provides a means by which obstacles can be transcended.

But all too often inaccurate and even destructive assumptions are made about the lines that can't be crossed. Because a Muslim man does not shake hands with a Christian woman, this is sometimes read as either a sign of disrespect or that she is not welcome - when in fact it is a simple rule of practice among some Muslims that you do not touch anyone of the opposite gender who is not family. There is no deeper nuance. Being asked to sit in a separate space does not mean there is no access to whatever dialogue is being had elsewhere – it rather provides opportunity for something else unexpected. And sometimes simply the presence of the unexpected brings about a questioning of religious practice – especially our own. It behoves us to remember there are some Christian cultures in which separation of men and women during worship is standard practice.

*An added caveat: in India often Western women are not seen as women but men, because of their status – and being 'over educated', with 'pushy' masculinised behaviour. This does not mean you are accepted as a woman, but rather that they bear with the situation whilst seeing you as an alienated-type.

<u>Guideline:</u> Think on your feet: don't' make assumptions about another's gender traditions. What appears to be discrimination may not necessarily be so. But above all, adhere to your own morality. If you see what seems to be prejudice, question it. If you find it to be a true prejudice, name it. If you find it is simply a perspective different from your own but not oppressive in itself, don't labour the point. Most of all, do not fall into misogynist or prejudice behaviour because you

believe it to be polite. Introducing a male into female contexts and vice versa is not insulting, although it may need to be approached with sensitivity. It is important to remember and acknowledge the Church of England is struggling with its' own gender issues, not least the recent debates surrounding women bishops. We do not have things 'sorted' and much behaviour between male and female colleagues unfortunately remains strained. It is important to be honest about this, and to endeavour to present a well-reasoned, articulate answer for our faith rather than project our own assumptions onto others and try to conform to that.

4 - When gender can make a difference

One Christian woman said because she had no formal title and didn't feel the need to speak out, she found among her local Hindu community she was treated with affection, a little bemusement, and complete respect when she did speak. She felt that because she was a woman, it was easier for the community to feel at ease and relax with her. It must be noted she felt this was partially due to the fact she was not perceived as 'missionary' but genuinely interested in listening and getting to know them, and not just because she was a woman.

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Another Christian woman said she found she had the advantage of having access to the women in her local Muslim community, something her male colleagues, however well intentioned, would never be given so much access to. She was also welcomed into male Muslim circles where she was treated as a religious leader. This was because her male colleagues and bishop treated her as such.

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One Christian woman remarked that she felt because of her gender the management of her romantic life, her chastity, were under scrutiny as it was not for her male colleagues. She was placed in the position of being the guardian of her community's sexual ethics.

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Another related a conversation between Muslim and Christian women who were articulating disapproval of couples who lived together, how they felt it was immoral. They then turned to the woman priest and asked her what she thought. She told them she found nothing immoral or degenerate in a couple who were in a committed relationship. Most couples who lived together were loyal to one another and had devoted themselves to one another. It would be unjust to level the same accusation of immorality against them as could be levelled against those who 'slept around.'

These short case studies were included not to imply that women are somehow 'better' at dialogue due to their gender, but rather to demonstrate that while women are sometimes placed in a position of trust because of their gender, or are seen as less of a threat, there is also implied in that a judgement of women,

rightly or wrongly, as guardians of the morality of their community. Women's behaviour is scrutinised more closely, how they dress or behave. There is greater pressure with regard to what is perceived as sexual behaviour, most of the time unconscious and unintentional. What kind of shoes or jewellery does she wear? What type and colour of clothing? Does she wear make-up or perfume? All of these can be judged as indicators of her suitability as moral guardian. How she behaves in the face of this, with confidence in her own moral fibre, and how her male colleagues treat her, can communicate a profound appreciation of the spiritual role of the feminine without compromising morality.

Guideline: It is important to recognise there are times when gender separation can be advantageous and a recognised part of some religious traditions. As mentioned previously, this does not necessarily mean an inequality – although it can. There is something to be said for participating in this separation while at the same time encouraging communication of the issues each gender may not necessarily be sharing.

5 - Good practice

A bishop was invited to attend a function at a mosque but was unable to attend. He requested a female colleague to attend on his behalf. When she turned up she was escorted into the female section of the mosque where she remained until the moment she was asked to enter the room where the men were holding the function and give her greetings. She did this, and then returned to the women's section of the mosque.

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This single simple example is testament to the graciousness with which we should be able to respond to any given situation – to accept the circumstances in which welcome is extended and act with due respect and dignity in accord.

Guideline: Respond to any given situation with graciousness, acknowledging the spirit of hospitality which is intended.

6 - How to ask the tough questions – about gender violence, forced marriage, FGM (female genital mutilation), education, participation and leadership

An imam spoke openly to a group of Christian students when they visited his mosque. Rather than the usual outlining of the pillars of faith he talked about some of the difficult issues facing his congregation and his pastoral care of them. He mentioned how women in the Bangladeshi community had the tradition of staying within their home. The husbands did the shopping and took the children to and from school. As a result of this the women just didn't learn English, and their children no longer wanted to speak Bengali – they wanted to speak the

English they were learning and using in school. This ended up with a whole generation of children unable to communicate with their mothers, mothers who became servants rather than the full parents that were needed. The imam said he tried to set up English classes in the mosque, but the women didn't come. He was asking whether there were any Christian women who could visit them in their homes and teach them English.

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As part of a consultation between Christian and Muslim women and participation in their respective communities of worship, the Muslim women expressed frustration that they had no place at the mosque; they could not worship there let alone be a part of their mosque committees. How could they get together to enable this to happen? There was an assumption the Christian women were treated with complete equality, and were surprised when told their Christian companions also had difficulties. They were not concerned with women acting as imams for their communities. That was beyond consideration for them.

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A volunteer at a charity supporting refugees reports the wide range of young women facing health problems due to female genital mutilation (FGM) practiced on them when they were young girls. Many of them come from Sudan and Egypt, Muslim and Christian alike.

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One priest reports hearing imams respond to questions regarding FGM, that it is illegal in the UK but that it is possible to send daughters abroad for circumcision.

This practice too, sending girls abroad for the purpose of FGM in a country where it is legal, is actually illegal for those resident in the UK and those doing so can be subject to prosecution. The complaint is that there is no or little enforcement of these laws and very little is being done to prevent this happening to girls. The practice is more cultural than religious, but religion is used as excuse. It has been known among Muslims and Christians in some parts of Asia, but mostly in parts of the Middle East and Africa.

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In a dialogue between Christians and Muslims about marriage, the issue of gay relationships was brought up. If we could accept that we are born to be the way God made us, if we cannot choose the gender we are attracted to because of our genetic make-up, and if Islam recognises the importance of sexual relations, advising against the practice of celibacy - how does a gay person enjoy intimate companionship within the constraints of faith and religious tradition? The answer came that even though a Muslim cannot indulge in religiously prohibited methods of sexual relations, there are ways in which people may share their lives and enter into a contract with one another – such as buying a house together or entering into a financial partnership. Like marriage, this involves a contract between two people.

It must be acknowledged that there is still debate among many religious circles, Christian and non-Christian, about the question of whether homosexual attraction is a matter of genetic make-up (something that is determined at birth) or matter of 'nurture' (something that can change depending on the complex interaction of social and psychological causes). In Iran, there is legal recognition that genetic make-up may determine sexuality. The conclusion of some religious jurists there, and brought into the law of the land, is that homosexuality is an 'illness' to be 'corrected' through gender reassignment surgery. This is yet another point for debate, and for some has been cause for yet another form of suffering. But this has meant that those individuals who have had gender reassignment are legally recognised as the other gender, having their birth certificate changed and able to marry as the new gender, in addition to the respective change in inheritance rights.

It should not be assumed that because there is a social stigma attached in some communities to LGBT individuals and practice, the surrounding issues are a taboo subject for dialogue or discussion. Many times it is in opening up these more contentious subjects that greater understanding and trust is built between and within communities as they touch on a hidden source of pain for many families, pain they may have previously been reluctant to engage. This type of engagement can be a source of healing and growth.

At the other end of the liberal-conservative spectrum, the debate surrounding the UK Government's 'redefinition' of marriage has lead to meetings between the Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and conservative Evangelical Christian groups as they work together to campaign against the term 'marriage' being applied to Gay Civil partnerships.

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A chaplain to the HIV and AIDS community has expressed the frustration of a group of women from the Hindu and Muslim communities. Because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, many gay men marry to hide their sexuality from their families and community. The result is that because of the guilt attached to their sexuality, they tend to believe they are damned and tend towards promiscuous homosexual behaviour. This more often than not ends in contracting sexually transmitted diseases and passing them on to their wives and future children. These wives are then stigmatized, feeling they must hide their husband's homosexual practice, hide their own illness, and tend toward guilt feelings of their own for not 'turning' their husbands to heterosexual practice. The chaplain has pastoral care of this group of women, but is also concerned to raise these concerns among the Hindu and Muslim religious leaders.

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Guideline: *Don't make assumptions about any tradition. To ask the awkward question demonstrates confidence in one's own theology, respect for the other, and trust in the relationship. Neither should these questions be asked immediately – if so, it may be more a misinterpretation on your own part and can appear confrontational. Take the time to build relationships, and if there is no time – ask anyway. It shows more respect for your partner in dialogue than if you leave without the serious questions being asked.*

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Conclusion

The single most abiding principle in any dialogue situation should be to act with generosity, good humour and kindness, to treat our neighbour as we would want to be treated and to love them as ourselves. Our behaviour with our fellow humanity, with all of God's beloved children, should be rooted in this.

It is very much hoped this short document will be used as a stimulus for further discussion. We have set up a Facebook group which we invite those who wish to, to share their own stories or related topics or points for discussion.

The name for this group, *Talitha cum! Stand up, Girl!*, is based on the story from the Gospel of Mark 5:25-end:
"While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat."

One, insignificant girl - someone no one would have paid attention to, would have shoved into the corner or told to fetch the water or sweep the floor; one insignificant girl – Jesus takes her hand, he tells her to stand. She was dead, but now she is alive! She is no longer lying on the bed silent and ill, she is not even sitting. She is standing, standing tall! Jesus has raised this weak female child from the dead, and she is alive! She is standing! And he tells everyone around to feed her, to nurture her, to look after her. She is a precious child of God. She must be seen. She must be supported and nurtured, loved and cared for.

Talitha Cum, Girl! Stand up, be counted! Know you are loved for the precious child of God you are!

Women have much to contribute to our faith communities, but in order to do that they need to be brought to life and nurtured. It is hoped this humble contribution may provide a means by which some practical and spiritural nourishment may be shared.

For more information:
Contact the Rev'd Bonnie Evans-Hills
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Or share your story on our Facebook page:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/Talitha.cum/

These guidelines are available to download at:
http://talithacumstandupgirl.wordpress.com/