

Beliefs and Values: Interfaith Issues

Interfaith Issues

What does 'Interfaith' mean?

The Interfaith Movement in Scotland grew out of a need to get people from different religions and cultural backgrounds to work together and support each other. The term 'interfaith' encompasses a breadth of meaning, but is primarily about promoting mutual understanding and building good relations between people of different religions. People involved in interfaith work seek to raise awareness of the teachings, traditions and practices of different communities.



This [action guide](#) from the Inter Faith Network for the UK discusses the importance of building connections and friendships between the different religions in Scotland today.

Within this section you will find out information about key people involved in interfaith work in Scotland and how they put their beliefs and values into action in order to achieve greater awareness between groups.

Prominent figures in the Interfaith movement: Stella Reekie

A life remembered

In Wellington Church, Glasgow, on 4 October 1982, there was a gathering of many nationalities, among them Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, Jews and Christians, to celebrate the life of Stella Reekie. After reading Psalm 139, with its words:

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, Too high to grasp, too great to understand.”

Balwant Singh Saggu, a leader of the city's Sikh community, was moved to speak from his heart:

“Stella Reekie was too great for me, too high to grasp and too great to understand ... She suffered for us up to her last breath, so that we ... could get together, enjoy ourselves together, and learn to live in love, peace and harmony.”

Stella died on 28 September 1982. She fought on bravely, refusing to let her illness influence what she wanted to do. She rejoiced that at times prayer kept her well and free of pain. She said that she overcame her pain by taking into herself the suffering of those who came to her for comfort and assistance.

All faiths were represented at Stella Reekie's funeral, which was testament to the work that she carried out. A woman of strong faith and commitment, who acted out of love and compassion for people, achieved so much. From the early work of Stella Reekie, the interfaith movement grew, where different people of different faiths and background talk and communicate and work together.

Stella's Story

Stella Jane Reekie was born on 29 July 1922, youngest of the eight children of Arthur and Jane Reekie. A year after her birth, the family moved to Chalky Bank, a new house that her father had built two miles outside Gravesend. Until she was eight she went to Bronte Villas School run by two sisters, and later attended the Gravesend County School for girls, where she played hockey and lacrosse in the first teams.



In 1943 Stella was living in Hammersmith and working in the war-time nursery at Cadby Hall. She was very deeply affected when the house she was living in was bombed and the girl she shared it with was injured and blinded. One evening she went to the Greek Embassy and saw a film shown by the Red Cross, about the distress in Europe, the hunger and the poverty, and the need for relief workers. She joined the Red Cross and took evening lectures, while continuing her own work during the day, in preparation for work among refugees overseas.

Early in 1945 she sailed with other team workers to Belgium. While they were there, an S.O.S. was received from the front line. Belsen had been discovered, and they, as civilians, were the only people who could go so far forward and take charge of civilian people.

She writes: 'That was the beginning of a long chapter of my life ... Here I saw much but it is sufficient to say that it was here I saw before my own eyes, in the same dazzling way in which Christ stood before Paul to tell him of the Truth, Jesus the Christ Living, to save mankind. I saw in the horrors of Belsen what man could do if Christ was not in the centre of men's lives, and at the centre of the world.'

At Belsen, the issue was how to manage, feed and look after all these people, and at the same time rehabilitate them and help them to make decisions on whether or not they wished to return to their homelands. Whilst the daily, physical needs had to be catered for, the psychological and emotional problems could not be disregarded. There was a need for a Polish Church for the many children needing instruction, and adults, deprived of education during the years of war, who were also in need of re-schooling.

The Polish School of Bergen-Belsen was the setting in which Stella became a prolific and enthusiastic worker. She worked day and night, trying to seek out those capable of providing necessary tuition, to find sources of desks and paper, to search for Polish books, and to cater for all the physical needs of the children. There were some 470 Polish children between the ages of 7 and 16, mostly peasant children whose parents were deported to Germany to work on farms.



Stella continued to work with children after the closure of Belsen, she took control of the Children's Block of the British Red Cross No. 1 hospital for T.B. Displaced Persons at Bad Rehburg.

Stella's work in Pakistan

After approaching the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland through the Presbyterian Church in Gravesend, Stella studied at St Colm's College in Edinburgh for two years, from 1949 to 1951. In 1951, she sailed from Liverpool with other missionaries on the S.S. Cilicia bound for Karachi and Bombay. After a period of language study, Stella was appointed to take charge of the work amongst women in the Sialkot district of Karachi.

She worked at the Welfare Centre, where daily clinics were held for mothers and children, and local midwives were given training. There was a kindergarten, where Stella was in her element. In the same compound there were Bible teachers in training, and the afternoons were set aside for visiting in the villages with these young women.

In a land still very much influenced by traditional views of a woman's place in society, the influence of the Bible teachers was vital. They were permitted to enter houses closed to others, and so their training was especially important.

Stella visited the villages on foot, to bring assurance of concern to scattered Christian groups, and into Muslim homes. Two or three villages were visited each day. When transport became available, more distant villages were reached and longer stays were possible.

Stella was very much a 'loner', who organised her own methods of working and pursued them with dedication and persistence. She showed great determination in defending the women's work against interference from the men, and even from the wives of the missionaries. She

helped women in many practical ways, such as promoting and supervising women's sewing for the Technical Services Association. Village women were given material to sew, then Stella collected and inspected the work, and took it to Lahore. The women were well paid for good work and it was a blessing to many.

She never took the easy way out even in all the difficulties involved in distributing relief food and clothing to villagers who had lost their homes in floods or during the tense days of war between India and Pakistan. This, when she was the only foreign missionary left in Gujrat. She never deviated from what she believed to be right. She seemed to remain calm and unafraid.

Stella's work in Glasgow

In 1968 Stella headed back to Scotland as huge cultural change was underway. In the late 1900s many Asian people were coming to the industrial cities of the UK and the YMCA and the churches were exploring ways of serving the growing number of immigrants in Scotland.

For religious and cultural reasons, many Asian men would not permit their wives to go outside their homes even to meet other women, unless they were satisfied that no men would be present. The need emerged for a woman worker who understood and respected the ways of the newcomers to be appointed in Glasgow, where the greatest numbers had settled.

Stella and her friends were already visiting Asian families in their homes. They found many of them reluctant to open their doors more than an inch, but when Stella spoke in Urdu the doors were opened wide. In March 1969, Stella was appointed by the Home Board of the Church of Scotland to work three days a week among immigrant women in Glasgow. After six months it was agreed that the churches should adopt a united approach to work with immigrant groups.

The International Flat

In 1969, Stella and others searched for suitable accommodation in order to offer hospitality to any person in transit for official reasons, or stranded and in need. After a time it was agreed that her own rented flat in Glasgow should receive official recognition as the centre for the work.

Three years later, through the purchase by the Church of Scotland of a large flat, the International Flat was established. It had two large meeting rooms – the sitting room and the library – and the all-important kitchen.



When Stella returned to Britain, one of the main things she missed was the extended family, for she found that people of different generations rarely seemed to meet together within the family. Different members worked on different shifts and people were constantly busy. Within the International Flat she managed to create a truly family atmosphere, a home, to which everyone was welcome, day or night.

Stella wanted the flat to grow and despite growing media interest and publicity, she managed to retain the main emphasis on family and sharing that the flat encapsulated. Staffing numbers

grew in the flat and as Stella's health started to deteriorate she got assistance from many others who wished to ensure that the work of the flat continued.

The sharing of faiths

No one planned the sharing of faiths in Glasgow: it grew out of something else. In May 1969, the Pakistani, Indian and British helpers formed a voluntary committee, and in July the committee voted to be known as the Central Social Group. Its purpose was to help the newly arrived ethnic groups to find their feet in Glasgow, and to represent the ways of these new communities to those in authorities and to the rest of the city.

As time went on, other bodies began to take over the general social purposes of the Group, but the spiritual needs were not being met. Meetings were held in people's homes to learn from one another about faith. The new communities were active in this sharing from the start. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus found a bond between themselves and their Jewish neighbours. Stella acted as the focus of this sharing, to stimulate and express a context of trust in which the sharing might develop.

Stella felt that the Sharing of Faiths Committee must never be exclusive. It should be open to any faith which sought to make its own contribution. Stella said:

“When we meet together, we find that we have so much in common, and, although our faiths are not the same, we can learn to respect one another because of the differences that we discover together. By doing this we can build a much happier set of relationships within our own city and can make sure that Christianity will be better understood by others.”

The Sharing of Faiths continues to share human friendship across religious boundaries and to foster understanding among people of different races and faiths in order to learn from each other, to share religious experiences and to deepen peoples understanding of religious insights.

Activities to support learning

Think:

- In what ways do you think Stella was influenced by her faith?
- Did the results of her work reflect what she believed in?
- Can you think of any other examples of people who have been prompted to promote interfaith dialogue?
- Do you think there is still work to be done in relation to interfaith dialogue in Scotland? What currently happens to promote this in the country and what else needs to be done?
- Explain how Stella's formative experience in the concentration camps affected her life and future actions.
- What do you think Stella would want her legacy to be?
- What difficulties are there in getting different groups to talk to each other?
- How can you help different groups to talk with each other?

Education Scotland

Denholm House
Almondvale Business Park
Almondvale Way
Livingston EH54 6GA

T +44 (0)131 244 4330

E enquiries@educationscotland.gov.uk

www.educationscotland.gov.uk