

Why This Pastor to Muslims Wanted to Remain Quiet About the Orlando Shooting

Forgive me for being emotional and personal: I woke up at 3:30 this morning with my heart churning about Orlando and quickly emailed Steve Strang that we were all grieving with you from across the pond in the U.K., but that as a Mahabba team (that means “Love” in Arabic), we had decided to respectfully remain silent to give you time to grieve and find a way to respond. We hurt and grieve with you all.

It was such a surprise to have an immediate request not to remain silent, but a heartfelt request to help people come to terms with this tragedy, as he and so many others felt numb. I so well remember that same numbness when I was an officer in the British Army and four of my soldiers were blown up senselessly in a radio-controlled explosion in our first week of action. The shock was so immense that I never really processed that pain, and just locked it up inside. So I do identify with many of you, and it is with some trepidation, and a feeling of humility and brokenness, that I am now writing.

Right now we are all facing the Love Challenge: Will we choose to love sacrificially when nothing makes sense and our emotions are either totally numb or screaming inside? It's at times like this that we need to remember that people are never our enemy, whether Muslim or Christian, LGBT or straight, black or white—whatever the differences, everyone is loved and has been purchased by our precious Jesus, who gave His life for each one with no exceptions. My Bible says that love never fails, but oh, how it hurts sometimes! This is the Love Challenge!

I remember just after the events of 9/11 that Muslims in the U.K. were terrified of being persecuted and so they gathered in large numbers in mosques to try to make sense of the events. I quickly sent a message to all the other pastors in my town, asking them to join me outside the local mosque after Friday prayers, so that we could press flowers into every hand as they came out, telling them not to be afraid: We were true believers in “Isa Al Masih”—Jesus the Messiah—and they could count on us to be their friends. This was the Love Challenge—to respond in the opposite spirit, when our love tank was totally dry, and inside we were raging against radical Islam; we had to choose to love the very people whose Holy Book had inspired such senseless carnage.

Sadly, not one pastor turned up, due possibly to fear or anger, and I was left alone with five intercessors pressing flowers into every hand. Most were in tears as we did this, and one young man jumped into my arms and said, “I don’t care where you come from—I’m following you!” This was the impact of one simple act of true love. That moment profoundly changed my life: learning to see behind all the veils and facades of religion, refusing to stereotype people, and actually feel God’s Father heart of love for them.

The seeds of this love for Muslims had been sown over several years as I went ahead of Reinhard Bonnke, as his campaign director, into many Islamic cities, believing that thousands would come to Christ. During our prayer times, we again and again heard the prophetic heart cry of God from Isaiah 45, that He would give us these precious Muslim people, whom He saw as “treasures in darkness.” Somehow we needed to choose to see Muslims as people just like us—but people who had become prisoners of an ideology that denied them the joy of living in the light of God’s forgiveness and grace.

Back to this morning. As I drove to the National Prayer Breakfast in the Houses of Parliament in London, my heart was heavy for Orlando, and unexpectedly all the memories of losing

my four soldiers almost 40 years ago began to resurface. At the breakfast I listened to the Middle Eastern bishop talk of the martyrdom of 21 courageous men from his church being beheaded on the beach in Libya, and how he knelt down and then tweeted #fatherforgive. He then finished speaking, there was silence, and the band began to play. I cannot explain what happened next as I closed my eyes, but tears just flowed, and those years of locked-up pain were released and healed—instantly!

Only embracing the cross at this time will enable us to respond well to the Love Challenge. Oh, how it hurts, but it is the only safe place to bring the kaleidoscope of emotions and reactions that we are all feeling. {eoa}

Gordon Hickson *is a pastor from Oxford, England, and has been in missions and pastoral work for over 30 years. Recently he and others have launched a prayer-based relational network called Mahabba, motivating and mobilizing ordinary Christians to unveil Jesus to Muslims (info@).*