



# A different path

**I am a business woman working alongside Muslims, not only as a colleague, but also as an employer. I am based in New Zealand, but also conduct business in several Muslim countries. Widowed at the age of 34, with two young children, I never dreamed I would end up here...**

My introduction to this world was stumbled upon shortly after our family's return to New Zealand: we had moved to the outskirts of Auckland, and I had to drive the girls to and from school. One warm, sunny afternoon, returning home from school, I noticed three children walking along the side of the road. Home was obviously quite a distance from school, so I stopped and asked them if they wanted a ride. They looked a little nervous, so to reassure them I gave the oldest child my phone number and suggested meeting their parents to ask their permission. Shortly after arriving home I

received a phone call to say their father was ready to see me! Minutes later I stood knocking on the door of an old farm house. As it opened gingerly, a small black-clothed figure scurried away into the shadows, and there appeared before me a tall, striking Pashtun man. Once inside the house, I was ushered into a bare room where the only furniture consisted of an assortment of old chairs that lined each wall. Male friends of the family were already gathered in the room, waiting to meet me. I was the only woman present. Smiling rather nervously, I took my place, and questions began to flow. Eventually they moved onto the number of children I had, and whether I had a son. On finding out I didn't have a son and wasn't planning on having more children, they quickly suggested that my husband would appreciate it if I changed my mind and tried again. I politely thanked them for their concern.

The tension seemed to disperse, though, once they learned my younger daughter's name: a warm banter bounced from one wall to the other, until it stopped at my host who asked me where I had got her name. He then explained that her name came from the Northern province of their country, the

province my host called home! It means 'brightness', in particular the brightness of God. Translated, we would call it His Glory - WOW! The warmth of the Holy Spirit touched me as I drove home afterwards, and I sensed this meeting somehow was going to change my life. Muslims? God, are You sure? I didn't know anything about Muslims, but a door was opening and, curious, I stepped on through.

Unbeknownst to me then, the host would, in time, become my dear friend. I quickly discovered him to be incredibly opinionated: once, losing control in a friendly debate, he exclaimed with intense frustration, "I'm glad I meet you here in NZ, because if I had met you in my country, I may have already put a knife in your back!"

Unsure if he was actually serious or not, I responded with nervous laughter and surprise - "You really are my warrior brother and I love you!" He then broke into a huge smile, delighted by his new title.

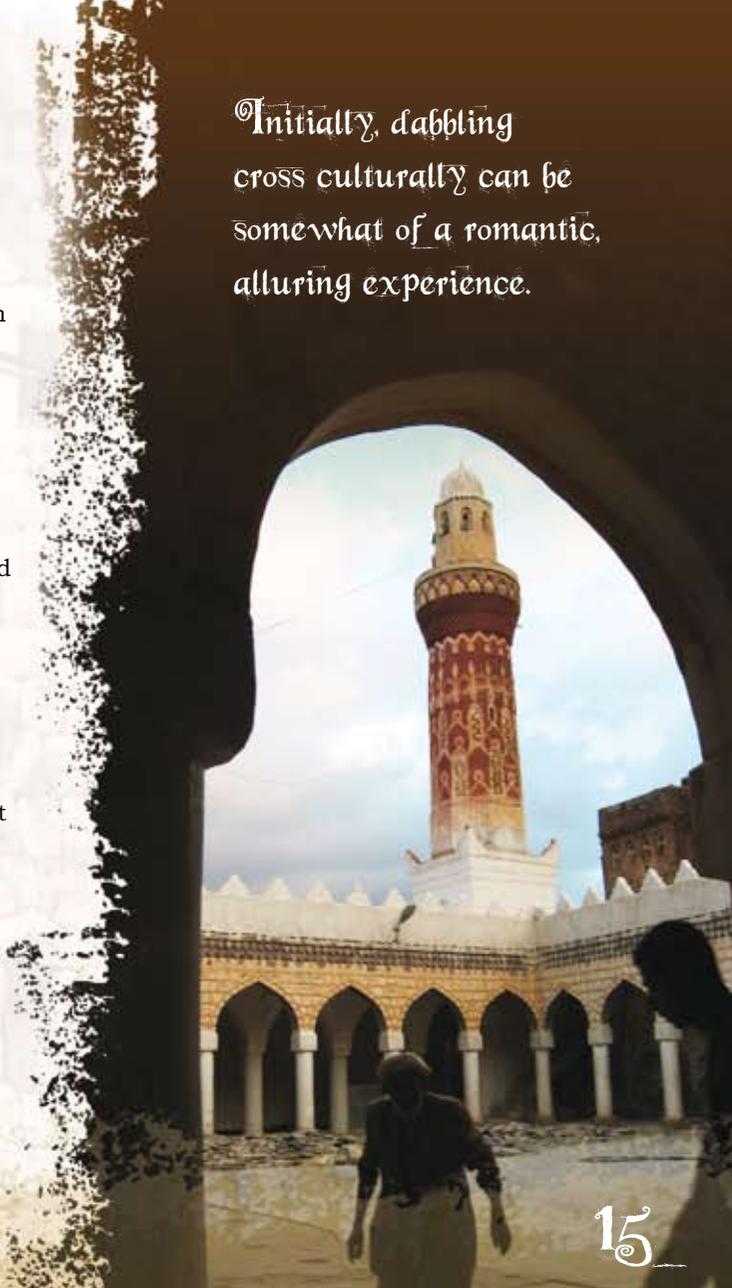
My business life started while helping out a Muslim friend in a small retail shop/café, and I realized I had found my passion! When that business was sold, another Muslim friend asked if I'd consider managing a business he was looking at buying, right in the central business district. After much prayer, I agreed to accept the challenge! I am currently one of the directors, with a staff of nine. Most of our staff are Muslim, with the exception of two, but even they grew up in Muslim countries.

At times it's difficult for my male employees to have a women boss, and equally difficult for me. I don't believe that I'm actually considered to be totally woman - but I'm definitely not male - I think I'm placed in a category all of my own. This actually has its advantages, as I can move from male to female domains with relative ease, even when I travel in Muslim countries. I do find it interesting that Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was a business women, and yet Islam in so many countries discourages female education, let alone female careers!

I acknowledge working on New Zealand turf gives me an easier road than working overseas, but working with people who have completely different value systems still has its challenges. Thankfully the Word of God is full of good advice on how to manage our personal lives, our finances, and how to interact with others. During my first couple of years in business I studied the book of Proverbs - I'd go through a chapter a day. I also became more conscious of the need for the fruit of the Spirit to be daily outworked in my life - I really believe that the 'fruit of the Spirit' encapsulates the nature of Immanuel, the Christ we want others to see.

I feel I have been incredibly blessed. There have been many precious

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afternoons where our tearoom at work has filled with friends who stayed on into the night... lots of eating, drinking, talking and laughter as we shared in each others lives. Often it's in this warm, friendly hub, as I listen to their stories, that I get to see beyond the gulf of religious and cultural differences, and I see their hearts. As the frustration and busyness of the day melts away, God reminds me of His love for each of them, and His desire to be known by them - what a privilege to have a chair in our tearoom!

We're quite an interesting bunch, so let me introduce you to some of my business family: the dearest Afghan gentleman, who's deeply concerned on how to bring both of his wives to New Zealand; the loveable Iranian rogue who hides 'halal' whiskey behind the fridge and teases the more dedicated Muslim, who won't join him in a drink but admits to never buying anything off a Muslim if he can help it; the mocking, hard young man who defends Islam yet lives an immoral life; and the crazy, personable Casanova who has



mixed Islam and Buddhism and believes he's a prophet. You can see why I hesitate when asked to explain what a Muslim believes on a certain topic - telling you what the Qur'an says is no problem, but what individual Muslims believe... that's different. It's so important that we get to know and understand each person God has put into our lives as being unique, and not assume we know exactly what they believe just because we can categorise them.

Dabbling cross culturally can initially be somewhat of a romantic and alluring experience. It's as we move from curiosity to a commitment that we find ourselves stretched uncomfortably at times. My



commitment to cross-cultural involvement, and then business, has been the vehicle God has used to unravel my human frailty. It's been in this place that I have come to understand God's grace in my life and, in turn, for others, in a far deeper measure. This painful inner transformation has been His greatest gift to me - I thought I was going out to change the world, and ended up seeing the greatest change happen in me!

As believers in God's unfathomable creativeness in making each of us unique, tailored for His purposes - why do we continue to be surprised when He chooses that different path for us? That warm, sunny afternoon when I thought I was just stopping to offer three children a ride home, I had no idea that God was about to lead me down a path that not many others have journeyed on.

But all followers of Christ are 'born again' with that mission to love Him and make Him known - and if business is your business, then that's obviously the place to make Him known. As Christ-centred business people we can help those around us understand and appreciate justice, the boundaries of freedom, and the many beautiful attributes that can only be experienced in Him. ☞

*The author is currently located in New Zealand where she continues to develop her business and shares her life with many in the Muslim community. She also spends time in the Middle East.*

## Khadija

Muhammad was employed in his early years by Khadija, a wealthy widow, to manage her caravan trade. At the age of 25 he married her; they were married for 25 years.

Khadija was a very successful business woman, however as Mecca at this time was a polytheistic society, she did not conduct her business affairs in a Muslim-majority environment. Islam was in its very early stages; there was no Qur'an, no Haddiths

(most of Muhammad's revelations had not occurred yet), so no comprehensive teaching was in place about the role of women.

Khadija was Muhammad's mentor and supporter, and encouraged him to pursue his spiritual journey. She held the purse-strings, and it wasn't until after she died that Muhammad (with the aid of the money he inherited from her) began to promote Islam more openly and aggressively. ☞

## Women in Islam

The official Islamic view on women is taken from the Qur'an and the Haddiths (the body of literature that explains the Qur'an), and all interactions between Muslim men and women flow from this background of teaching. However, a great diversity exists within Islam and Islamic-based cultures, and the understanding and application of the teachings on women are interpreted according to context and culture.

The orthodox Islamic view is that women are deficient in intelligence, religion and gratitude. As a witness their testimony is worth only half that of a man. A woman is a man's 'toy'; she is a chattel with very few rights, and most of these rights are

dependant on her husband's whim. Men may marry up to four women and have the right to automatic divorce if a wife is displeasing for any reason. Children belong only to the husband.

In more liberal Muslim-majority countries women have more rights (i.e. can work, drive, vote, even become Prime Minister as in Pakistan) but where Islam is applied more strictly, women have very few rights; very few would be allowed to work, let alone run a business. In Western nations the application of Islamic rules change again, and many women are allowed, even encouraged, to work, whilst others are forced to stay home in virtual Purdah (isolation). ☞