

Maryam Shah, a law student from the UK, spoke at the first plenary of the Tools for Changemakers conference, about her experience of the Learning to be a Peacemaker (LPM) course.

The course's aim was to develop peacebuilding skills in young people through looking at peacemaking in an Islamic context. There were 12 participants from around Europe: the UK, France, Albania, Turkey, Sweden, Poland and Ukraine.

The five-day programme was designed to challenge our misconceptions of Islam and what it stands for. Islam is not a religion of extremism or violence and out-dated beliefs, but, instead, one that promotes justice, peace and tolerance towards all people, regardless of faith.

This course taught me three things that really changed me.

Firstly, the importance of truly knowing your own beliefs. As Frank Buchman, the founder of Initiatives of Change, taught, how can we build peace among others if we are conflicted inside us? It is important to know what you truly believe in and what you are willing to stand for.

I learnt that in Islam, justice is the priority. The Quran, our holy text, teaches us to stand up for justice, even when it is hard, and even when it means speaking up against our own selves, or against our loved ones.

I also learnt about the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) and his skills as a peacemaker. We were taught that as early as the 7th century AD, he led to the creation of a constitution for a tolerant, multicultural society with the Jews living in Medina.

This was something I did not know before. In this constitution, it states, 'The Jews will be treated as one community with the Muslim believers'. And it recognizes that the Jews have their own religion which is to be respected and tolerated in its practice.

All of this knowledge helped us to understand the tradition of peace in Islam. But even more than that, it helped us to feel confident in being able to explain our beliefs to other people. This was something I had not been able to do before.

The second important thing I learnt was the ethics of disagreement. I had always fled away from talking about the aspects of my religion that did not seem to fit in with the views of society today, the status quo.

Through staying silent when people questioned me about my religion, I had previously felt voiceless, uncomfortable, powerless. This course helped me to realize that you should never feel afraid to have conviction in what you believe in.

And even more importantly, that it is OK to not hold the beliefs of the majority and to be true to yourself. Disagreement is part of life. There will always be differences. They are what makes us the multicultural, global community that we are today.

But the key is to know how to disagree respectfully, in a way that is tolerant, peaceful and respectful of others' beliefs. This was a part of peacebuilding that I had not understood until now.



Finally, the course emphasized the importance of being an active citizen. Not just of your country, not just of your continent, but of the world.

Instead of allowing any feeling of isolation or not fitting in to lead to sadness or violence, we were taught to channel these emotions into something far more constructive: working for the societies that we live in to become more inclusive and understanding and tolerant.

In summary, this course has helped me to become a lot more at peace with myself and a lot more excited to be a tool for change and to contribute to the global society that we live in.