



Testimony

Religious and Moral Education

Inter Faith

Stella Reekie (1922 – 1982)

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 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. The person on the bike cannot understand the feeling of the person flying in the air. I did not understand what was meant by saying Jesus died for our sins. Now I do understand what it means. Stella died for us. She suffered for us up to her last breath, so that we the Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Baha'is, Jews, Christians and others could get together, enjoy ourselves together, and learn to live in love, peace and harmony. For Christians, she was a Christian, but she was something more than that. She was above labels. For me, a Sikh, Stella was a Sikh, because I could see Sikhism reflecting from her daily life. She was a saint of God and she showed us what the love of God was like. To me, she was like water, clear running water. If you pour it into a glass, it takes the shape of a glass. If you pour it into a flask, it takes the shape of a flask. She became the shape of what was needed at any time where she was. Like water, she would wash and soothe wounds. Take away dirt and quench the thirst of lonely, desperate minds."

An outline should never the less be recorded. Stella had a mastectomy operation in 1974. Cancer of the spine was diagnosed in 1980 and she fought this indomitably, conceding it no importance and refusing to let it influence what she wanted to do.

She rejoiced that at times prayer kept her well and free of pain. She said, "It is true that pain is one of the Father's honours and a gift to us, because in it we see Him, know Him, and find Him in new and wonderful ways." She said that she overcame her pain by taking into herself the suffering of those who came to her for comfort and assistance. This accords with the lovely words of a meditation found in her office desk after she died, the source of which is unknown.

*When I am hungry
Lord, when I am hungry, give me someone to feed. When I am thirsty, give water for their thirst. When I am sad, someone to lift from sorrow. When burdens weigh upon me, lay upon my shoulders the burdens of my fellows. Lord, when I stand greatly in the need of tenderness, give me someone who yearns for love. May your will be my bread, your grace my strength and your love my resting place.*

In September 1982 Stella went into hospital for a rest, intending to come out refreshed for work. But she discharged herself, saying she must be present at the special Sunday afternoon meeting at the Flat, when the Clerk of Glasgow Presbytery was to speak. She returned to the hospital the following day, very ill. On Sunday, September 26, her Nigerian doctor and his wife, Mark and Maureen Muotone, were with her in her last time of consciousness, and her last words were words of comfort to Maureen,

"Now do not worry , it will be all right". Two days later, other close friends were with her when she died.

The Polish School at Belsen.

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.



Stella at Wellgarth Nursery Training College, 1939 – 1940

"He led me by the hand"

In 1943 Stella was living in Hammersmith and working in the war-time nursery at Cadby Hall, established by J. Lyons and Company for their women workers. 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 she has described what happened there: "I realise, looking back, that this could have been the beginning of God revealing to me the work. He had prepared for me. At the Greek Embassy I saw a film, shown by the Red Cross, of the distress in Europe, the hunger and the poverty, and the need for relief workers. I joined the Red Cross and took evening lectures, while continuing my own work during the day, in preparation for work among refugees overseas. The training was absorbing and interesting and the 'social welfare' approach to life took hold of me."

"He opened my eyes"

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 peoples.

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."

She spoke rarely about Belsen, but once she told a friend that while they were separating the living bodies from the dead, she found a sack which she thought contained a rickle of bones, until she heard a whimper. It was the living body of a child.

The ranks of those liberated at Belsen were further swollen by the transfer of many nationalities to the area. 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, and of course there were also children. Many, many children needed instruction, and adults, deprived of education during the years of war, 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. Here 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. One of the features of her work was her complete devotion to the cause of providing those lost, disadvantaged people with the semblance of a normal life. Stella's own family sent pencils, paper, crayons, paints, wool, and cotton - as much as they could collect.

At the Polish School, 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, they were quiet and gentle, but delightfully friendly and responsive. The teachers were all Polish.



A paper describing the school speaks of Stella: "The British Red Cross Child Welfare Officer is the guardian angel who watches over the school life, and to whom the children turn eagerly, quite unhampered by the fact that there is little they can say in English, or she in Polish. They understand one another admirably, and it is the same with the teachers, although they also have little English, she copes with endless problems, such as sudden shortages of fuel, collapse of the bus, lack of material for work, illnesses, complaints about the bread, the endless small details which in such an undertaking are always going a little wrong and needing care."

When Stella continued to work with children after the closure of Belsen, she took control of the Children's Block of the B.R.C. No. 1 hospital for T.B. Displaced Persons at Bad Rehburg. Colleagues remember how Stella inspired interest and support in the most unlikely of people. One very solid official used to save his sweet ration for "Stellas Children".

Pakistan

"Looking back into my life," Stella wrote, "I would say that this was the point at which God pushed me. In 1943 He led me by the hand. In 1945 He opened my eyes, but in 1949 He challenged me, forcing me to associate with Him more closely. He had honoured me by opening my eyes to the condition of the world without Christ. He was patient with me, but now came the command: "Go ye! I returned to London, joined the Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh, and sailed from Liverpool in 1951, in His Name, to become a member of the Church in West Pakistan."

She approached the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland through the Presbyterian Church in Gravesend, and studied at St. Colm's College in Edinburgh for two years, from 1949 to 1951. In 1951, four missionaries sailed from Liverpool on the S.S. Cilicia for Karachi and Bombay, including Stella.

After a period of language study, Stella was appointed to take charge of the work amongst women in the Sialkot district of Karachi. Her responsibilities were many and various. Close to the mission bungalow which she shared with others was the Welfare Centre, where daily clinics were held for mothers and children, and indigenous midwives were given training. There in the kindergarten 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 the orthodox view 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, crossing the fields by narrow tortuous paths, the irrigation dams which separate one field from another, to bring assurance of concern to scattered Christian groups, and into Muslim homes. These villages were only little groups of houses set in the midst of fields. In many of them were Christian families, who lived apart from the others, for they were from 'scheduled' or out-caste groups, but worked for their neighbours in various domestic ways, and were part of the village. Meetings were held within the compound of the homes where there was a little fireplace for cooking, a mud oven, if they were fortunate, and a bathing place with pump, in the case of those who were really rising in the world. A gathering included a short service of worship and instruction. Then, of course there was talk, when joys and sorrows, hopes and fears were shared. Two or three villages were visited each day. When transport became available, more distant villages were reached and longer stays were possible.

At home in the evening, supper was seldom finished before there came a knock at the door for Stella - and this continued until late. Many people came to her with problems, seeking help and advice. Her opinion was valued by pastor and babu (lay preacher) alike.

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, because she felt that in the man's world of Pakistan, any integration of women's work would mean that it would be pushed to the wall.

At her Memorial Service it was said of her that she never took the easy way out. In all the difficulties involved in distributing relief food and clothing to villagers who had lost their homes in floods, in the tense days of war between India and Pakistan when she

was the only foreign missionary left in Gujrat, in the controversies stirred up by conflicting parties within the church. She never deviated from what she believed to be right. She seemed to remain calm and unafraid. It could not be said of many missionary ladies that they had driven a tank, but that was true of Stella. The joy of the Lord was her strength. She had a personality with an impact that could lighten the day, with a driving force to overcome all obstacles and an ability to communicate despite all barriers, language not being the least. It was true indeed that language was never Stella's forte, as she would admit with one of her disarming smiles. But she used what she was able, however inaccurately, to acquire, and covered every deficiency with the warmth of her sincerity and concern for the person and the problem. She would sit chatting with groups of Pakistani women as if there were no barriers of language and culture. To her they were simply friends. To young missionary colleagues she was always at home and ready to provide coffee and fruit cake.

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. 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. Life in Gujrat perked up with Stella's coming. She would take everyone under her wing—the homesick stranded foreigner, the destitute widow, the seeking student, the blustering landlord, the sick, the sad, the unemployed and they all responded to her knack of bringing out their best.

For some it is the word “prayer” that sums up the life of Stella. It was Stella who said “Let's stop to pray” and it was an unforgettably felt prayer.

A devotional book always lay open on her dressing-table so that as she left for her day's work, the Lord's word would go with her. She was not often satisfied with herself. She knew and bemoaned her short - comings and was continuously grateful for prayers offered on her behalf. Her special prayer, sung at her funeral, was:

“God be in my head and in my understanding. God be in my eyes and in my looking. God be in my mouth and in my speaking. God be at my end and at my departing.”

A Punjabi Village

In 1968 Stella headed home to Scotland as huge cultural change was underway. In the late 1900s many Asian people were coming to the industrial cities of the U.K 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.

In the beginning, Stella's purpose was to make use of all the work which was already being carried out and to enlist the co-operation of an army of faithful voluntary workers – Woman 's Guild members; who invited overseas ladies to coffee mornings and clubs, and helped in the organising of social evenings; teachers, students and others who willingly gave their time for English classes for women and homework classes for children: a smaller number of women who helped by visiting homes or by travelling with overseas women to a clinic or to a social function. From the beginning, Stella's work was alongside the leaders of the Indian and Pakistani communities, helping them to recognise the special needs of women and young people, and to devise ways of meeting these needs through co-operative projects and educational and cultural programmes.

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, whose aim was "to build up friendships between overseas and local people and help promote the general welfare of the overseas communities in Glasgow". This group was to function as a mobile centre for all areas, willing to assist where help was required. The group's plan included the provision of a house or residence for a full-time worker, with rooms large enough to hold meetings of considerable size, and able to offer hospitality to any person in transit for official reasons, or stranded and in need . Stella and others searched for suitable accommodation, but 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 has two large meeting rooms – the sitting room and the library – an all-important kitchen where members of the family met and shared the arts of cooking, a double room which might be shared by two overseas students making their home there, a spare room to be used by anyone. From a visiting V.I.P to someone on drugs and needing to get away from their usual surroundings, an office, a children's playroom and Stella's own bedroom, the only private room in the house. This inner space of privacy gave her room for her prayer life and for her loneliness before God.

Close friends have commented on her “loneliness”. Friends recall streams of letters and phone calls at all hours of the day and night. She often was left to champion her causes and fight her battles alone. Being a woman of great strength and integrity, she coped. She compensated for this loneliness by making the International Flat a home, to which everyone was welcome, day or night. She said:

“My own life is the flat”

It had aptly been described as the life of a Punjabi Village. Punjabi was the majority language spoken there, but many people from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Mauritius, and her adopted Glasgow felt equally at home. Almost every day felt like a party day. Everyone joined in all the celebrations – New Year, birthdays, anniversaries. Great care was taken to have the right food, tastefully set out. No one was left out regardless of background or faith.

Grannies afternoon on Thursdays made time for those in immigrant families who were left at home whilst others were at school or work. Four o'clock was when tea arrived and was a time to use English. There were English lessons provided by local groups and different groups met in the flat. Friday night provided an opportunity for culture with different songs and folk music. Sunday afternoons were an open house with special speakers. Stella welcomed new arrivals and helped where she could, often visiting people in hospital or families in need. She was there to share the grief and pain when someone close or a loved one died. She gave constant care and comfort. The homely atmosphere she created in the Flat helped many strangers to Glasgow feel that the city was not so alien after all. There are many stories of those who felt alone and scared in the city until they visited the flat. The flat was home for many.



The kitchen in the International Flat.

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. For many the key was that the flat was Stella's own home. The

kitchen was her kitchen, the lounge was her lounge and all she did was what she would have done wherever she had her home.

Stella's love and understanding of children was a key thread running through her life. She constantly fought against prejudice and discrimination by welcoming all from different cultures and faiths and often challenging cultural perceptions. Throughout all this hectic work of bringing people together she was still an active member of her local Church and was involved in many different projects through the Church.

She worked with one local area which had a large immigrant population where there was growing tensions between groups. She proposed that the groups should sit down to see what the differences were. The result was a first meeting of people from Sierra Leone, Kenya, India, Pakistan and Glasgow. This resulted in a summer project where all worked together for the benefit of the children.

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. But it needed someone to tend its growth, someone who had the vision to see what might grow and the tenacity to feed its growth. That “Someone” was Stella Reekie.



Stella Reekie in the International Flat

At almost precisely the time when she came to Glasgow in 1969, a body known as the Central Social Group was founded. 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. At that time there was plenty for such a group to do. It responded to a need, and a measure of trust could be built up among people from the different communities. The Central Social Group fulfilled its purpose.

As time went on, other bodies began to take over the general social purposes of the Central Social Group. Strathclyde Region's Social Work Department, the Community Relations Council and other bodies, both voluntary and statutory, were able to meet those needs. But there was still a need to come to know our new neighbours at the deepest level, the spiritual level. This kind of deep sharing is important for all people; but it is especially important for people whose spiritual nurture is in the Eastern hemisphere. Their faith dominates their whole life. For many it is what makes their life. It became increasingly clear that a need was not being met.

Gradually, without any preconceived plan, the religious dimension came to the fore in the Central Social Group and the social side faded. 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, the second oldest religious community in the city, and they were encouraged in their sharing by a devoted number drawn from the Churches of the Christian majority. In all these meetings there was someone making tea, offering a welcome at the door and being hostess. That person said very little. Someone was needed to be the focus of this sharing, to stimulate and express a

context of trust in which the sharing might develop. Once again that someone was Stella.

It was she who felt that the Sharing of Faiths Committee must never be exclusive. It must be open to any faith which sought to make its own contribution. So the Baha'is, after two years of association, formally joined the Committee in 1974. The Committee had learnt its first, crucial lesson-that exclusivism is the denial of true religion.

Stella's faith was remarkably mature. Due to that maturity, she was eager to share with people from other faiths. She was often asked about the basic concepts on which the sharing of different faiths can be pursued. On one occasion she gave this answer:

"You have to respect a person for what he or she is: you respect them because they are good Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Baha'i's – not just because they are good Christians. You welcome people who come from India, Pakistan or Malaysia and realise that they have a richness which they can share with us."

She went on to say of the Sharing of Faiths meetings:

"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."

Throughout the 1970s, the Sharing of Faiths Committee developed its work in two main directions: it planned a programme of public meetings held each month, culminating in an annual festival known as the Presentation of Faiths, and it sponsored a series of educational visits, mainly to schools, with the assistance of speakers from each faith. This dual approach proved highly successful, and the fact that so many people of other faiths and cultures have found Glasgow a city of welcome is due in some measure to the consistent, faithful work done in the name of this Committee. The place where the members of all faiths felt most at home was in Stella's flat.

So what was the point of the Sharing of Faiths?

They are to share human friendship across religious boundaries, to foster understanding among people of different races and faiths, to learn from each other, to share religious experiences and to deepen peoples understanding of religious insights. These purposes showed a distinct departure from the old comparative study of religion. They were not trying to compare and contrast ideas. They were concerned with people, how they live, what they believe and how their lives are shaped by what they believe. Stella always prompted people to think first of particular people and only then of the ways in which they differ. The group did not pretend that there are no differences. There are, and they matter, because the people who believe these different things matter.

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 whereby different people of different faiths and background talk and communicate and work together.

With thanks to the Scottish Inter-faith Council for allowing us to use material about Stella Reekie.

Activities to support learning

Think

1. In what ways do you think Stella was influenced by her faith?
2. Think about how her life reflected her faith and this in turn influenced how she acted. Did the results of her work reflect what she believed in?
3. Can you think of any other examples of people who have been prompted to promote inter faith dialogue?
4. Do you think there is still work to be done in relation to inter faith dialogue in Scotland? What currently happens to promote this in the country and what else needs to be done?

Reflect

1. Explain how Stellas formative experience in the concentration camps affected her life and future actions
2. Reflect on what type of person you think Stella was? What do you think she would want her legacy to be?

Talk

1. What difficulties are there in getting different groups to talk to each other?
2. How can you facilitate dialogue between groups?
3. What skills are needed for effective discussion?

Act

1. Access the following link:
Use this guide and write up and plan for a multicultural/interfaith event in your local are using this guide to help you
2. Write a development plan for your local council to promote and further interfaith work
3. Research your local interfaith group and find out about some of the activities they do to promote interfaith understanding

