

## **Diminishing the Fear of the ‘Other’**

Image



Cautious optimism glimmering in wake of Molenbeek community gatherings

In the space of a few hours last month, community members of Molenbeek, Belgium connected with one another as people with more commonalities than differences. A cautious optimism glimmers that a new story for this community’s future has been seeded.

And if that happens here, it should be able to happen anywhere. After all, this is Molenbeek, the municipality that’s gained international attention for being a breeding ground for jihadists.

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“We have planted a seed, and now we hope it takes,” says Anita Sheehan-Nutz, a Brussels resident and one of the hosts of the community gatherings.

Molenbeek is described as a powder keg as largely uneducated youth, 90 per cent of them unemployed, become easy targets for Islamic radicalization through a local group.

For several years, the local police and partner organizations have been attempting to implement a plan to create a safer community. But the talks to create consensus on the plan have not been very fruitful.

In late 2015, Geertrui Oris, a local police officer also involved in these deliberations, was at wit’s end, and contacted Jean-Louis Lamboray, the pioneer of a strengths-based community response called SALT (S stands for Stimulate, Support; A for Appreciate; L for Listen, Learn and Link and T for Transfer, Team).

Jean-Louis, Anita and a several other experienced facilitators practiced in the SALT approach visited Molenbeek in late May to introduce themselves and ask whether the community would be interested in working with them. The group of 40 or so community members that attended that first conversation said yes to having them back.

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“One of our biggest intentions was for people to find commonality,” says Anita. “Also for them to realize that they have a common dream, which helps people fuse together more.

“Sadly, the Muslims themselves are victims of the latest attacks because they fear being ostracized and they often are ostracized,” she adds.

“So we live in very precarious times right now...

“And therefore, it’s really finding the commonalities and taking the fear out of the other or at least diminishing the fear of each other by knowing each others’ stories and wishes.”

## **A ‘Hope-inspiring’ Start**

Two “hope inspiring” community gatherings occurred in June.

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Anita says for herself, the gifts she received included a deeper awareness of the possibilities in the SALT approach, as well as the gift of goodwill and enthusiasm from those who joined.

The response from the officer who invited the group to Molenbeek was hopeful gratitude: “For two years, we have been meeting, discussing, fighting, complaining, blaming, and we have very little to show for,” the officer said. “You have helped us, in just three short sessions, to find common ground, a vision, and the energy to put into action a plan that we have created together.”

Anita has since created [a beautiful blog](#) about the experience of the gatherings. She notes that how the co-hosts worked together was in itself a positive experience. “It was like magic how we just sort of filled the space and everybody instinctively and intuitively took charge of the part that they were best suited to.”

Now what’s most alive for Anita is cautious optimism for what these efforts will bring.

“I am a realist and an optimist,” Anita says.

“It was a really hope-inspiring start but this is like a tiny plant that pierces its way through the dirt — it’s still very delicate.”

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Anita's goal is to reconnect with the community and also her co-hosts of the gathering this month to see what might be done about further cultivating what's been seeded.

One of her hopes is to encourage a couple of social workers who work with young people on the streets to introduce a similar process to that of the community gatherings with the youth.

To read Anita's blog, click [here](#).

To learn more about SALT, click [here](#).

*To share your story of community, contact us at [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.com](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.com)*