



The Queen and The Munshi

A Bible Study
in five sessions
based on the film

VICTORIA & ABDUL

An extraordinary true story of a queen and her new best friend.

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Session I – When Worlds Meet

Gathering Prayer:

Pray together the Course prayer.

Holy One, God of all.
In the stranger and in our friends, you meet us.
In the powerful and in the powerless, you meet us.
In our vulnerability and emptiness, you meet us.
When we take time and make space
to hear another's story, you meet us.
Meet us now and show us
your constant love for all your children.
Amen.

Diane Smith

To Read:

'I am so very fond of him. He is so good & gentle & understanding... & is a real comfort to me'

(Queen Victoria to her daughter-in-law the Duchess of
Connaught, November 1888)
[from Basu 2017:Frontspiece]*

Karim began his journal with due modesty:

Under the shadow of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, I a humble subject venture in the following pages to lay before the reader a brief summary from the journal of my life in the court of Queen Victoria from the Golden jubilee of 1887 to the Diamond jubilee of 1897. As I have been but a sojourner in a strange land and among a strange people I humbly trust all mistakes will be kindly overlooked by the reader who would extend indulgence to the writer of these pages.

[Basu 2017:13]

'A fine morning with a fresh air,' noted the Queen as she looked out of her bedroom window at Windsor Castle the next day, but she was feeling 'very tired'. It was the third day of her Golden Jubilee celebrations and the monarch knew she faced another day of buntings and presentations....

* Quotes from the book 'Victoria & Abdul' are copyright © Shrabani Basu, 2010, 2011, 2017

The Queen ascended into her carriage for the short drive to Frogmore with her daughter Beatrice. As they rode down the rolling green of the Long Walk in Windsor Park, past the rows of chestnut trees, the Queen thought of the excitement of the past two days and the fireworks of the night before. Everything now seemed so still. At Frogmore House her eldest daughter Victoria and her granddaughter Vicky were already there waiting for her; and so was a special gift from India.

Abdul Karim and Mohammed Buksh - the Queen's Jubilee presents from India - had arrived early to wait at table. The breakfast room at Frogmore, a sombre place at most times, seemed to come alive with the new arrivals. Buksh's practised elegance matched Karim's naturally regal presence. Their clothes made them look almost princely. The Queen was delighted. Dressed in striking scarlet tunics with white turbans, they approached her reverentially. The Queen noted Mohammed Buksh's appearance, 'very dark with a very smiling expression'. She described the much younger Abdul Karim as 'much lighter, tall and with a fine serious countenance'. Both servants approached her slowly, their eyes lowered to gaze at the ground as they had been instructed to do. Then, with a deep bow, Karim and Buksh bent down to kiss the Queen's feet. As he rose, young Karim's dark eyes fleetingly met the Queen's gaze. Suddenly Victoria no longer felt as tired.

[Basu 2017:56]

To Watch:

The Queen and the servants arrive at Windsor for the Golden Jubilee Banquet: Watch from 4min 14sec to 15min 20sec.

Words about Pictures: As a large group discuss the movie clips you have just watched. What did you notice? What has changed from 'then' to 'now'? What touched your emotions or caused you to think in a different manner?

From the Word:

So Naomi said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'

¹⁶ But Ruth said,

'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die - there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!' (*Ruth 1v15-17*)

To Discuss: in groups of 3 or 4 discuss these questions

- How does the Bible passage you have just read relate to the movie clip you have just seen?
- What did you think of the way we were introduced to Victoria and Abdul at the beginning of the film?
- What impression do you get of their different lives?
- How does *Victoria & Abdul* portray the Royal Court?
- What things are important to people there?
- Do you see any parallels with our society today?

To Share: if comfortable and happy to do so, small groups may tell the whole gathering their answers and thoughts about the questions they have been discussing

To Pray:

God of the ages,
you are the beginning of our journey
and our strength as we pause along the way.
Hold us by the hand as we grow,
show us where to seek you,
and guide our steps that we may find you.
Give us devoted hearts that we may love you,
and your peace when we reach our journey's end. Amen

Session 2 – Ruler and Subject

Gathering Prayer:

Pray together the Course prayer on page 2.

To Read:

At Osborne, just weeks since he had kissed Queen Victoria's feet, the young Karim decided to surprise her. One day he came to the kitchen in Osborne House with the spice box that he had carried from India. He was going to cook a curry for the Queen. To the amazement of the cooks in the Royal kitchen, Karim was soon chopping, churning and grinding the *masalas*. The aroma of cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, cumin and nutmeg wafted through the room. Before long, Karim had prepared a fine Indian meal.... For the first time in her life, Queen Victoria was introduced to the taste and smell of India. She described it as 'excellent' and ordered the curries to be made regularly.

[Basu 2017:66]

As Karim's English improved, he started having lengthier conversations with his Queen about India and she listened, rapt with attention, marvelling at being Empress of such a land. He told her more about himself and managed to convey to her that he came from a good family, that his father was a doctor in Agra Jail and that he himself had been a clerk in the jail... The Queen was impressed and began to rely increasingly on the polite young Indian who was taking his job of manservant so seriously.

On 11 September she wrote in a letter:

'My dear Indians are going on admirably. General Dennehy was invaluable and settled everything and found out all they wished and wanted and now everything goes on as smoothly as possible. The youngest [Karim] is evidently almost a gentleman who could not be treated like a common servant and is extremely well educated and the other stout one is quite excellent. He was seventeen years with General Dennehy whose whole house he managed.'

Karim was a fast learner and was soon helping her with her papers. Victoria was delighted with him. While the smiling and portly Buksh remained waiting at tables. Karim now started doing secretarial jobs.

On 12 September she wrote to Sir Henry Ponsonby from Balmoral:

Sir Henry will see what he (Lord Dufferin) says about the Indian servants. It is just what the Queen feels and she cannot say what a comfort she finds hers (her Indian servants). Abdul is most handy in helping when she signs by drying the signatures. He learns with extraordinary assiduity and Mahomet is wonderfully quick and intelligent and understands everything:

The Queen continued to ask Karim about India and their conversations now grew weightier as he moved from descriptions of colour and local customs to deeper political issues. As Karim helped the Queen with her boxes and her mail, he also progressed beyond just blotting her signature. She was curious to know about Indian religions and customs and Karim explained the difference in customs between the Hindus and Muslims. He told her about the conflicts the differences could cause and described the riots that sometimes broke out.

[Basu 2017:80]

To Watch:

Karim kisses the Queen's foot and she learns that he was not just a servant. Watch from 17mins 10secs to 27mins 30sec

Words about Pictures: As a large group discuss the movie clips you have just watched. What did you notice? What has changed from 'then' to 'now'? What touched your emotions or caused you to think in a different manner?

From the Word:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who

resist will incur judgement. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴ for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is due to them - taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. *(Romans 13v1-8)*

To Discuss: in groups of 3 or 4 discuss these questions

- How does the Bible passage you have just read relate to the movie clip you have just seen?
- What common ground do Victoria & Abdul share, despite their differences?
- The Scriptures commend us to 'eat what is set before you'. How do you cope with 'foreign' food and customs?
- Is it a Christian duty to show deference to the leaders of your nation and to pay taxes?
- Wars and riots are often blamed on religion. How can you yourself, and your church, 'pursue all that makes for peace' (*Romans 14.19*)?

To Share: if comfortable and happy to do so, small groups may tell the whole gathering their answers and thoughts about the questions they have been discussing.

To Pray:

Living God,
deliver us from a world without justice
and a future without mercy;
in your mercy, establish justice,
and in your justice, remember the mercy
revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Session 3 – The Servant becomes Friend & Munshi

As their friendship grew Abdul was referred to by Victoria as her 'Munshi' - A Persian word for a teacher of languages.

Gathering Prayer:

Pray together the Course prayer on page 2.

To Read:

The Indian servants now occupied her full time. She fussed about their clothes, their duties and wanted to make sure they were comfortable. Tutors were engaged to teach them English and their wives were invited to join them. Always enthusiastic about India and wanting to learn more about the country she ruled from a distance of over 4,000 miles, the Queen chose Karim to be her link with the exotic land.

The ageing Queen wanted to learn Hindustani and asked Karim to teach her. The youth from Agra was undaunted at this new job, He proved a serious teacher and a hard taskmaster. Karim ordered special gold-lined journals from the Royal stationers and sat with the Queen every evening, filling these up. He began by teaching her a few everyday words. A phrase book was devised with simple words written in Hindustani in the roman script and their meanings in English. The small red and gold pocket-sized phrase book became the Queen's constant companion. Soon the lessons progressed further. Karim would write a line in Urdu, followed by a line in English and then a line of Urdu in roman script. The Queen would copy these out.

Barely a few weeks after their arrival, an excited Queen noted in her Journal:

'Am learning a few words of Hindustani to speak to my servants. It is great interest to me for both the language and the people, I have naturally never come into real contact with before.'

Sir Henry Ponsonby was not spared the Queen's newfound enthusiasm and was handed a phrase book of common

Hindustani words by the Queen. He wrote with dry humour to his wife, '*She has given me a Hindi vocabulary to study*'.

Karim's presence was transporting Queen Victoria into another world. The times spent with him learning Hindustani were the elderly Queen's moments spent in India, in a different land and culture. The Queen liked the sound of Urdu, the rich language used in the Mughal Courts, a mix between Persian and the native Brajbhasa, and she would try to say the words after Karim. He would also tell her about India; about his own native city of Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, and the romance of seeing it on a full-moon night. He told the Queen the story of Shah Jahan and his Queen, Mumtaz Mahal, and how the news of her death during childbirth affected the Emperor deeply. The Queen listened in rapt silence, understanding the anguish of Shah Jahan at losing his Queen. She learnt how Jahan had then built the Taj Mahal, taking twenty-two years to create the tomb that would be an everlasting monument to love. The Queen thought of the mausoleum she had built at Frogmore for her own beloved husband and how she would one day join him there. She shuddered when she heard how the ageing Emperor was imprisoned in Agra Fort by his son Aurangzeb; its position on the bend in the river providing the most enchanting View of the Taj, and how the Emperor spent his dying days there gazing at his beloved monument, and mourning his Queen.

Karim's soft voice brought the tragic story to life. He described the splendour of the Taj Mahal, its marble dome rising towards the sky, framed by four elegant minarets in perfect symmetry. He described the inlay work with precious gemstones, the feeling of being in heaven when light filtered in through the latticed framework and fell on the two tombs, and the words of the Koran that were inscribed all around. The Queen was entranced, letting Karim take her into this Mughal paradise that was as sad as it was beautiful. As Karim gently described his homeland India became alive before the Queen: she could see the bazaars, the colour, the crowds and almost feel the heat.

[Basu 2017:67]

To Watch:

*The Queen learns Urdu and Abdul becomes a friend:
Watch from 29mins 51sec to 42mins 12sec.*

Words about Pictures: As a large group discuss the movie clips you have just watched. What did you notice? What has changed from 'then' to 'now'? What touched your emotions or caused you to think in a different manner?

From the Word:

One who forgives an affront fosters friendship,
but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend.

(Proverbs 17.9)

A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

(Proverbs 17.17)

Some friends play at friendship
but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.

(Proverbs 18.24)

Wealth brings many friends,
but the poor are left friendless.

⁵ A false witness will not go unpunished,
and a liar will not escape.

⁶ Many seek the favour of the generous,
and everyone is a friend to a giver of gifts.

⁷ If the poor are hated even by their kin,
how much more are they shunned by their friends!

When they call after them, they are not there.

(Proverbs 19.4-7)

To Discuss: in groups of 3 or 4 discuss these questions

- How do the Bible passages you have just read relate to the movie clip you have just seen?
- *Victoria & Abdul* portrays a friendship that crosses boundaries of age, gender, race, culture, religion and class - changing lives as a result. What possibilities might be created when two very different cultures, or individuals, are 'reconciled' in this way?
- What effect could this have on family life?
- Victoria is eager to learn 'Hindustani' (Urdu) from Abdul. How does mutual curiosity and good communication help build their relationship?
- How are they changed by knowing each other?
- How can you be a better friend to those in your church, those at work or a club you attend, when you are in public company?

To Share: if comfortable and happy to do so, small groups may tell the whole gathering their answers and thoughts about the questions they have been discussing.

To Pray:

O God,
who would fold both heaven and earth
in a single peace:
let the design of thy great love
lighten upon the waste of our wraths and sorrows:
and give peace to thy Church,
peace among nations,
peace in our dwellings,
and peace in our hearts:
through thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Session 4 – Growing Old, Loneliness and Lunacy

Gathering Prayer:

Pray together the Course prayer on page 2.

To Read:

To the Royal Household, the Queen's attitude to Abdul Karim began to gradually remind them of her relationship with John Brown... After Albert's death, when the Queen was inconsolable, it fell to John Brown to bring her out of seclusion. At forty-two, the Queen had chosen to wear black all her life and had withdrawn into a shell. The Court became disgruntled with her absence at public ceremonies and lack of interest in state affairs, and John Brown was brought in as her personal servant to try to cheer her up. Brown was a commonplace, coarse man with a typical Highland sense of humour. He loved his whisky and was often rude to the Prince of Wales and the Household, who disliked the influence he had on the Queen.

[Basu 2017:82]

Beneath the regal trappings, the Queen was very much a people's person. She enjoyed nothing more than getting to know her subjects, especially the country folk and the under-privileged. At Balmoral, she regularly went to the village shops and chatted with the locals, often buying knick-knacks. She disapproved of the snobbery of the upper classes and reached out to the ordinary people whenever she could. Her mothering of her Indian servants and protecting them from the prejudices of the Household was natural to her.

In the quiet setting of the Highlands, the Queen became closer to Karim. He informed her that his father had accompanied General Roberts on the famous march to Kandahar in 1880. The Queen was impressed by his candour and felt relaxed in his company, much to the discomfiture of the Household. They did not approve of the closeness that seemed to be developing between the Queen and the young Indian servant.

[Basu 2017:85]

Karim was not aware of the Household's early wariness of him. He remained close to the Queen and asked her many questions of his own. She told him about her family, her grandchildren and the relations in Europe. The Queen reminisced about Albert and the happy times they had spent in Balmoral. Karim saw the statues of John Brown that the Queen had erected in Balmoral and learnt about the Highland servant who had been so close to her. He told her about his extended family, his father, wife, brother and sisters. In the slight chill of the September days, Karim and the Queen got to know each other better. In less than two months he had mastered reading Queen Victoria's handwriting, which at most times defeated even the patient Ponsonby. The Queen started writing to him directly instead of giving instructions through her Household.

[Basu 2017:86]

The news just broken by Reid had provoked [a] collective display of raised tempers. It concerned the Munshi. The doctor revealed that he had been treating the Munshi for a relapse of venereal disease. The Queen, said Reid, nevertheless wished to take him to Cimiez (near Nice, France) on her annual spring visit. This meant the Household would have to dine with him, which they were determined not to do. If Karim went, they would strike. Despite his best efforts. Reid could not quell the revolt. Her Majesty would have to be informed and Harriet Phipps, lady of the bedchamber, was picked for the job...

Phipps gathered her shiny starched skirts around her, thrust her chin out in a defiant mood, and walked briskly across the courtyard towards the Queen's sitting room... The Queen was sitting at her desk looking through a large pile of papers. Almost instinctively she knew that something was amiss. No sooner had Phipps spoken the words than the seventy-eight year-old Queen flew into a violent rage, dramatically sweeping off the contents of her desk. Books, pens, papers, memos, boxes and mementoes went crashing to the floor as the Queen threw them down, shattering several glass objects in her fury. Never had Phipps seen her in such a state. She fled the room and tearfully conveyed the scene to the shocked Household. They had not expected the Queen to back her Munshi over them. For the incandescent Household, the Cimiez trip was a step too far.

The Queen won the argument, the Household did not resign and on 10 March the Royal suite started for Cimiez. The Court Circular noted that the Munshi was part of the suite. The mood was decidedly grim.

[Basu 2017:217]

To Watch:

Glassat Shiel: Watch from 34mins 24 sec to 38mins 34sec

Household Revolt: Watch from 1hr 16min 30sec to 1hr 22min 45sec

Words about Pictures: As a large group discuss the movie clips you have just watched. What did you notice? What has changed from 'then' to 'now'? What touched your emotions or caused you to think in a different manner?

From the Word:

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' ³³ He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴ And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' ³⁵ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' ³⁷ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? ³⁸ Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' ³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰ And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

(Mark 14.32-42)

To Discuss: in groups of 3 or 4 discuss these questions

- How does the Bible passage you have just read relate to the movie clip you have just seen?
- Queen Victoria has wealth and status, but still feels isolated and even marginalised in her own court. How does the film portray her unique experience as a woman in power?
- As we age we often become lonely. How would you like your family and friends to respond to you being lonely?
- How would you feel if an elderly family member made a deep friendship with someone unknown to you?
- What can we do to help combat loneliness amongst members of our churches?
- How do we cope when those around us appear to be 'losing their powers' and maybe even drifting into dementia?
- In your own church what would need to change for it to be more dementia friendly?

To Share: if comfortable and happy to do so, small groups may tell the whole gathering their answers and thoughts about the questions they have been discussing

To Pray:

Loving God,
you are merciful and forgiving.
Grant that those who are suffering the hurts of the past
may experience your generous love.
Heal their memories, comfort them,
and send them all from here
renewed and hopeful;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Session 5 – Death and Departure

Gathering Prayer:

Pray together the Course prayer on page 2.

To Read:

The Queen had made her last journey from Balmoral the night before [the Munshi returned from India]. The Queen slept badly that night, knowing she would not be returning to her beloved Highland home. Back in Windsor, with her Munshi by her side, the Queen felt better and resumed her lessons immediately.

On 7 November 1900, she wrote in Urdu:

Today, I reached here safely from Balmoral. The weather was not good. It is a matter of sorrow that we do not write the lesson well today because we paid attention to it after a year. The Munshi returned the day before yesterday. The whole of this year we faced grievous shocks and concerns. Many a famous man was wasted in war. My son, Duke of Coburg, passed away. Prince Gracious Victor died of fever ten days ago.

It was the Queen's last entry in her Hindustani Journal. She was soon to become seriously ill...

(Queen Victoria died at Osborne, 22 January 1901)
[Basu 2017:274]

The Household had been openly hostile to Karim and were keen to restore the old order speedily. They had never understood what the Queen had seen in him. To Fritz Ponsonby, the Munshi was like 'a sort of pet, like a dog or cat which the Queen will not willingly give up'. The Dean of Westminster, Randolph Davidson, thought she was 'off her head' over the Munshi. Lord Salisbury was of the opinion that the Queen enjoyed the spats over the Munshi with her Household because 'it was the only excitement she had'.

The Queen's maid of honour, Marie Mallet, observed that the Queen gossiped more with the Munshi than she did with the other ladies in the Household. 'He is ubiquitous here,' she

noted, 'and I am for ever meeting him in passages or the garden or face to face on the stairs and each time I shudder more...'

The Queen's Munshi was described by the Household as 'repulsive' and 'disagreeable'. Even Henry Ponsonby described him and his relatives as the 'Black brigade', forcing the Queen to decree that the word 'black' was not to be used with reference to the Munshi and the other Indians.

Lady Curzon, wife of the Viceroy, while on a visit to London, made a few deductions about the Household and the Munshi. She wrote to her husband six months after the Munshi had been banished: *'The Munshi bogie which had frightened all the household at Windsor for many years proved a ridiculous farce, as the poor man had not only given up all his letters but even the photos signed by the Queen and had returned to India like a whipped hound.'*

Lady Lytton, widow of the former Indian Viceroy Lord Lytton and lady-in-waiting to the Queen, was also perhaps one of the few to be fairly sympathetic to the Munshi. Her granddaughter, Mary Lutyens, later edited her diaries and concluded:

Though one can understand that the Munshi was disliked, as favourites nearly always are, it is difficult to believe that he was 'so personally repulsive', for Queen Victoria was as sensitive as any woman to male attraction. One cannot help feeling that the repugnance with which he was regarded by the Household was based mostly on snobbery and colour prejudice. There were few English people in those days who would sit down at table with an Indian were he not a Prince.

[Basu 2017:282]

The Munshi had lived quietly with his memories [in Agra] after his return from England. Though he knew the strength of the feelings against him in the Palace, he had never spoken any ill of the Royal family or the Household. The Queen's family never understood that he had provided her with the companionship over the last decade of her life, which they themselves had not been able to offer.

[Basu 2017:310]

To Watch:

Deathbed and eviction: Watch from 1hr 28min to 1hr 38min.

Words about Pictures: As a large group discuss the movie clips you have just watched. What did you notice? What has changed from 'then' to 'now'? What touched your emotions or caused you to think in a different manner?

From the Word:

Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²² Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

(Deuteronomy 10:16-22)

To Discuss: in groups of 3 or 4 discuss these questions

- How does the Bible passage you have just read relate to the movie clip you have just seen?
- Abdul experiences hostility as well as welcome during his time in England. How might this reflect the experiences of people coming to the UK as immigrants or as refugees today?
- Why are Christians in particular called to build bridges of friendship to those who are different from us?
- Where could this kind of reconciliation be needed in global situations today, and in your own life?
- 'They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love' was a popular chorus sung in churches during the 1960's and 1970's. How would those outside your church fellowship describe your church?
- What could you yourself do to improve you welcome of others in Christ's name?

To Share: if comfortable and happy to do so, small groups may tell the whole gathering their answers and thoughts about the questions they have been discussing

To Pray:

Abide with us, Lord, for it is evening,
and day is drawing to a close.
Abide with us and with your whole Church,
in the evening of the day,
in the evening of life,
in the evening of the world;
abide with us and with all your faithful ones, O Lord,
in time and in eternity.
Amen.



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Our thanks go to The Mothers' Union and Damaris Media for the initial idea
and encouragement to expand the notes they produced on the same topic.*