



Interfaith Bridge Building

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Interfaith Bridge Building: A Programmatic “Key Initiative” for International Work in MCC

by Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr

Interfaith work always begins with faith. As Christians, it's our conviction that Jesus the Christ is Lord and that the church is the central locus of God's work and presence in the world. As Peter Dula notes (see below p.2), claiming that all salvation comes through Jesus, however, need not inhibit forging alliances with those who do not share this conviction, nor should it prevent us from cultivating an ability to learn about God from those outside the church or the Christian faith.

One temptation is to hold so narrowly to an exclusive faith that we are unable to see God's humanity in those outside this narrow focus. Another is to shy away from particular convictions, to search for a neutral faith language. Both reflect weak faith convictions. On the one hand there is no such neutral ground, and on the other God frequently challenges faith by speaking through the Other, from outside Christian faith or the church. To deny that there is truth to be found outside the church, to deny the value of fostering friendships and collaboration among persons of different faiths, is to have too low a Christology. In fact, we interact with persons of other faiths as a way to understand better the light of Christ.

Last year, as part of a strategic planning exercise, the MCC International Program Department chose “Interfaith Bridge Building” as a programmatic focus for the next five years: paying particular attention to building relationships with people from other faiths. During the Cold War years, the big divide in the world was ideological, having to

do with different economic and state systems. Currently, references to a “clash of civilizations” and to religious differences is popularly seen as an explanation for conflict and division. As people who are concerned about furthering peace in the world, about overcoming divisions, how should we respond?

MCC's history is one of working in partnership with a wide variety of groups and people, in activities of service. So it is logical that MCC will approach interfaith bridge building in a “diaconal” way—through service. “Diaconal” comes from the Greek word *diakonia*, or “service,” also the basis for the New Testament “deacon.” Interfaith bridge building that is diaconal might include specific attention to seeking partnerships for service (for relief work, for development work, for peacebuilding work) with groups or organizations from different faiths. It might also include supporting or joining Mennonites around the world, as well as other Christians, to work at common tasks with partners of other faiths. We assume that working together will teach us and our partners more about what motivates service from a faith perspective, and will build bridges of understanding that can further peace.

Often, Christians have engaged persons from other faiths in dialogue, seeking to understand one another's theology and sacred texts. A first aim for interfaith bridge building, however, is to find ways to work together in response to human need. Theological conversations and Christian witness will grow from such work and may at times lead to formal theological dialogue. Such

developments are welcomed and anticipated, although the starting point is partnership, working together and building trust.

As a way to begin a focus on interfaith bridge building, the MCC International Program Department and the MCC Peace Committee sponsored a workshop in March, 2005. The Peace Committee is an advisory committee made up of persons from across MCC's constituent churches that meets twice each year to give counsel on issues growing from MCC's international work. The workshop in March drew on the experience of a number of MCC workers, and

examined MCC's history of work across faith divides. Their presentations, in shortened form, are included in this issue of the Peace Office Newsletter.

Included here as well is the summary of discussion from the March workshop. This notes some of the concerns and issues raised for MCC, including suggestions for further work. It is a useful starting point for MCC as we seek to expand old and build new interfaith relationships.

Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr are Co-Directors of MCC International Peace Office

Barth in the Borderlands

by Peter Dula

What if MCC chose to transform the threat of otherness into opportunity?

So it *must* be that the word of judgment will often come from without.

From Coles begins his book, *Self/Power/Other* with a citation from Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* about the borderlands that ecologists call 'ecotones.' Ecotones are the borders between two different ecological communities, say between a wood and a meadow. Ecologists know that those borders 'often harbor a greater variety and density of life' than either the forest or the grassland alone. Lopez calls them 'special meeting grounds' and says that 'the mingling of animals from different ecosystems charges such border zones with evolutionary potential.'¹ Coles uses these ecotones as an image for borders that have long been the concern of political philosophy: between cultures, between self and other, black and white, male and female, between religions, etc. Coles takes off from this to note that we have often viewed borders as 'indicative of an evil that lies on the other side; . . . as regions to be forever thrust back and ultimately eliminated at the moment when we conquer the other.'² Western civilization has often turned the borderlands into spaces of desolation instead of fecundity. But what if we, as MCC, might dwell in these eco-tones in hope instead of fear? What if MCC chose to transform the threat of otherness into opportunity?

In these remarks I turn to Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 in an attempt to display why inhabiting these borderlands is theologically imperative.³ Barth writes, 'Jesus Christ is *the* light of life' (86). Jesus Christ is the one and only light in all fullness and perfection. Christian faith stands or falls with this claim, but we had better make sure we are clear about what it means. Barth is convinced that we haven't been clear enough

and therefore the objection is based on a 'supreme misunderstanding.'

The statement that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God has really nothing whatever to do with the arbitrary exaltation and self-glorification of the Christian in relation to other men, of the church in relation to other institutions, or of Christianity in relation to other conceptions.

It is a christological statement. It looks away from non-Christian and Christian alike to the One who sovereignly confronts and precedes both as the prophet. . . . Thus the criticism expressed in the exclusiveness of the statement affects, limits and relativises the prophecy of Christians and the Church no less than the many other prophecies, lights and words (91).

That Jesus is *the* light of life does not mean 'that every word spoken outside the circle of the Bible and the Church is a word of false prophecy and therefore valueless, empty, and corrupt' (97). If Christ is truly Lord, and if 'in him all things in heaven and on earth were created.' If 'all things have been created through him and for him . . . and in him all things hold together' (Col. 1.16-17) then it only makes sense that there is nowhere that we cannot expect to find words reflecting the light of the Word. There is, we might say, only one Sun, but many moons, often in unexpected places.

In what follows I assume that we can agree on the exclusiveness of the claim to Christ's uniqueness. And we can agree that the fact of other true lights and words does not compromise that uniqueness, but is a product of it. There are, on Barth's account, true lights and words in other religions and the point of interfaith bridge building is to see and listen to them. But two questions remain. Even if

there are such words and lights, why bother with them? And if we are to engage them, how? To the first: I take it that the idea behind interfaith relationships is to very deliberately seek them out and attend to them. But if Christ is *the* light, and all the others only reflections, why not just concentrate on Christ and leave the others aside? Perhaps they are worth pondering when we trip over them, but why actively seek them out?

Barth has too low an opinion of Christians to trust us to attend to Christ well. He asks 'Can [the Church] ever pay sufficient attention to this one Word?' This sounds like the question raised a paragraph ago. But the sentences immediately following it say, 'Can it be content to hear it only from Holy Scripture and then from its own lips and tongue? Should it not be grateful to receive it also from without, in very different human words, in a secular parable' (115)? Barth never let up on the relentlessness of his understanding of the church as under judgment. It will be the constant tendency of the church to manufacture defenses. So it *must* be that the word of judgment will often come from without. If we fail to attend to the words without, we will squander the opportunity for transformation, change, growth, renewal. Barth thinks the church is hard of hearing, and words from outside may be the equivalent of the sort of shouting in which we might have chance at hearing the one Word.

This brings him to a second criterion for discerning such true words: they lead us into a deeper engagement with scripture. What this means was well expressed by John Howard Yoder when he argued that it often takes

outsiders to remind the Church of what scripture says. Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to bring non-violence back to the church because of the outsider Gandhi. Theology rediscovered God's partisanship for the poor through the outsider Marx.⁴

So a space has opened up in which the believer is freed for openness to hearing words of truth in this outer sphere. But we have to be careful how we say this. Here one answer to the question about *how* we engage other words emerges. On one hand, we have to be careful to not let those words crowd out the one Word. On the other, we have to be careful to listen patiently. I mean that the temptation will be to only hear those words that confirm what we already know.

What beautiful music might be playing that we are too tone-deaf to hear? How do we cultivate the kind of responsiveness, patience, habits of listening that would enable us to hear?

Peter Dula is MCC Iraq Program Coordinator.

Notes

1 *Arctic Dreams* (Toronto: Bantam, 1986), p. 109. Quoted in Coles, *Self/Power/Other: Political Theory and Dialogical Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 1.

2 Coles, p. 2.

3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961). Almost all parenthetical page numbers in this essay refer to this text.

4 *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 93.

There are, on Barth's account, true lights and words in other religions and the point of interfaith bridge-building is to see and listen to them.

MCC Nigeria Inter-Faith Peacebuilding: History and Learnings

by Gopar Tapkida

Nigerian Historical Context

Although Nigeria is only the fourteenth-largest country in Africa in geographic area, Nigeria's population of about 120 million is the largest, some 15% of the continent's total population. There are about 400 ethnic groups with three major tribes and three major religions: Christians (40%), Muslims (40%), African Traditional Religions (ATR) (10%). These diversities are often seen as potent features that drive and sustain violent conflict in Nigeria.

Islam arrived in Northern Nigeria in the 14th and 15th centuries through trans-

Saharan merchants, judges, scholars and missionaries. It spread gradually in the North mainly among the Fulani/Hausa tribes until an Islamic jihad led by Usman Dan Fodio early in the 19th century, which brought about the spread of Islam over the fragmented non-Muslim groups in the North and some of the middle belt of Nigeria.

British colonial administrators arrived first in the south of Nigeria in the 19th century. At that time, the southwestern part of Nigeria was dominated by a number of Yoruba empires. The British then came to northern Nigeria between 1900 and 1903. They

MCC sees victims of conflict as major resources for peace-building.

imposed a system of direct rule in the Southern region, but a system of indirect rule in the North. Indirect rule left many of the Hausa/Fulani (Islamic) governing structures intact.

Christian missionaries arrived on the southern shores of Nigeria in the 19th century. They were allowed to operate only in non-Muslim areas by the British authorities. Hence, many non-Muslim groups in the south and middle belt became Christian, and had earlier access to western-style education and the modern-sector jobs thereby available to them. Many Muslims in the North were suspicious of Western education as a Christian tool for proselytization. Indirect rule in the North empowered the political ambitions of Muslims, while many of the non-Muslim groups were socio-politically marginalized.

After independence in 1970, it did not take Nigeria long to realize that the wounds were much deeper and the issues more complex than just getting political independence. Hence, the early Nigerian post-independence parliamentary government was soon hijacked by a series of coups, which gave rise to a civil war (1967–70). When the civil war ended, the military remained in power and ruled Nigeria almost continuously until 1999 when Nigerians elected a civilian government. Owing to this long military rule, the Nigerian society consciously or unconsciously became militarized.

The freedom of expression allowed by the return to civilian rule has led to tremendous and severe religious and political tensions as Nigerians try to achieve “unity in diversity”. Violent riots continue to terrorize Nigeria in the name of religion, although most are politically motivated. In highly controversial moves, several state governments have in recent years introduced an Islamic Sharia legal system, which has led to more violence and counter-violence in nine states. Such moves have been met with great resistance from the non-Muslim ethnic groups. It is still unclear whether such a system can work fairly in the Nigerian society where the majority of the population is non-Muslim. This is one of the issues for discussion at the National Political Reform Conference now underway in March 2005.

MCC Inter-Faith Peace Work in Nigeria

In 1963, just three years after independence, the Nigerian Federal Government invited the MCC Teachers Abroad Program (TAP) to northern Nigeria (Middle Belt and Far North) to teach at secondary, teacher training, and university educational institutions. The aim was to help bridge the educational

gaps created by the legacies of Islam, colonialism and the early Christian missionaries. So the primary emphasis of MCC from 1963 to 1980 was in education. As more trained Nigerian teachers became available, the MCC program diversified and now includes theological education, income generation, peace education, health (particularly HIV/AIDS issues), and handicapped services. Although peace education has always been embedded in MCC’s theological placements, its active inter-faith peace involvement started in 2001 with the establishment of the MCC Nigeria peace program.

With my Eastern Mennonite University master’s degree in Conflict Transformation in hand, I was eager to help plant some seeds of peace in the city of Jos and throughout Plateau State.

However, very soon after my family and I arrived in Jos in August 2001, we were confronted by wide-spread and severe ethno-religious violent conflicts. On September 7, 2001, the city of Jos came under intense fighting between the Hausa Muslims and the Christians. Many lost their lives in the clash. Many homes, churches, mosques, vehicles and properties were burned down. Within a distance of less than a mile, we counted more than ten vehicles burned and four military roadblocks. The whole of Jos was filled with smoke rising from every direction. For six days movement was strictly restricted and highly risky. On one of the days, two guards of the guest house where we were staying were shot. Hospitals in Jos were filled with people who had been badly wounded in the violence. Many took refuge at various police and military barracks. We were forced into compulsory fasting since we could not buy foodstuffs. In fact, we had to host 10 people in just 2 rooms of the guest house throughout the period of violence. We were all terrified, especially with the noise of gunshots day and night.

When the dust of the violence began to settle, Monica, my wife, and I went out to see the ruins. We could not stop weeping. Soon we became stunned and quickly withdrew to the guest house. We soon realized that Monica had lost three relatives, and the person who printed our wedding cards had been killed and cut into pieces. These were a few among many people that we knew personally who lost their lives in the crisis.

Energies for vengeance were very high. The wounds were deep, and the pains nearly unbearable. Even as a trained peacemaker, I saw myself as someone swimming in an ocean alone and not knowing which

True religion is determined not by how it treats members of its own faith tradition, but how it treats people of other faiths.

direction I was going with nothing in the ocean for me to hold onto for survival. Everything was so complex and so impossible. “Where do we begin?” felt like an overwhelming question.

Out of this traumatic time, the MCC Nigeria peace program began on a small scale, with me as the only full-time staff person. Even after four years, there are only two full-time staff. There continues to be a severe lack of funds for inter-faith initiatives, even where initial skepticism has now been overcome. In addition, the frequent incidence of inter-religious conflict in recent years continues to over-stretch the MCC Nigeria peace program capacity.

One primary group with which MCC Nigeria works on peace is an association of churches (TEKAN) which includes 12 denominations and more than 8 million members spread over 20 states. All the denominations have experienced serious inter-religious conflict. MCC’s peace program has provided training in trauma healing, mediation, reconciliation and transformation, but has not been able to embark on other peace-building endeavors such as civil education, poverty mitigation programs, relief, advocacy, research and documentation.

Issues and Challenges

In its inter-faith peace-building efforts, the MCC program has sometimes encountered as many challenges from Christians as from Muslims.

- Some Christians in Nigeria interpret the many instances of violence in the world today as signs of the end times. I am troubled when they claim that there is little or nothing we can do to positively change things except to just pray and wait for Christ’s second coming.
- Initially it was very difficult to convince churches that still maintain strong relationships with their mission partners of the importance of peace studies. Some mission partners misinterpret our Anabaptist background as being opposed to their theological positions.
- Some Christians misinterpret peace for passivism.
- Some religious leaders are absolutely opposed to inter-faith initiatives.

In addition, from both the Christian and Muslim side, there may be a lack of candor as to the role of religion as a source of conflict. Most defend their religion by quoting the peaceful verses of their religious books

without acknowledging that some religious leaders use the same holy books to incite their faithful to hate people of other faiths. At the same time, people are often afraid to talk about those religious practices that directly infringe on the rights of others because such actions may be seen as a public disgrace of their holy religion.

Learnings and Conclusions

Religious violence does not occur in a vacuum. It is affected by wider conditions in Nigeria and in the world. The lack of good communication systems in both rural and urban areas means that many people rely on rumors rather than facts. This has escalated religious violence in many places in Nigeria. While some conflicts, such as land disputes or chieftaincy tussles, can be confined to one geographic area, religious conflicts are highly contagious and know no boundaries.

Widespread poverty in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, the Middle East and Asia has encouraged fundamentalism because it aids the indoctrination of intolerance.

The British colonial system of indirect rule in the north of Nigeria combined religious and political systems, and is seen by many as a negative historical legacy.

At the highest level of decision-making in Nigeria, the Federal Government has set up the Nigeria Inter-religious Council in recent years. The state governments have established peace commissions and committees, and have held peace conferences. Civil society organizations have been conducting problem-solving workshops and seminars.

All these efforts are important for the inter-faith peace process. However, an unmet need is to work directly with the primary victims and the affected communities so that they can reframe the conflict and move toward reconciliation. There is also the need to focus on peace impact assessments as well as problem-solving workshops. This will enable the identification of peace-building gaps and the way forward.

Inter-faith peace work is highly sensitive. People have to trust the process in order for them to continue on the hard journey.

As trainers, we have learned that there is the need to maintain personal relationships with those that have been transformed. They need support after the transformation as well as before and during the training. Just as in transplanting crops or trees, survival after transplanting is not automatic and continuing care is necessary.

Enabling Factors for MCC Nigeria’s Peace Training

1. MCC Nigeria has benefited from the fact that it is a Christian service agency rather than a church. Muslims have told us that one of the reasons they trust MCC is the fact that conversion is not its primary goal.
2. MCC as an international service agency is seen as more neutral than is a Nigerian church.
3. MCC’s focus on transformation has helped participants to appreciate its genuine, credible, and effective approach.
4. The strategic nature of the trainings is a major factor. The phased trainings are intended to lead to establishing peace programs for continuity and sustainability that reflect the visions for peace of the participants.
5. The low-key approach with little publicity has been much appreciated by participants.
6. MCC’s approach of working with victims has been understood as one of the major strengths of its approach. MCC sees victims as major resources for peace building.
7. The MCC office operation has been relatively non-bureaucratic, and this has been important where urgent emergency responses were needed.
8. MCC’s peace training tries to be more practical than philosophical. This means prompt responses to requests rather than extended theological debates.
9. The adaptability of the MCC peace training approach means that trainers are sensitive to the local context and materials available. Workshops are sometimes held under a tree and sometimes incorporate power point presentations.

We have learned that there is often politicalization of religious issues, and “religionization” of political issues. A political conflict at the top level of a society can be a religious conflict at the grassroots level.

We are convinced that our human failures, rather than our diversities, are the cause for religious conflict in Nigeria.

We have been heartened to learn that both Christians and Muslims in Nigeria accept that true religion is determined not by how it treats members of its own faith tradition, but rather, how it treats people of other faiths.

Gopar Tapkida is MCC Nigeria Peace Program Coordinator and lives in Jos, Nigeria.

Interfaith Bridge Building in the Middle East

by Alain Epp Weaver

Colonial movements
use religious arguments
to justify their claims.

What do we mean by interfaith bridge building? Which examples of projects from Palestine and other parts of the Middle East are representative of what Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) wishes to do under the rubric of “interfaith bridge building?” Is it sufficient for a project to bring together persons from different religious backgrounds for it to be considered an example of interfaith bridge building? Or is something more intended? Is the act of interfaith bridge building to be the primary purpose of the project, or should it be viewed as a beneficial by-product? Consider, for example, Christian schools in the Middle East, like the Catholic school in Zababdeh. Such schools have arguably done more than anything to foster positive relations between Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle East. Through Christian schools and through social service programs like those carried out by the East Jerusalem YMCA, a variety of church and church-related organizations in the Middle East make a *diaconal* witness within their wider societies, a witness that consists at least in part of an embodied testimony to the reality that God’s love reaches out to all and that God is at work outside the walls of the church, such as when a Palestinian Muslim trainer for the YMCA’s Women’s Training Program gives rural and refugee women skills they can use to take greater charge of their lives. But the social service and development programs of church-related groups like the YMCA or the activities of Christian schools in the Middle East are first and foremost about helping rural women gain greater financial control over their lives, or about improving accessibility for persons with disabilities, or about providing a high-quality education. These projects might in the course of their implementation also build bridges of understanding and friendship between persons from

different religious backgrounds, but these programs were not started with the express purpose of building such bridges.

Some of the dynamics that help to shape Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East include memories of the Crusades and their violence against not only Muslims but also Eastern Christians; Western Christian complicity in the colonialism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Western Christian support for Zionism; and the widespread reporting of disparaging comments about Islam made by various Western Christian leaders, such as Franklin Graham. Christians in the Middle East sometimes find themselves facing guilt-by-association for the actions and words of their Western co-religionists. The fact that the impact of Western Christianity in the Middle East has been and continues to be negative in many ways should reinforce our commitment to be accountable to Middle Eastern Christians when it comes to any proposed interfaith bridge-building efforts in the region. I’d like to highlight three implications that being accountable to the church in the Middle East should have for how MCC approaches the task of interfaith bridge building.

The first implication is that we should be skeptical about applying the interfaith lens to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Many Israeli leaders wish to present the conflict as a religious one, part of a broader “clash of civilizations” or of the “Global War on Terror.” I do not wish to deny that both Palestinians (Christian and Muslim) and Israeli Jews deploy religious discourse in order to justify violence. That said, a strong argument can be made that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not a Jewish-Muslim conflict but is rather best understood as a conflict between a settler-colonial movement, Zionism, that seeks to extend control over partic-

ular territory, and the indigenous population resisting such control. That colonial movements use religious arguments to justify their claims to particular parcels of land and their control over particular peoples is nothing new, nor is the fact that anti-colonialist insurgents deploy religious rhetoric to mobilize and justify resistance to colonial practice. Even the most secular of Zionists make implicit religious appeals alongside secular arguments for why the Jewish “nation” should rightfully control Palestine, and even the secular factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization rally their followers with emotional appeals to liberate Jerusalem. However, to view the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in primarily religious terms is to lose sight of the military and bureaucratic forms of power through which the Israeli colonial regime extends and deepens its control over land and people. Too many initiatives carried out under the “interfaith” rubric serve to obscure these realities of power. The churches in Palestine call on their fellow Christians in Europe and North America to be aware of the ways in which Israeli colonial practices dispossess Palestinian Christians (and Muslims) and, by crippling the Palestinian economy, threaten the church’s existence in Palestine, as more and more Palestinian Christians emigrate, seeking to make a livelihood in the West.

A second implication of being accountable to Middle Eastern churches is that we will join Middle Eastern Christians in being unapologetic in our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. We need to be clear amongst ourselves and with our supporting churches that we engage in interfaith bridge building *because*, not in spite, of our Christological convictions. Our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He is the way, the truth and the life, that all salvation comes through Him, should not serve as a stumbling block to forging alliances with those who do not name His name, nor should it prevent us from cultivating a receptivity to learning about God from those outside the borders of the church. One temptation in any interfaith activity is to shy away from our particular confessions, to search for some neutral language to describe our faith convictions. But such a search is doomed from the start, for there is no neutral ground to be found. The bridge-building metaphor is problematic if it leads us to think of persons of differing faith convictions coming together at a neutral location. We need to expect, and be unapologetic about the fact, that people from different faiths will name the truths they discover in interfaith collaboration according to their own faith convictions. We should engage in interfaith bridge building

not out of a low view of Jesus according to which Jesus is one light among many others, but out of a high view of Jesus. To deny that there is truth to be found outside the church, to deny the value of fostering friendships and collaboration among persons of different faiths, is to have too low a Christology.

Finally, a commitment to being accountable to the church in the Middle East with regard to interfaith bridge-building efforts should remind us of the continued importance of ecumenical work. In Egypt and in Syria MCC has close partnerships with the Coptic Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox churches, respectively. Yet these are churches from which Mennonites, heirs to the radical Reformation, are estranged. The same could be said for the Roman Catholic and Chaldean Catholic institutions with which we work. The decision by MCC and the Mennonite mission boards not to try to plant Mennonite churches in the Middle East has been, to my mind, a missiologically sound one: the last thing the church’s witness to Jesus in the Middle East needs is more fracturing and splintering of Christ’s body. Accompanying the churches of the Middle East and supporting them in their witness is an exciting missiological adventure. Such ministries of accompaniment should be carried out in a vulnerable spirit, one in which we open ourselves to ecclesiological challenge. Just as we should not be content with a pluralistic attitude in interfaith matters, our commitment to ecumenical partnership should not be driven by an embrace of denominational pluralism. Our partnerships with Roman Catholic and various Orthodox churches, all of which make strong ecclesiological claims about being the true church, presents us with an opportunity to reflect on why we as Mennonite and Brethren in Christ remain separate, out of communion, with these churches. Building ecumenical bridges through cooperation in the church’s diaconal service to the wider society has been and should continue to be a defining characteristic of MCC’s presence in the Middle East. But convergence in service ministries should not obscure ongoing doctrinal divergences. While we can and should affirm our common identity as Christians, the fact that we cannot share in the Eucharistic feast with many of our partners should remind us that the religious Other is often our Christian sister or brother. In the Middle East, then, building ecumenical bridges will also be an indispensable part of what it means to be engaged in interfaith bridge building.

Alain Epp Weaver is MCC co-representative for Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq.

We will join Middle Eastern Christians in being unapologetic in our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The last thing the church’s witness to Jesus in the Middle East needs is more fracturing and splintering of Christ’s body.

Reflection on Somalia Interfaith Work

by Chantal Logan

Somalis recognized that Mennonites had come out of love and to serve.

The Somali account of Mennonite Mission is a unique story in many ways. It is unique because it is a saga that has been going on for more than fifty years. It is also unique because it is truly a “Mennonite story.” Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) and Mennonite people of several nationalities and many backgrounds have been involved. But above all it is unique because it is a story about the trust built between two very different people groups. One group, called the Somali people, happens to be Muslim, and the other called Mennonite Mission, turns out to be Christian. This makes it a long-term, people to people, interfaith bridge-building story.

Islam and Somalis

If one consults books written before 1995 about Somali identity, three phrases constantly recur: “one language,” “one culture,” “one religion.” The Somali people are always presented as being one very homogeneous group—despite their inability to recreate a central government after these last 15 years of civil war. And to many Somalis, the most important of the three elements which makes up their homogeneity is their religion. All Somalis are Muslim, they insist.

According to prevalent Somali genealogies, their ancestor came from Saudi Arabia very soon after the death of the prophet Mohamed. This ancestor, who is sometimes presented as a Muslim missionary, brought the knowledge of Islam to the people in Somalia. Once there, he married a local woman and from that marriage came the Somali people. Although some of those genealogies might be questionable historically speaking, Islam likely did accompany Arabian traders who traveled to the Somalia coast in the early days of Islam. It moved gradually from the coastal area to the interior in a peaceful way. The paradox though is that in spite of being a strongly-held identity symbol, Islam in Somalia sometimes appears to run a little thin: clan identity often takes precedence over religious identity.

Christianity and Somalis

When the European colonial powers came to Somalia in the 19th century, contrary to the situation in the Middle East or in Iraq, they did not find a Christian church. In Somalia,

the Christian presence came with European colonization, via two main groups. The first were the Italian Catholics who came very early in the story of colonization, and the second were the Mennonites, who followed a brief Swedish church presence, and arrived a few years before Somalia’s independence in 1960. The British, Italian and French colonial powers who had carved up Somali territory at the end of the 19th century each ruled differently when it came to religion. The British determined not to allow Christian missions in their northern territory. But in southern Somalia the Italian colonizers allowed the Catholic church (and later the Mennonites) to work freely. This continued after World War II when Italy was allowed to maintain jurisdiction over its former colony through a United Nations trusteeship. So when the Mennonites came to southern Somalia in 1954, they were able to build schools and hospitals and engage in other mission work. After Somalia independence in 1960, some restrictions on religious freedom were gradually imposed.

Building trust between Mennonites and Somalis

The first post-independence stipulation was that Islam would be the only religion allowed in Somalia, with a clause added later that made proselytizing illegal. Mennonite Mission did not feel it was greatly affected by the change. The schools had become well known and appreciated and missionaries had always been low key in their witness. But these government directives soon precipitated two events which brought the mission to a crossroads which had lasting impact.

When the government decreed that Islam be taught in all schools, public and private, some Protestant missions chose to close their schools. But Mennonite Mission in consultation with new Somali believers and the Lancaster board, decided to allow Islam to be taught in their schools. This decision proved to be ground-breaking for the relationship between Somalis and Mennonites. Still today, Somalis affirm that this was when trust was built. Somalis recognized that Mennonites had come not merely to convert them to a new religion, but out of love and to serve.

Ironically, the tragic murder of Mennonite missionary, Merlin Grove, by a Muslim fundamentalist also helped build trust. Many in

Somalia expected the Mennonites to leave. But again, the mission's decision to stay communicated a message of commitment to the Somali people and a message of forgiveness. Those two events of more than 30 years ago are still retold in Somali oral history. Thanks to their ability to live their theology of presence, commitment, sacrifice and forgiveness, the name "Mennonite" is today a household word in Somali.

MCC and EMM work since the civil war

MCC became active in Somali refugee work in 1977, when war with Ethiopia created a flood of refugees. In 1990, the Mennonite Somalia program became a joint effort between MCC and EMM. When the 1990 civil war started, nobody thought that anarchy could last so long. The present conflict in Somalia actually defies common theories about conflict. It is often stated that people fight because of differences in religious or ethnic affiliation. Yet for 15 years, the unusually homogeneous Somalis have not been able to stop fighting and set up a central government. It might appear that René Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry better explains the conflict in Somalia. Girard states that people fight because they are alike, not because they are different. The Somali conflict proves this point and defeats the popular "clash of civilizations" theory which makes too much of differences, religious or otherwise.

The longevity of the Somali civil war took UN agencies and INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations) by surprise, and sent them scrambling to find a way to intervene in this chaotic situation. It was difficult for them because there was no official government to deal with. This is where the Mennonites held a special and privileged position. Their knowledge of the people and culture allowed them to work through unofficial channels. But above all they were seen by the Somalis not as an organization but as a *people* who were known and could be trusted. In the absence of official structure, trust was paramount.

In recent years, especially in the absence of a functioning government, the international community has normally worked through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Since the NGO is a Western concept, the local people have to adopt an NGO recipient mentality, and learn how to relate to Western organization principles in order to receive help. It is somewhat ironic that those who need the help have to adapt to those who provide it, rather than the other way around! Because Mennonites enjoyed estab-

lished relationships with the Somalis, they could use other channels to help. MCC and EMM focused their work primarily in the area of peace. It was possible to support peace conferences, especially at the local level, by working through councils of elders which were native to the region rather than working through newly-created and artificial NGO channels.

The interfaith dimension

Some international NGOs, who identify themselves as secular to guard their neutrality, find it hard to understand why a religious (Christian) organization like MCC can be regarded as a valuable and trusted partner by the Somalis (Muslims). What they fail to see is that Muslims and Christians have much in common because they maintain a religious, not a secular, world view. It was when I taught in Djibouti, an Islamic republic, that I learned the importance of the faith connection. My French colleagues sent by the French government showed indifference or even contempt towards religious life. On the other hand, I could connect with my Somali colleagues because I acknowledged that God existed and mattered. My openness about working for a Christian mission was also a plus. For a Muslim, the one thing worse than being an infidel is to be a hypocrite. A person (or agency) who disguises his/her Christian identity is much more likely to be rejected than one who acknowledges her/his identity openly.

The interfaith dimension of the MCC and EMM work was more pro-active when we sponsored several Somali peace facilitators to the African Peace Institute in Zambia for training. We told them in advance that they were going to a Christian peace-building institute, including chapel services and a Christian framework. The first person we sent was very enthusiastic about what he learned, and was pleased that he had been given the opportunity to share peacemaking from the Koran during a chapel session. Later we sent a Somali woman who told us that what she had learned was invaluable. She also told us about a Christian priest who had avoided her during the first 15 days because she was Muslim and he was afraid of her. As the classes went on, he realized she was a good person and apologized for his earlier attitude. That was an "interfaith bridge building" event which was a wonderful by-product of our primary intention to train someone to be a peace facilitator. When Muslims and Christians interact in the same context, interesting and unexpected interfaith communication can happen.

To build bridges entails risks.

What we have done and what we have learned

In a situation of civil war it is difficult to measure in any quantitative way what has been done. Everything can unravel overnight. But one thing can be said for sure: a bridge has been built between Mennonite—Christian—people and Somali—Muslim—people. It is sad that this story is not widely known in Mennonite circles. A story of Muslim and Christian people walking together through 50 years of history needs to be proclaimed in today's context. In any case, MCC and EMM have built bridges, and those bridges make it possible to walk alongside the Somalis during this very difficult time of their history.

There are several lessons that can be learned from this story. The first is that it takes time and patience to build bridges. To build bridges in an interfaith context, trust is essential and comes as the result of long-term commitment. Second, it entails risks. The risks sometimes endanger one's life, as Merlin Grove's martyrdom shows. Then there are risks from walking into uncharted theological territory as in EMM's decision in the 1960s to allow Islamic teachers to teach in order to keep the schools open and main-

tain a Mennonite presence. Additionally, there is great risk when people cross the interfaith bridge, as when Muslims become Christian and sometimes risk their lives. And what of the risk that Christians may abandon their faith? Third, one must never renounce nor hide one's Christian identity as an organization or as an individual. Integrity is of utmost importance in any interfaith enterprise.

Finally, Anabaptist theology in which non-violence is an integral part is ideally suited to interfaith bridge building. A belief in non-violence is a refusal to engage in evangelism that is belligerent or coercive. A non-violence stance permits one to relate to another of a different faith in a respectful way. In light of recent world events, for any interfaith dialogue with Muslims, one is forced to distance oneself from any state or government policy which condones war. Anabaptist belief in the separation of church and state helps explain that peace is an integral part of our Christian faith and it is from that integrity that our message comes and from that message our credibility.

Chantal Logan is a former MCC Somalia Country Co-Representative and lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia and Chassagnes, France.

Summary of MCC Peace Committee and International Program Department Discussions on Interfaith Bridge Building

March 16–19, 2005, Akron, PA

Introduction

International Program Department (IPD) staff met March 16 and 17 and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Peace Committee met March 18 and 19, 2005 to consider the IPD key initiative of Interfaith Bridge Building. Both meetings heard from resource persons Peter Dula (MCC Iraq Program Coordinator), Alain Epp Weaver (Palestine/Jordan/Iraq Country Co-Representative), Gopar Tapkida (MCC Nigeria peace worker), and Chantal Logan (former MCC Somalia Country Co-Representative). The goal for both meetings was to reflect on the context for interfaith bridge building work, hear some of MCC's experiences and current involvements, and give counsel on how this initiative might be shaped.

This key initiative has been defined as focused on *diaconal partnerships*, in which

MCC or its church partners form partnerships with agencies or groups from other faiths. The meetings asked what we need to keep in mind in such an endeavor, and what pitfalls we should look out for.

Central Themes

Throughout our discussions, certain central themes were presented and discussed. The following three areas capture much of this.

1. Identity

We began this discussion by referencing an ecological concept referred to as the "ecotone", a borderland space between the forest and the meadow, for example. The ecotone, or borderland, contains a bio-diversity many times richer than the center of either the forest or the meadow. Our faith, and other faiths, are healthiest and most rich in this

borderland. However, a traditional impression is that faith often finds the strongest, perhaps most rigid, defense at the heart of the forest or the center of the meadow, and borderlands are therefore seen as spaces of fear.

This metaphor was both a call and a caution: a call that the light of Christ will be most evident and rich in the borderland, and a caution that the borderland is a place of competing confessions, with multiple lights. If one is insecure, entering a borderland imagining a stance of neutrality, the borderland can be a place of confusion and disorientation.

Western discourse generally has championed the division between public and private, relegating faith to the private sphere and suggesting that public arenas be narrowed to issues that we hold in common. For many who do not participate in such a Western dichotomy, this seems too unrealistic an understanding of what motivates people, as well as an impoverished account of religion and of the political. Most people can understand entering a borderland from a faith confession. Entering such a place from a secular (neutral) confession can often raise suspicion and confusion. Therefore, as we think about Interfaith Bridge Building, an explicit Christian faith confession will not only be freeing but will be more understood by those others who are also making faith confessions. This will not guarantee a welcome, but for working in Islamic contexts, the most unwelcome and suspected stance is likely to be that of an unreflective commitment to secular frameworks.

An interfaith lens for work therefore begins with the question of identity. Who are we and what is the role of religion in the borderland context we are entering?

2. Faith and Transformation

How do we approach the issue of conversion? Several noted that this is too important an issue to be pushed off the table, although many of our colleagues involved in secular humanitarian work consider this a taboo subject.

The Western world in general has a deep historical commitment to the notion of separating religion from public life. Early European political developments, from experience with wars that many considered to be religious wars, formed strong emotions around these principles. The “old European pledge” from the Treaty of Westphalia assigned religious identity to that of the ruler, in order to reduce religious tension.

Republicanism formed around core ideas about separating church from state. We struggle therefore to know how to make potentially exclusive faith claims in today’s public spaces (borderlands and eco-tones) and how to make such claims while developing habits of respect for others’ equally exclusive religious claims.

Part of our task around faith transformation is to become more articulate on how faith enters and thrives in these borderlands. We need more work on identifying the “whole economy” (from *oeconomia*) of these borderlands so that our image of transformation is not reduced to a few ideas on forming and maintaining Christian identity. Confession, propagation, and dialogue need to be complemented with themes like exchange, sharing, argument and antagonism. We noted the importance of assuming a stance of vulnerability. A commitment to transformation in today’s interfaith borderlands asks us to expand our capacity for vulnerable encounter.

The term “witness” surfaced as perhaps a more useful term than “conversion”. Our task is first of all to give a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. God is the source of conversion.

3. Program

Is “diaconal” the right word to assist us in understanding how an organization like MCC might more deliberately participate in interfaith encounter? We also discussed whether “bridge building” is a helpful term.

Can “diaconal” be a stance for entering interfaith borderlands through vulnerability and service? This need not suggest disinterest in theological dialogue or worship, but asks how such encounter often happens. A diaconal approach can start with assumptions about identity and transformation, as reflected on above.

Bridge building is an older term to signal Christian presence in diverse settings. Will this still work within the image of an ecotone or borderland? The “bridge” metaphor can be a problem if it suggests meeting difference half-way, that we adjust/limit our confession in order to encounter another, or that we are creating a neutral space for an encounter. The notion we need to communicate is not one of neutrality.

On the other hand “bridge” is a way to resist imperial images that have been used in the past and that imply defeating/condemning the other. Confrontational images are never far from a past of violence.

Although MCC’s strength and interfaith bridge-building efforts will continue to focus on relationships built around diaconal ministries, MCC has the flexibility and sometimes the opportunities to engage more directly in theological dialogue. Precedents exist in MCC placements in Soviet bloc countries, or in Iran, and in peace and justice projects where theological education has been integral. MCC should welcome opportunities for theological dialogue where appropriate.

—from Peace Committee discussion



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We will continue to struggle with images for how to best reflect and talk about interfaith encounter.

Concerns and Counsel

The Peace Committee provided counsel for MCC as we work at this key initiative over the next five years:

1. We must communicate as clearly as possible that we start from the basis of our Christian claim that Christ is the light of the world. A fear that comes up when we talk about working in interfaith partnership is that we will imply that all religious truth is relative, or that we will act in a way that signals that religious conviction is a private matter.
2. We engage in interfaith partnerships both to accomplish tasks together and to interact with the other. Both of these are important, and we will likely have examples of both. A partnership may focus on the work we can do together, or, in cases where the religious difference itself is a source of conflict, the

focus may be on learning how to live with one another despite our differences. Often MCC programs are interested in interfaith bridge building because the people we work among are mostly from a different faith. Building friendships and relationships are rewarding in themselves, without regard to outcomes.

3. As Christians we want everyone to come to see their lives in light of the gracious judgment of the cross, so that we may grow together into the future human community that Jesus made possible. In that sense, the end goal of all we do is conversion. However, we need also to be aware that, especially when we come from the West, we carry implicit and explicit power into many of these relationships. Exclusive claims must always be expressed with vulnerability, and our power must be acknowledged.

Summary drafted by Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr with input from MCC Peace Committee. Any of the unabridged conference papers is available upon request from the Peace Office.