REFLECTION

Dialogue of the Feet:
A Mennonite Sojourn Through Mindanao
A Trip to Survey MCC's Inter-faith Relationships in Mindanao's Trouble Spots

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Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteers cannot help but engage persons of other faiths when living and working in a religiously pluralistic context. Often the most significant encounters happen in the humblest ways, over a cup of tea. These little conversations accumulate significant relational capital and run counter to growing religious antagonism and fracture evident in so much of the world today.

The Anabaptist tradition inculturates a biblical set of values that have a practical side to them when engaging the religious neighbors. These values make bridges, in turn creating space where conflict over ideology or resources has left little room for conversation. Through a relational orientation, careful listening, incarnating Jesus' love, honesty, and a belief in transformation, amazing dialogical space is opened up. For MCC in the Southern Philippine context, these values have helped to span the gaps between peoples locked in decades-long violent conflict.

This is the story of a sojourn by five Mennonites who connected with broad spectrum of MCC's interfaith relationships on the Southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The reader will be introduced to some friends of MCC who are co-laborers in the field of inter-faith conversations, in order to extract the underlying principles that draw Mennonites to those partners. For the reader, then, these practical examples will form a dialogue of the feet.

I found myself standing in between two Catholic priests who have a well-known history of being at odds with each other over approaches to inter-faith dialogue. One has a center focusing on the spirituality of inter-faith

dialogue. His approach is for people to retreat from the pressures of daily life and find an inner peace in the quiet of reflection, thus opening the doors of the heart to people of other faiths. The other priest is an activist who has been in the thick of inter-faith tensions during some difficult years. He advocates for dialogue to happen in the rough and tumble of life, getting one's hands dirty with issues of justice and peace. Here was I, a Mennonite, standing between the two priests, knowing both and empathizing greatly with each philosophy.

Being an Anabaptist within the Mindanao mix is a strange and wonderful gift. The intent is to connect that which is disconnected, moving into the empty space between two parties who are in conflict or bridging the gulf between those who are not aware of each other. The paradigm of "standing with" yet being a "bridge" symbolizes the MCC approach to inter-faith relations in the Philippines. This sojourn is representative of the tremendous relational capital built up over thirty years of MCC life and work in Mindanao, as we have been the bridge.

MCC in The Philippines: How Did We Get There?

The Mennonite Central Committee has had two complete histories in the Republic of the Philippines, a nation of more than 7,100 islands and a population of 85 million people. The two periods of MCC presence, separated by 27 years, responded to different realities. The first time frame was post-World War II, spanning 1946 to 1950, when relief and development were needed. The work was mainly in the northern island of Luzon in the mountains, and took the form of medical and housing reconstruction. The second block of history covers 1977 to 2005, when Mennonites stood in solidarity with Filipinos who were seeking justice under the repressive dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos.[1] Throughout this second period, beginning from a base in Mindanao, MCCers rubbed shoulders with many different expressions of Christianity and Islam.

On a "presence/project" continuum, the MCC program in the Philippines has been characterized by presence with Filipinos as they struggle for justice and peace in their communities. This has been done almost exclusively through seconding MCCers to organizations, whether church or secular. The work itself has been dialogical.

It was at Mennonite World Conference in Zimbabwe in 2003 that I bumped into David Shenk as he was giving a short input session on Islam and dialogue with other faiths. His input was delightful, primarily because he peppered solid biblical and Anabaptist principles with stories of his lifelong vocation of engaging other faiths in dialogue. Since September 11, 2001, he has focused primarily on engaging with Islam. I invited him to come to Mindanao to visit some of the inter-faith partnerships MCC had nurtured over the years. That invitation was reinforced by Luke Schrock-Hurst, former MCC Country Representative and Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) missionary working with the Integrated Mennonite Church (IMC) of the Philippines.

Two other persons were invited on this Mindanao Sojourn in order to give them exposure for an ongoing Anabaptist presence in Mindanao. Richard Rancap is the president of the IMC and is from Lumban, Laguna, Luzon Island of the Philippines. The IMC has only Mennonite churches in Luzon at present but has expressed interest in church planting in Mindanao. Dann Pantoja, a former activist, is a Filipino who migrated to Canada twenty years ago during the height of the purges after the fall of Marcos. Dann found his way to peace theology and is currently a member of Peace Mennonite Church in Vancouver, BC.[2] *He has been engaged in an immersion and presence ministry among Muslims in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao to test the idea of a longer-term service to Muslim communities in the Philippines.*

Religious and Historical Context

Muslims make up just five percent of the Filipino population,[3] although Islam first established a beachhead in the Sulu Archipelago in c. 1380 as part of its spread throughout Asia.[4] The Sulu Sultanate was established in 1450 and is still seen by many Muslims as the legitimate governmental system for Muslim Mindanao. The Spaniard Magellan arrived in the Philippines in 1521 and claimed them for the Spanish King. The Spanish met Muslims in Mindanao and transferred the title "Moro" to these adherents of Mohammed after the Moroccan Muslims-Moors who had occupied much of Spain for hundreds of years. What began as a pejorative term has been taken now by Mindanao Muslims as a term of pride: "Moro."

Spanish colonization didn't begin until 1565, and the Catholic Church established a dominant presence. Today, 83 percent of Filipinos consider themselves Roman Catholic, with the Philippines having the third highest number of Catholics of any nation behind Brazil and Mexico. A quick scan of urban and rural areas reveals a large number of churches and Roman Catholic institutions.[5] While Catholics come in many shapes and sizes, MCCers have tended to gravitate toward orders with members sharing the values of working with the poor, speaking to injustice, and building peace.

The Spanish were unable to subdue the Mindanao Moros during their colonization, and when the Americans took over Spanish territory at the end of the Spanish/American War in 1898, the Philippine Islands became a US colony. Through a combination of hard power (superior firepower) and soft power (education and treaties), the Americans drew the Moros into agreements that eventually contained their influence to a few select areas of Mindanao. Through the policy of giving land to Christian settlers from the northern islands of Luzon and the Visayas, first by the Americans and later by Filipino policy set by the Manila aristocracy, the Moro populations were diluted and made minorities in their own homelands.

This migration from the northern "Christianized" populations caused no great conflict at first. The Muslim inhabitants welcomed new neighbors and even gave them land nearby. But wiser to the ways of imported laws and statutes, the Christians registered their land and gobbled up vast tracts of property, displacing those who welcomed them in the first place. Animosity between Christian settlers and Moro inhabitants reached a peak when, fueled by third force terror and vigilante groups, executions, destruction, and displacement became a state tool under President Marcos's tyrannical rule in the 1970s and '80s. While there are still elderly people around who remember living peaceably among their religiously different neighbors, younger Muslims know only war and displacement in Mindanao.

We left early in two cars to travel the road from Cotabato to Marawi City. The day sprang up sunny and the sky was cloudless. Winding up the road outside of Cotabato, the beauty of the physical landscape belies the reality that this area was depopulated during the 2000 "all-out war" declared by President Estrada of the Philippines. The Armed Forces of the Philippines

(AFP) over-ran the Islamic Center at Camp Abubakar, a site for Muslim separatists pressing for an Islamic state in Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Painful atrocities, like the AFP eating pork and drinking beer in the main mosque, are still fresh in the Moro psyche.

Passing the turn-off to Camp Abubakar reminded me that the people of this part of Mindanao face prejudice aimed at them for their Islamic roots. An occasional armored personnel carrier or truckload of soldiers, and the numerous military detachments dug into the side of the road, were reminders that the area is still heavily militarized. In recent years this stretch of road has seen many kidnappings and car-jackings, and it is not recommended to foreigners. Warned that our convoy would not be making any stops, we were surprised when our two dark-tinted-window vehicles halted on the shores of Lake Dapao in Borug for a sight-seeing stop. Further along we took a break to eat lunch at a restaurant at the southeast end of Lake Marawi. I was amazed that, in a place with such a bad reputation among westerners, we could walk freely and were shown gracious hospitality by local people who knew we were foreigners, outsiders.

Father Bert: Living Catholic Faith as Reconciliation

Maguindanao province of Mindanao is the epicenter of displacement from a series of wars since the 1970s. Our destination was the Immaculate Conception Parish in the town of Pikit to meet with Father Bert Layson, an unassuming Catholic priest usually found in a tank top, short pants, and flip-flops. He began his personal journey to inter-faith transformation by telling us about being assigned to the remote, predominantly Muslim Philippine island of Jolo in the Sulu Archipelago as a new priest, "because he was naughty" as he describes it. For nine years he served on this small remote island of 4,000 Christians in the midst of 600,000 Muslims.

During this time two things happened to shape his attitude towards the work of the Catholic Church and more specifically his order, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). First a destitute man approached him for aid, which he refused to offer, saying it was the government's responsibility. Six months later Father Bert, after reflecting on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, "Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done to me," had a vision on retreat of this destitute man's face and Jesus' face interchanged. He realized he had failed this man and Jesus.

The second formational event occurred when, after nine years in this Jolo parish, his beloved bishop was martyred. Father Bert began to hate Muslims for this act. But after a transfer to the Pikit Parish in Central Mindanao, and an almost immediate crisis of massive displacement of the Muslim communities surrounding his parish due to war, his attitude changed. "When you hear mothers crying and see families displaced, you don't ask if they are Muslims or Christians," he mused. So he set about providing relief to uprooted people, who were mostly Muslims, in his parish during four major displacements from 1997 on (1997, 2000, 2001, 2003). He says that "helping the poor is not a matter of choice for Christians, it's a social responsibility."

Through his humble service to the displaced in his parish, Father Bert has proven that he holds the basic principle of dialogue, which is "the belief in the basic goodness of every person, that is, the goodness of God." He sees dialogue as "an integral part of the evangelism of the Church," not in a narrow soul-winning way but in a holistic demonstration that "the Kingdom of God is bigger than the Church." When asked how his mission is received by his fellow OMI priests, he laughs and says, "It's difficult for priests to transcend their biases." Indeed, Father Bert works tirelessly to change Catholic altitudes toward Muslims among his parishioners, by crossing social and religious boundaries and even by putting himself in harm's way on the front lines of war in pursuit of peace.

I have made central Mindanao the focus on my work in the Philippines. Nearly two years prior to our Mennonite delegation visiting Father Bert, I was sitting under the trees with fighters from the Muslim secessionist movement, the MILF. I was with a group investigating breeches of the ceasefire between the MILF and the government. The MILF commander of the 105th unit and four field commanders were taking our questions. They quite freely stated that they "wanted peace" and indicated that they wouldn't make any provocation because "It's our people who get hurt when there is a skirmish." "This is our land, our back yard," declared the commander while sweeping his hand toward the beautiful rice fields, coconut groves, and bush land around us. "Why would we want war?" he asked. Good question, I thought later.

The Mindanao conflict, while looking religious, has its roots in land grabbing, resource stealing, and unjust treatment of the original inhabitants. Differences in religion are convenient places for the powerful to hang their prejudice while they exploit the conflict for their own ends. Part of any long-term solution to the conflict is education about the real cause of conflict.

Southern Christian College: Global Education for Service

Southern Christian College (SCC) in Midsayap is a United Church of the Philippines (UCCP) college committed to providing a global education to its students. As one of the larger denominations of Protestants, who make up nine percent of the population, its creative and visionary leadership have come from Dr. Erlinda Senturias. After having lived for years in Geneva working for the World Council of Churches, she returned to contribute toward development in Mindanao. Her commitment to nonviolent solutions for conflict includes helping to shape students' worldviews in ways that include inter-faith awareness and interaction.

Students attending SCC are required to do some cross-cultural education through interaction with the tri-peoples[6] in Mindanao: Lumad (indigenous), Muslims, and Christian settlers. Other SCC programs include an annual Summer Institute for Peace and Sustainable Development Motivators (SIPDM), which was going on as we visited. This program brings ten youth from each of the tri-peoples together for education in peace, history, and peace building. Interacting for a month, these young people forge friendships that transcend their diverse backgrounds and the prejudice inherent to this diversity.

Our Mennonite delegation had several occasions to interact with SCC students, faculty, and the SIPDM youth. It is impressive how SCC has taken the dynamic context of its location and used it for a learning laboratory, one that engages local problems and challenges from a global perspective.

SIPDM participants used "a Culture of Peace" (COP) as the paradigm for their dialogue framework. When quizzed about what constitutes a COP, respondents varied in their answers. Some said that it is the "absence of colonization and oppression (neo-colonization from Manila) or a respect for others, dialogue, justice, and pursuing diplomatic solutions to conflict." Some recognized that a COP is inner peace. "You have peace when you

don't respond back to injustice with aggression." When asked "How do Maguindanaoan Muslims forgive as a community?," the response was that in Islam, adherents follow the leader; if the leader forgives, the whole group will. "Allah says, 'I love people who forgive,'" we were told.

For Muslims, though, a simple acknowledgment of wrongs, such as land grabbing by the Manila elite during the Marcos years, would go a long way. "We are not asking for all our lands back," said one Muslim youth leader. However, a Lumad community leader reminded the group that "one reason we lost our lands was from forgiveness and hospitality. Forgiveness is a tangible/concrete expression [of a] restored relationship." His meaning was that their graciousness had been taken advantage of.

Our Mennonite group was probing topics rarely raised by foreigners involved in the peace process, forgiveness and reconciliation. Correspondence long after this trip from someone in our discussions who personally experienced loss from war affirmed probing these aspects:

> It was nice having your group during my summer class for a round table dialogue. I won't forget the inspiring thoughts shared that "every time we have sufferings and pains, let's ask Jesus to remove that spear in our backs," and I asked, "How many times shall we ask Jesus to remove the spear, given the dynamics of conflicts here in Mindanao?" It was a very emotional environment of dialogue that we had. I treasure that encounter in my heart.[7]

Muslim-Christian Friendship Produces Fruits of Peace

One fruitful inter-faith friendship that began during this Mennonite trip was between Dann Pantoja and Ustadz A.M. who works full time as director for a Mindanao university in its Muslim-Christian relations initiative. As Dann wrote later,[8] *"Our friendship began when the delegation met [Ustadz A. M., who is like a reverend among Muslims because he confidently quotes the Qur'an in Arabic whenever we exchange theological ideas].*

He told me that his job and his mission used to put him and his family in a very fragile situation in the midst of his Muslim community. But he believes in peace, so he risked his life and the safety of his family. He regularly brings Muslim youth leaders on the university campus to talk with

Christian and Lumad youth leaders. The people in his region saw positive changes in the lives of their young people. Now, his Muslim community trusts and supports him, and protects him and his family. This developing Muslim-Christian friendship "exemplifies the divinely-arranged trust preparation among the hearts and minds of many Muslim religious leaders in Mindanao," commented Dann.

The Mennonite delegation was invited to visit the community where Dann had been doing his immersion live-in during the previous months. The group paid a courtesy call to the mayor, Datu M., who, through a position of strength, has kept the peace in his town all through the last ten violent years. After walking the gauntlet of machine-gun-wielding military security forces bristling with grenade launchers, we were welcomed us into his office.

Dann Pantoja gave an example of Datu M.'s wisdom in strength by telling the story of how Datu M. ended a brewing *rido* (an inter-clan revenge feud) right in his office. Two families had come to him because family B had killed someone from family A. The mayor asked if family A was going to kill someone from family B in revenge. They answered an enthusiastic "yes." Then the mayor asked family B, "If family A kills one of yours, will you kill one of theirs?" "Of course," family B responded. The mayor said, "Each of you choose one to be killed, right here and now, so that this ends." The families came to their senses and realized the futility of revenge. However, "It was only in the presence of the mayor's overwhelming firepower that this kind of settlement could take place," said Dann. "The mayor told me there would be lots of killing when I die," as his overwhelming firepower that keeps *rido* in check will no longer be a deterrent to violence.

In the midst of this kind of political and social reality, a simple prayer opened up space that all the force at the disposal of the mayor could not open. Ustadz A.M. from SCC was invited into the meeting with Datu M. After the introduction formalities, both David Shenk and Ustadz A.M. prayed for Datu M. Because of that prayer, Dann said he

> felt the respect of Datu M. and his support [for] my involvement with the Muslim youth group of his town. He kept mentioning me and that prayer event before his fellow municipal leaders. Because of that, my relationship with the town folks grew deeper.

> You see, I planned and carefully tried to build trust between me and the Muslims, and it worked quite okay. But what happened through this unplanned prayer of David Shenk and [Datu A.M.] is something beyond what I could have imagined – a DEEPER TRUST from a Transcendent Source began! Thus, I expect more unplanned, divinely-provided trust-building events for me and the peace building teams who would come after me.[9]

"Is there something hidden in your presence here among Muslims?" Haron Al Rasheed asked us point blank. Datu B. chimed in: "A sword in one hand and Bible in another is what destroyed [the community] in Maguindanao. When we see white people, the first thing that pops into our minds is religious imperialism," since this has been so much of their history with Christians. From those sour encounters "we [Bangsamoro] are looked upon as bandits and robbers by Filipino historians." "As a Christian, there are three big mistakes to keep in mind," said Ibrahim Bolono. "Betrayal to your purpose to God, betrayal to yourself, betrayal to neighbors." These honest words were a gift from friends to challenge us to transparency and integrity in our intentions and actions.

Evangelicals Reaching Out to Religious Neighbors

With regard to their religious neighbors, evangelicals often resort to one of two extremes. As in many parts of the world, some of the Philippine evangelical community uses cloaked language and aliases to move into Muslim areas for covert evangelism. They take on "tent making" roles with the clandestine motivation of converting Muslims to Christianity. So, while some evangelicals are in the undercover conversion business, many who live as religious minorities develop a "circle the wagon" mentality.

When the church develops a myopic, survival-oriented, inward focus, it becomes oblivious and unconcerned about the welfare of religious majority around them, as if it's waiting to be recognized or validated before reaching out to its religious neighbors.[10] A "don't care," or worse, "they had it coming" attitude during times of strife communicates a distorted picture of the Gospel message.

In the coastal city of Cotabato, our delegation met with the staff of Al Hayat,[11] a Christian NGO seeking a third way between covert evangelism and outrightly ignoring their religious neighbors. Of Cotabato City's 200,000 population, only an estimated one percent is evangelical Christian. Most churches are small and stagnant in growth, and make very minimal effort in reaching out to their Muslim neighbors. In this environment, Al Hayat staff feel very lonely in their work and unsupported by evangelical church hierarchy. One of their programs is a Three-Year Peace and Development Project, in which they partner with five of the estimated forty protestant/evangelical churches in the city to do ministries of compassion. They offer community organizing, development strategies, and peace building in five barangays[12] in Cotabato.

It wasn't easy for Al Hayat community organizers at the start to gain acceptance in the barangays, since the communities feared being the object of conversion efforts. As the communities learned to trust Al Hayat staff, and gained from their training in leadership and transformation, Christian acts of service gave these people new and creative tools for addressing inter-clan feuds, among other situations. When asked about the spiritual foundations of their quest for peacemaking, an Al Hayat program staff member answered, "We show love."

A pastor, a partner in the peace program, sees the role of the church as "bringing Jesus to the community, not the people to the church." He continued, "God has the power to transform. We share the Gospel through deeds." In going to Muslim communities that make up part of Cotabato City, the pastor has been continually "surprised by hospitality" and says "we have tasted the goodness of what the communities have to offer." He himself is a product of an exposure trip organized by Al Hayat in attempt to dismantle the prejudice of pastors toward these communities, and to give them a first-hand look at the communities where they have church volunteers.

I met with N.C., an evangelical church leader, late one night at a coffee shop. He lamented to me that the Philippine evangelical leadership and mission community had received a series of threats by a zealous Muslim. He had heard about the Christian Peacemaker Team approach of working inter-faith in Iraq, and sought out MCC for resources to help him deal with this

kind of conflict. He had a desire to seek out ways to redemptively address this situation. I sent him a stack of peace building materials, especially the Mennonite Conciliation Handbook*, which contains a significant section on the Christian theological basis for conciliation. He later thanked me and indicated that the materials were helpful as he was being called to mediate a contentious conflict situation.*

Likewise, I was approached by a Muslim religious leader who expressed a desire for any materials in Arabic that would validate his working at peace. "My ideas for peace will gain much more respect if the materials I use and disseminate are in Arabic." I supplied him with a copy of an Arabic Conflict Resolution Manual that MCC Jordan sponsored for translation.

Our Mennonite delegation visited Alim M.[13] in a restaurant in downtown Marawi City to hear a truly inspirational story of how he tries to promote peace building among his fellow Muslims. "Shifting from violence to nonviolence is difficult, because any little deviation from armed struggle is seen as a betrayal of the cause which many Maranaos[14] have died for in the decades of struggle [against colonial powers]. Many believe the only solution is war."

As an Islamic scholar, Alim M. garners respect within his Islamic community. But his stand on peace has put that esteem in jeopardy. "I was banned in many mosques when I started this thing (peace building among Muslims). I need your (Mennonite) support. The Muslim peace movement needs Mennonite encouragement." MCC sponsored him to Eastern Mennonite University's Summer Peacebuilding Institute.

Through being a member of the Bishop Ulama Conference (BUC), Alim M. is part of a movement of Mindanao religious leaders and intellectuals who are reshaping religiously prejudicial attitudes. The BUC started as a forum in 1996 to discuss wide-ranging issues from theology to the security of Muslims and Christians in each other's areas.

Alim M. cites three practical outcomes of the BUC over the years. First, people realize religion has little to do with Mindanao's problems. Second, the BUC is a venue where issues are vented so as to present government with a unified voice for influencing its decisions. "We can urge

the government not to use force to solve security problems like kidnapping," Alim M. comments. Third, the youth can be brought into similar assemblies. He warns, "We cannot rely on the government to sustain our attitude of good relations. We have to devise many NGOs to bring this to a lower level of the common people all over Mindanao and the Philippines."

Reflecting on his peacebuilding strategy, Alim M. says that "we are telling government what we want to tell them without violence. Our friends in the jungle are speaking with arms. Conflict is part of nature, but we can resolve problems peacefully without using arms." Gradually, he says, "people are recognizing that even through an individual Muslim and Christian have a fight, it's not between their respective Muslim and Christian communities."

I gained a new revelation on this sojourn that I had made the idea of Christian community too complex. Our delegation of five had evening debriefings from the interactions of the day. As we traveled, discussed, worshiped, and prayed together, our group of five became a community for the ten days we were together. Christ's assertion in Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," became scripture incarnate for us. We were living on the cutting edge of faith during this trip, trusting God and our friends for discernment at each step. This kind of temporary, task-oriented community can be transformational, I discovered, when set in the rich context of inter-faith discussions.

Silsilah: Inter-faith Conversations as Personal Transformation

On the extreme western tip of the mainland of Mindanao Island is a town called Zamboanga, the site of recent large US/Filipino joint military operations in the war on terror. By contrast, this city is also host to a quiet calling for peaceful inter-faith conversations through the work of Father Sebastiano D'Ambra, PIME [Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions], who started the Silsilah dialogue movement. Silsilah, literally "chain" or "link" in Arabic, aims to foster a dialogue of life where Muslims and Christians live among each other, respecting and caring for each other in community.

What this means is that Silsilah is not simply an NGO but an agent of transformation of lives from the inside out. A spiritual foundation is

essential, as evidenced by a Silsilah motto, "Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God." So the movement uses the imagery of journey: "A journey becomes a pilgrimage when we feel God is accompanying us and we move to a holy place."

Harmony Village is Silsilah's idyllic retreat center where this vision takes practical shape. Amidst a beautiful piece of land overlooking the ocean, Father Sebastiano related to our Mennonite delegation how the property was a former camp for armed Muslim resistance in the area. Now the land is nurturing the vision of harmony, not only in the Zamboanga peninsula of Mindanao but in the whole of the Philippines. This tranquil fourteen-hectare campus has a clinic for herbal remedies, a preschool, a farm center, a House of Peace conference center, administrative offices, a mosque, and chapel.

We arrived just in time for the graduating ceremonies of the nineteenth summer basic course on dialogue. Eight Muslims, and 24 Christians of all stripes (diocesan and religious Catholic seminarians, one sister, seven lay leaders, and one evangelical) spent three weeks exploring the spirituality of inter-faith dialogue. Participants in the summer seminar are hosted by families who adopt them and take them in for weekend stays. Christian participants are adopted by Muslim families, and vice versa. Silsilah has more than 200 alumni throughout the country and is working to replicate this dialogical/learning/spirituality model throughout Mindanao and Luzon.

We Mennonites celebrated mass with the Silsilah community in the tranquility of the evening. It was clear that the quiet strength of the sacrament gives the Silsilah community renewal to continue their journey. They know suffering first hand. The martyrdom of one of their priests in 1974, and family members lost to inter-religious fighting, made the suffering Christ image on the chapel wall all the more poignant.

The four heavily-armed soldiers aboard the fast craft from Zamboanga to Basilan Island looked bored. I had some anxiety about traveling to the small island of Basilan, a half-hour boat trip from Zamboanga City. Basilan was where missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham and Filipina Ediborah Yap were held hostage for more than a year by the Muslim separatist group Abu Sayyaf in 2001 and 2002. As I learned later, I needn't have worried. Since the Abu Sayyaf was chased off the island, there has not been much tension and danger of firefights.

A General Committed to Peacebuilding on a Troubled Island

Brigadier General R.F., a devout Catholic and newly-promoted army officer, is in charge of 1,500 army troops and 2,400 CAFGUS (citizen members of paramilitary groups).[15] One of the army corporals on the fast ferry thought that General R.F. is "strict," as the General does not allow any gambling, drinking, or involvement in illegal logging, a source of tension on the island. General R.F. sees his soldiers as peace keepers. As he says, "my troops are to be protectors of civilians, not part of the local problem of peace and order," a documented concern. In the past the Philippine military has been co-opted by one side or the other in this conflict, and has thus become part of the problem.

General R.F. has trained all his soldiers in the Culture of Peace program that gives them skills at seeing past simplistic religious labels to becoming a constructive force in society. When asked if he met resistance in his peace efforts, he replied that "some officers think that the Culture of Peace will make soldiers not want to fight, but it is really more of values formation." Practical results of his reforms are as simple as courtesy at checkpoints. "Before, the predominantly Muslim residents of the island use to fear harassment at the checkpoints. Now, I insist that my men show courtesy and respect," he said. This translates directly into good will, and eventually into trust that the military is not an enemy but an enforcer of the peace. General R.F.'s attitude is that order and peace cannot be attained apart from the NGO community and civil society. So he is working actively at promoting relationships and cooperation between the military and civilians where he is stationed.

Sporadic war, skirmishes, and feuding have left deep scars on the population of Basilan. Father Angel Calvo, a Claretian priest who grew up in Basilan and has worked in the area most of his life, led our Mennonite group on a tour of the lovely countryside. Along the way, he pointed out the sites of ambushes, skirmishes, and battles. "The sadness of this place is that every corner has a history of tragic loss," he said. "There is so much brokenness, yet the area is so rich and beautiful."

Through the efforts of Miriam "Dedette" Suacito, a war trash project collects artifacts of war, such as bullet and artillery shell casings, and turns them into artworks. This project is particularly innovative, as it has a trauma

healing component built into it. Communities, Christian or Muslim, are approached to see if they are ready to give up old shell casings from small arms and artillery pieces – a symbolic release of the pain communities have held from the fighting they experienced. For some residents, the trash may be all they have left of a firefight that took a loved one, so turning it over is particularly difficult. The brass and steel are used to make candle holders and other artifacts to symbolize the turning of swords to plowshares. By working at trauma healing, the scars of past hurts are less likely to precipitate inter-communal violence in the future.

Synthesis

I hopped into a motorcycle trike, a common mode of transport in Mindanao, and headed for the bus station on my way home. Amidst all the colorful decorations on this three-wheeled jalopy were slogans, some rather raunchy but some inspiring. In my trike was the poignant command, "Exercise your faith walk . . . ." I was amazed at God's little confirmation of the right path on this sojourn, for that is exactly what happened on the trip. I had the satisfaction of living at the edge of my faith in the spirit of a long line of MCCers, both in the Philippines and around the world, who moved, sometimes boldly and sometimes haltingly, toward the tension spots even though they put themselves in uncomfortable, sometimes dangerous positions vis-à-vis current geopolitics.

I named this article "Dialogue of the Feet," since our conversations are practical. It is not a heady and academic work left to the theologians but a kind of action-oriented lifestyle that finds, in the daily, commonplace exchanges in our life, opportunities to build and cross bridges over the chasms that separate a broken humanity. In order to do so, we have cultivated values that orient the attitudes of the program, as noted below.

Relational Capital

On our sojourn we found that US Embassy and US State Department personnel had been to many of the places in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao just days before our Mennonite contingent got there. Since the US Embassy still has a travel warning for American citizens traveling to

Mindanao, we were aware that American envoys had been accompanied by heavily armed escorts of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The United States came with a show of strength through large deployment of troops and even helicopter gunships. Our Mennonite delegation went, unarmed, with trust in the relationships developed over the years MCC has worked in Mindanao. This tremendous relational capital gave far greater security in the volatile areas we visited, as we depended at each step of the journey on friendships and partnerships that had cultivated a deep level of trust. Mennonites saw their journey in Mindanao primarily within the relational context of building bridges of understanding, compassion, and peace, not as acts of statecraft. To this end, our human relationships included an element of vulnerability and the reciprocation of trust.

Learning Posture

MCC began its second round of presence in the Philippines shortly after the United States lost the war in Vietnam. It was at a time when many North American churches had not been very prophetic about the war's inherent evil. Former MCC Philippines Country Co-representative Earl Martin says that "Philippines taught us the church can be prophetic and working for justice." During the Marcos dictator years, with a heavy US military presence, the Philippine church remained prophetic to oppressive powers and compassionate to the oppressed.

In order for the West to regain a prophetic stance to state power, a posture of learning needs to be adopted. North Americans so often have a "we know best" attitude coming from winning world wars, putting a man on the moon, and being the surviving empire from the cold war days. This impediment often blunts the ability to hear the soft voices of our colleagues who can see, much more clearly, the relevance of the Gospel to current communal, national, and global realities.

Service as Visible Expression of Christ

Recently I had a chance to do some election monitoring in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. I, a Christian, was seconded through a Muslim NGO to a Christian poll-watching body to monitor a Muslim election in a predominantly Christian country. MCCers have rendered service to civil

society, whether the church or NGOs, that enlarges social space which resists the militarization of all things (relief, peacekeeping, law and order). Service, as Christians understand it, reaches out across the boundaries set by the state to those who may be considered enemies of the state. Works of compassion invoke the best of our own faith teachings, but may also urge the same from other faith groups we interact with. As a practical example, Filipino evangelical church leader N.C. has helped to organize and promote a "Bless the Muslim" day on September 11 in an effort to bridge the gulf between him and his religious neighbors.

Transparency and Transformation

Engaging in inter-faith conversation demands an air of transparency. Because of the dark history of Christianity riding on the coat-tails of western colonization, capitalistic greed, and nationalistic hegemony, Christians must be transparent with both themselves and others during inter-faith discussions. This transparency will demand an element of self-reflection. What are our motives? Why are we about inter-faith conversations? Is there something inherently transformational about the Gospel, for ourselves and the other, as we speak the message?

These kinds of questions, forced by the issue of transparency, move us into gray theological zones where the only way forward is more honesty with ourselves and others. Our answers to these questions will not come from our seminaries and theological think-tanks. They will come as we are honest with our uncertainties, take down our religious masks, and journey into our uncertainties. I have experienced a true seeing of the face of God as I walk with my religious neighbor.

Author's note: Due to program prioritization, MCC closed the Philippines office in August 2005 and no longer has any direct programming in the Philippines.

Notes

[1] See Benjamin Baniaga and Helen Liechty Glick, eds., *Where Will They Sit? The Life and Work of Mennonite Central Committee in the Philippines* (Mennonite Central Committee, 2005).

[2] See http://www.peacebuilderscommunity.org for details of Dann's involvement in Mindanao.
[3] http://www.nationmaster.com/country/rp/People
[4] See Hilario M. Gomez Jr., *The Moro Rebellion and the Search For Peace: A Study of Christian-Muslim Relations in the Philippines* (Zamboanga City, Philippines: Silsilah Publications, 2000).
[5] http://www.nationmaster.com/graph-T/rel_cat
[6] The tri-peoples of Mindanao refer to the first people (called Lumads), the Muslims who came later, and the Christians, usually settlers from Luzon and the Visayan Islands of the Philippines.
[7] Dr. S. Y. S-A, 27 October 2005 e-mail to author.
[8] E-mail of 21 October 2005: Response to questions in Gordon Janzen's e-mail.
[9] Ibid.
[10] I have seen this phenomenon throughout Asia where the church is a minority, more specifically in Nepal, India, Myanmar, and the Philippines.
[11] Meaning "the Light" in Arabic.
[12] A barangay is the smallest unit of local government in the Philippines. It is equivalent to a village.
[13] An "Alim" is a learned scholar in Islam.
[14] The dominant clan in the Lanao area of Mindanao, who take pride in never being subjugated by foreign powers.
[15] Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs), paramilitary units made up of local citizens but under the command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), are trained as soldiers and stationed near their homes to "protect" their communities.

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