Mennonite Interfaith Peacebuilding in East Africa: An Analysis of Current Involvement

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Two comments I have heard from East African Anabaptist Christians provide a backdrop for analyzing the current state of Muslim-Christian relations in the region. The first is from a Mennonite pastor in Ethiopia. Shepherding a church in a majority Muslim area of the country, he told me, "Muslims are our neighbors: we eat with them, we do business with them, we are like brothers and sisters." The second is from a Mennonite pastor in Tanzania: "How can we make peace with Muslims when they have no interest in peace, only in violence and conquest?" These two sentiments reflect the current reality of the Mennonite interface with Muslims in East Africa. On the one hand, there is neighborly affection, reinforced by shared histories, nationalities, communal life, and the best impulses of faith. On the other, competing goals, political tension, and violence erode the trust that has been built.

In taking stock of the relationship between Mennonites and Muslims in the region, we would be wise to pay special attention to areas where Mennonites have had a significant historical presence, which includes parts of most countries in East Africa and the Horn. In fact, the first, third, and fifth largest Anabaptist bodies in Africa are in the east, namely Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya respectively.[1] That the continent of Africa is home to the most members of Mennonite World Conference (more than a third), combined with the reality that many countries with the most Mennonites also have large numbers of Muslims, especially along the Swahili coast, means that East Africa is the site of some of the most significant Mennonite-

[1] Mennonite World Conference Directory Statistics, www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/mwc_world_directory_2015_statistics.pdf. Baptized members are as follows: Ethiopia: 255,493; Democratic Republic of the Congo: 235,852; Tanzania: 65,456; Zimbabwe, 45,284; Kenya, 37,172.

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Muslim "ecotones"[2] along with India and Indonesia.[3]

Of the North American Mennonite agencies, by far the one with the longest presence in East Africa is Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM), which has had or continues to have sustained presence in the region, first in Tanganyika in 1934 and followed by Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, and Djibouti.[4] Later Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) joined the work in Somalia and Kenya, and now has personnel in most countries in the region. MCC has also had an important role in connecting Mennonite churches, hosting a regional meeting in 1962 in Kenya at the encouragement of Orie Miller, at that time executive secretary of both MCC and EMM.[5]

I live in Zanzibar, a 98 percent Muslim island off the coast of Tanzania, and work as a regional consultant for the Mennonite Board in Eastern Africa. In that capacity I travel and teach in Tanzania, Kenya, Somaliland, and Ethiopia. In this paper I offer a few comments and stories from each country about the Mennonite-Muslim relationship. I conclude with some observations about the challenges of interfaith engagement in this region, and a proposal for constructive collaboration going forward.

Somalia/Somaliland

The long Mennonite peacemaking presence in Somalia is a fascinating missiological saga: what happens when an agrarian Christian North American lineage-oriented people meets a nomadic Muslim East African lineage-oriented people? As it turns out, something very special: the formation of what I call a *peace clan*, consisting of people drawn together by their embrace of strangers and by taking on the identity of peacemaker.[6] This happened both for Somalis who studied in the Mennonite schools, and

[2] A term borrowed from biology, referring to transition areas where communities can meet and may integrate.

[3] Mennonite World Conference Directory Statistics.

[4] John A. Lapp, "The Mennonite Engagement with Muslims: A Historical Overview," in *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims*, ed. James R. Krabill et al. (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2005), 97.

[5] Pakisa K. Tshimika and Doris Dube, "Introduction to Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in Africa," in Alemu Checole et al., *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts. Global Mennonite History Series: Africa* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 12.

[6] Peter M. Sensenig, *Peace Clan: Mennonite Peacemaking in Somalia* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock/Pickwick, 2016), 230.

for Mennonites who wrestled for the first time with how to witness to the peace of Jesus in an entirely Islamic context. The broader changes within the Mennonite identity and theology impacted the approach in Somalia—from nonresistance to justice, from interfaith antagonism to interfaith dialogue and partnership.

But the reverse is also true: the Mennonite experience in Somalia impacted the Mennonite relationship to Muslims. This was especially true of two flashpoints in their shared history: the death of Merlin Grove in 1962 at the hands of an extremist Muslim, and the decision of the plain-suited Lancaster, Pennsylvania bishops in 1963 to allow the teaching of Islam in the Mennonite schools, as the Somali government demanded. The Mennonite and Somali clans converged, and both were changed both. Mennonite presence in Somalia and with Somalis continued through dictatorship, civil war, mass displacement, and the nearly total unraveling of Somali society. Yet, to this day Mennonites have a good name in Somalia, so that when my spouse and I moved to Hargeisa we were met by a former teacher and a former student of the one of the Mennonite schools who became our immediate advocates and treated us like their own children, and our son like their grandson, simply because we were Mennonites.[7]

The Mennonite presence of the past continues to bear fruit in the form of invitations to be involved in higher education in Somaliland, the autonomous northern region of Somalia. A partnership between Eastern Mennonite University and the University of Hargeisa resulted in the establishment of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. The Mennonite story in Somalia is one of coming and going, and the invitations keep coming—from Somaliland, from Puntland, from other areas. This posture of extraversion[8] has yielded some response: Mennonite teachers from EMM, from Elizabethtown College, and other individuals are involved in short-term language, peacebuilding, and trauma healing education.

[7] The Mennonite reputation in Somaliland is rooted both in the educational work of EMM in southern Somalia (where some leaders in Somaliland studied) and in the MCC involvement in the peace process that led to the formation of independent Somaliland from 1991-93.

[8] Christina J. Woolner, "Teaching Modern Peace in Somaliland: Education and Extraversion in a Post-War De Facto State" (M.Phil. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2014).

Ethiopia

Neighboring Ethiopia has had a longstanding hostile relationship to Somalia. But some of MCC's work with partners in Ethiopia is with Somalis. MCC supports the Lutheran World Federation's work in the Dollo Ado refugee camp. MCC is also providing two years of support for the Ethiopia-based World Concern Maternal Child Health project in Somaliland.[9]

Most of the international Mennonite presence in Ethiopia has historically been in Orthodox Christian or traditional religion settings of the country, which is still the case for most of MCC's development projects. As a result of the rapid growth of both Islam and of the Meserete Kristos Church, an increasing number of congregations are located in majority-Muslim areas, particularly in the eastern and western regions of the country.

In a Master's course on Islam and Christianity at the Meserete Kristos College (MKC) outside Addis, I asked the students (mostly pastors, some in majority-Muslim areas) to locate themselves on a spectrum comprising specific questions about their identity in relation to Islam. For example, to the statement that Allah and the Parent of Jesus are the same person, students indicated: fully agree, fully disagree, or somewhere in between. Likewise the proposition that Yesu/Jesus is the same historical person as the prophet Issa. Or that Muslims who come to faith in Christ can continue to pray in the mosque and identify with Islamic culture on a range of issues. The students were overwhelmingly positive about Islamic faith and practice on most of these questions.

I detect at least two factors in play here. First, the proximity of Amharic to Arabic, as a fellow Semitic language, yields a sense of fraternal recognition. Second, significant intentional outreach by MKC-related individuals in Muslim neighborhoods has made sensitivity and creativity of utmost importance. I met students at the college who come from a Muslim background and are now seeking to witness to Jesus in their own communities, and are at the college looking for resources to do that.

Nevertheless, there are huge challenges. The politics of ethnicity, mixed with inter-religious conflict, is roiling Ethiopia as the federal government assigns greater power to nine regional ethnic states. There is also a history of political interreligious violence. One of my students, an MKC pastor, wrote

[9] Laura and Ken Litwiller, MCC East Africa Area Directors, e-mail to author, May 28, 2016.

the following in an essay for the course:

> In 1990 my father went to the Orthodox Church to worship, and on his way home Muslim radicals slaughtered him in a harsh and merciless way. My father was 73 years old. As a result of this, my relatives developed an antagonistic spirit toward Muslims, and still now they are waiting for any opportunity to take revenge. It was a big temptation for me; my relatives expected me to stand with them to take vengeance upon the Muslims. However, I am a pastor who is preaching the gospel of peace, so how can I do this? . . . Unless we forgive, we can't share the word of God with Muslims.[10]

Evangelicals in Ethiopia have not always responded to this kind of violence with forgiveness. In fact, a visiting faculty member at the college, who had taken his training at another evangelical seminary in Ethiopia, sat in on one of my sessions. He objected strenuously to the nonviolent approach I was advocating, argued that the nonviolence of Christ is not relevant, and suggested instead that churches should post armed guards to deter Muslim extremists. Meserete Kristos College has chosen to identify as a peace church institution, yet dissident voices are heard on the question of violence.

It is evident that Ethiopia's Anabaptists have divergent views of Islam and Muslims, which is to be expected in a context of rapid church growth and political change. The potential establishment of a peace and conflict studies program at the seminary would play an important role in keeping the MKC connected to the broader Anabaptist tradition.

Kenya

Kenya is a flashpoint for interfaith tension in the region. The Kenyan military presence in Somalia has served as justification for the militant group al-Shabaab's lethal attacks in Nairobi, Garissa, and elsewhere. With each incident of terror, the tension increases. A major part of the challenge is that Kenya has received waves of refugees from Somalia over the last quarter century. Many have ended up in refugee camps, in particular Dadaab in

[10] Name withheld. Essay for Islam and Christianity course in Masters in Theological Studies program, Meserete Kristos College/Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology, February 2016.

northeastern Kenya, which is home to a third of a million Somali refugees, making it the largest refugee camp in the world. MCC supports Lutheran World Federation training of teachers in Dadaab.[11] A key point of contact for Mennonites is the Somali neighborhood of Eastleigh in Nairobi. MCC supports peace projects in Eastleigh, including peace clubs in primary schools, with the permission of the Kenyan Ministry of Education.[12]

In 2015 I facilitated a workshop with Somali community leaders in Eastleigh in an attempt to understand and address the impact of the actions of Kenyan security forces there. Already living in overcrowded, under-resourced conditions, young Somali men face regular harassment from police. In fact, they refer to themselves as "Walking ATMs" because they can be stopped and relieved of their cash at any time. It is difficult to imagine the impact of this kind of trauma. If the purported intention of these operations is to combat radicalization, they are having the exact opposite effect.

A Kenyan Mennonite congregation gathers in Eastleigh every Sunday in the Eastleigh Fellowship Center, which EMM established in 1977 as a community center for Somalis. Under the ownership of the Kenya Mennonite Church, the Center brings Muslims and Christians together for language learning, sports, and other activities. On a single day at the Center one can observe a Somali community meeting, an English class, a basketball coach training session, and private tutoring, all happening at the same time. Members of EMM's Christian-Muslim Relations Team have also conducted workshops at the Center on interfaith dialogue at the request of the Kenyan Mennonite Church.

Pastor Rebecca Osiro of the Eastleigh congregation, who also serves as Vice President of Mennonite World Conference, describes the situation in this way:

> The biggest challenge is disconnect due to suspicion, fear and distrust imbued with ignorance of the fundamentals of the Muslims' faith and manifestations of radical Islam. This suspicion continues to damage social bonds as well as undermine social cohesion at the slightest indication of political upheaval. At personal levels, Muslims find Mennonites to be

[11] Laura and Ken Litwiller e-mail, May 28, 2016.
[12] Fred Bobo, MCC Kenya, e-mail to author, November 30, 2015.

> peaceful and easy to relate with. . . . The peaceful Mennonite approach can provide a breakthrough in Christian-Muslim relations and interfaith dialogue. That a Kenyan Mennonite congregation (EFC Mennonite Church) has existed among majority Muslims for years without any interference or tension is quite remarkable.[13]

Another growing point of contact is a number of Kenyan Mennonite congregations planted in the majority-Muslim areas of Mombasa and along the coast.

Tanzania

Continuing along the Swahili coast into Tanzania and Zanzibar, one enters the heartland of East African Islam's historical relationship to the Arab world. As home to most of Tanzania's Muslims, Zanzibar and the cities along the coast have a long-standing tension with the majority-Christian mainland. This pressure is mitigated, however, by a couple of factors. First, Tanzania has not experienced the same level of Muslim refugee resettlement as has Kenya, and therefore has not dealt with the challenge of integration *en masse*. Second, Tanzanians pride themselves on national unity across ethnic and religious boundaries, articulated under the umbrella term *ujamaa* (familyhood).

According to MCC Country Representative for Tanzania Sharon Mkisi, "In our experience, it has been very rare to see tension due to our different religions. . . . Respectful relationships have been the norm. The local agency where I worked as a service worker started and ended their meetings with prayers. One would be Christian and one Muslim. It seemed to work well and I did not see animosity one towards the other in the workplace either."[14] MCC also runs a program in the north on Reducing Violence towards people with albinism, and the village education team consists of Muslim traditional healers as well as Christians working together.

The coastal areas to the east, however, have a higher percentage of Muslims as well as more influence from fundamentalist forms of Islam. Mennonite churches in Dar es Salaam and the surrounding areas experience some hostility. In 2015 a pastor of a Mennonite church in a majority Muslim

[13] Rebecca Osiro, Pastor of Eastleigh Mennonite Church, e-mail, May 30, 2016.
[14] Sharon Mkisi, MCC Country Representative for Tanzania, e-mail, May 30, 2016.

neighborhood of Dar es Salaam led his congregation in a program offering healthcare to Muslim neighbors. At the same time, the congregation was constructing a new church building. The congregation's increased profile in the neighborhood led to threats against the pastor and the church. The incident has served as a wake-up call for the eastern diocese that intentional peacebuilding with Muslim neighbors is a necessity.

On Zanzibar itself, the situation is further complicated by the fact that the archipelago has a significant secessionist movement, of which one factor is the impulse to establish Zanzibar as an independent Islamic republic. The future of the unity between the mainland and Zanzibar is unclear, and political uncertainty around elections, which have not gone well, has a decidedly religious component.

Observations and Proposals

While no Mennonite churches exist on Zanzibar, our family serves there with the Mennonite Board, and I teach in a peacebuilding program affiliated with a Lutheran university on the mainland, the first of its kind on Zanzibar. The program is intended to bring together Muslim and Christian faculty and students in both peace and conflict studies and more general liberal arts courses. I was warmly welcomed by the Lutheran and Catholic staff at the Zanzibar interfaith center, largely because of the Mennonites' reputation as pioneers of peacebuilding. When I met with the Danish Lutheran director and his Tanzanian Lutheran colleague, their first comment was, "You are from the theological tribe of John Paul Lederach? Welcome aboard." The Mennonite reputation for peacebuilding has deep roots and broad reach.

My first observation is therefore that the Mennonite interface with Muslims in East Africa has fostered ecumenical partnerships, particularly with Lutherans in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. Much of this collaboration has occurred around the practice of theological and peacebuilding education in relation to Muslims, as Mennonites have partnered with Tumaini University in Tanzania, St. Paul's University in Kenya, and the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis Ababa. This activity is the latest chapter in the ongoing healing of the pain of centuries. The Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence was most offensive to 16th-century Protestant and Catholic leaders in the context of the threat of Turkish Muslim invaders.

It is therefore striking that this rift should be repaired in the 21st century through the practice of peacebuilding with Muslim neighbors.

My second observation is that proximity between Muslims and Christians does not necessarily translate into familiarity. Even generations of living as neighbors can leave the misunderstandings of one another untouched. In my interactions with Anabaptist Christians in the region, a paucity of informed contact with Islamic faith and practice makes individuals and groups susceptible to error. For example, I asked students in my course in Ethiopia how many had ever been inside a mosque, and only one person raised his hand. Several expressed the idea that mosques were not places a Christian should go, either because of spiritual risk or because they would never be welcomed there. So we decided that it was important for us to visit a mosque during prayer, to be there as learners and to hear from Muslims gathered there as to why their faith was important to them.

To take another example: Many Christians in Tanzania have the idea that Muslim funerals include the ritual of eating food cooked with water that had been used to wash the body of the deceased. Tanzanian Muslims will be quick to tell you that this is an entirely absurd idea, violating cultural and religious taboos. I asked Mennonite pastors how many had heard about this practice, and everyone had. When I asked how many believed it, many were hesitant to say make a statement either way. This is one small example, but a host of theological issues are impacted by more exposure; Christians who study Islamic history, faith, and practice are more capable of finding common ground, responding sensitively, and engaging in the self-criticism that is necessary for authentically growing Christian faith.

This leads me to my third observation, which is also a proposal: North American Mennonites in East Africa find themselves drawn to education, at the request of local Mennonites and local Muslims. This is true in Somaliland, where the Ministry of Education asks for Mennonite teachers, and universities welcome Mennonite lecturers. Likewise in Tanzania and Kenya, where MCC does village and school education projects. It is also true in Zanzibar, where an active interfaith diploma program is developing. Not all the needs and invitations can be met, but this is certainly a gift and an opportunity.

Commenting on Philip Jenkins's predictions of "major trouble ahead

between Islam and 'the next Christendom'" (by which he means the growing churches of Africa and Asia), Gordon Nickel asks, "Do Mennonites around the world have nothing to say about this? Surely a church representing the peace tradition can serve as an alternative to the Christian crusading tradition."[15]

The question of what Mennonites have to say in response to the collision of Islam and the growing East African church is best answered by looking to what kind of involvements Mennonites seek out. That Mennonites are drawn to peace education is no accident. Education is crucial to the practice of enemy and neighbor love, because it shapes the way one sees oneself in relation to the other. The role of theological and peace education is to cultivate leaders who have taken on the identify of a peacemaker, firmly grounded in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The future of the Mennonite churches in East Africa is utterly dependent on the success of forming committed peacemakers. Furthermore, whether Mennonites engage Muslims in constructive or destructive ways depends upon the strength of theological and peace education. I am convinced that the future of the East African Mennonite churches is bound together with the ability to relate well to Muslims; that is, with humility, openness, and understanding.

One remaining gap, therefore, that local and North American Mennonites can try to fill together is the need for theological education along the Swahili coast. We need a vital educational institution in each country and in the appropriate language for leaders: Swahili in Tanzania, English in Kenya, and Amharic in Ethiopia. The role of Maserete Kristos College in serving the church in Ethiopia is invaluable. In a similar way, there is immediate need for a sustainable seminary or diploma program in Dar es Salaam or Mombasa, or somewhere in between, if the East African Mennonite church is going to benefit from the best of our shared faith tradition, and to meet Muslim neighbors in a sensitive, informed, and faithful manner.

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[15] Gordon D. Nickel, "Response: A Mennonite Consensus on Purpose," in *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims*, 121.