

## Missiological Reflections for Christian-Muslim Engagement

*The following is an excerpt from Alain Epp Weaver's presentation at the Council for International Anabaptist Ministries gathering in January 2015. The entire presentation is available as a PDF download [at the bottom of the page]. The presentation is an historical overview of inter-Anabaptist consultations on Christian-Muslim encounter since the 1960s, and is based on the author's research into the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) archives. The excerpt presented here follows sections on language and dialogue and evangelism. Epp Weaver is director of strategic planning for MCC, and worked in Palestine and Jordan for eleven years with MCC. He is the author of Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future (Fortress Press, 2014).*

Another learning emerging from inter-Anabaptist conversations about Christian-Muslim engagement is that such engagement requires a reckoning on the part of Anabaptists from Canada and the United States of how Christianity in the West has been closely intertwined with the West's colonial projects. Now, we should readily confess that Mennonite missiological discourse has at times unthinkingly reflected colonial vocabulary and assumptions. Reviewing material from inter-Anabaptist consultations in the 1960s, for example, one is struck by language of "targeting" specific Muslim populations or of the "penetration of the Gospel" within Islamic societies. Beginning in the 1970s, however, such vocabulary begins to recede as Mennonite mission agencies increasingly started to assert that the integrity of Christian witness required a disavowal of empire and a disentangling of Christianity from Western colonialism. This has persisted as an enduring theme in Mennonite reflection on Christian-Muslim engagement for the past forty years, and is arguably more important than ever in the wake of the Global War on Terror, US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and drone warfare. Yet we have also learned that disavowing empire is easier said than done. MCC worker John A. Lapp in 1979 asked, "what is the difference between the missionary-imperial link and the service worker-Western culture link?" in recognition of the challenges facing Anabaptist agencies from the US and Canada in separating their Christian witness from Western culture.<sup>1</sup> We might claim identities as resident aliens or exiles in empire, but we have also learned that colonial habits die hard.

This enduring challenge of unlearning colonial habits bring me to a final point of learning from the history of inter-Anabaptist consultation on Christian-Muslim engagement. Specifically, the growing recognition that in order to have depth and integrity, efforts by Anabaptist agencies to engage Muslims must be done in consultation and collaboration with the churches in the majority Muslim contexts in which our agencies operate. Mennonite agencies have sometimes exhibited impatience with these churches. Sometimes we viewed them as being insufficiently spiritual and too ritualistic and tradition-bound. Sometimes we lamented that they evinced minimal interest in the Mennonite peace position. Sometimes we considered these churches to be too insular, and sometimes we viewed them as too aligned to the state. This impatience would at times lead Mennonite agencies to try to create some distance between themselves and the local churches.

We convinced ourselves that we had strong missiological reasons for working for this distance. So, for example, during the civil war in Lebanon, MCC worked deliberately to position itself as an intersectorian organization, not aligned with any of the factions in the conflict that was tearing apart the country. MCC Lebanon workers worried that partnering too closely with churches would hinder MCC's ability to work with all Lebanese communities, and often viewed the Lebanese churches as insular. MCC Lebanon worker Ralph Miller reported in 1979 that MCC workers routinely heard from Lebanese Christians that "Christian aid should be for Christians" (a refrain other MCC programs heard in other parts of the Middle East and around the world).<sup>2</sup> Miller and his MCC colleagues insisted, following good humanitarian principles of non-partiality, that emergency and development assistance should be distributed according to need, and they believed that adhering to those principles required, while not separation, at least some institutional distance, from the Lebanese churches.

However valid the different reasons our agencies had for at times wanting some institutional distance from local churches were, we also came over time to insist on the importance of accompanying those churches. Lybarger observes that the CIM consultation in 1991 on "The Gospel and Islam" demonstrated not only "an openness to hearing Muslim perspectives," but just as importantly "a sensitivity to the experiences and concerns of minority Christian communities living in predominantly Islamic contexts."<sup>3</sup> We came to recognize the danger of replicating colonial patterns if we separated ourselves from the local church either institutionally or attitudinally. As free church Christians, we developed an appreciation for the centuries-old liturgies and traditions of Coptic Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox churches and realized that adopting a learning stance toward Muslim neighbors, friends, and partners demanded that we adopt a similar learning stance toward the Christian communities who had preceded us.

Most importantly, we slowly started learning to decenter ourselves, to free ourselves of the illusion that American and Canadian Christians are at the center of God's mission. We learned that a missiology of Christian-Muslim engagement should not be primarily focused on how our US and Canadian organizations are engaging Muslims in places like Egypt, Syria, or Indonesia, but rather on how the church in those contexts and others is engaging its Muslim neighbors, and then secondarily on how our organizations can accompany the church in those contexts. We have witnessed God's reconciling mission at work as Indonesian Mennonites and Muslims in the Forum for Peace across Religions mobilize to respond to emergency needs and to counter religious extremism. We have witnessed God's reconciling mission as Orthodox and Protestant bishoprics and congregations in war-torn Syria provide assistance not only to their own members, but also to their Muslim neighbors. We have witnessed God's reconciling mission as Muslims have protected churches in Deir Attieh in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. We have witnessed God's reconciling mission as the Orthodox and Catholic churches in the Gaza Strip opened their doors to Muslim neighbors driven from their homes by Israel's bombardment of Gaza this past summer, telling them, "if your mosques are destroyed, raise the call to prayer from our churches." We have no illusions that Christian-Muslim relations in these and other contexts are untroubled, and we are painfully aware of the increasingly precarious witness of the church in some of these contexts. Yet we also rejoice in how the church maintains its witness even in precarious contexts, engaging Muslim neighbors and joining with Muslims in rejecting forces that would drive them apart. As we think together about the future of Christian-Muslim engagement, let us stay focused on how we can accompany the church in such

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contexts as it participates in God's reconciling mission and on how we can support Muslims and Christians who testify to God's reconciling work by refusing to be enemies.

*Interested? Read the full article [here](#).*

1. John A. Lapp, "Is There a Resurgent Islam?" (June 1979), IX-12-6, MCC archives, Akron, PA.
2. Ralph Miller, "Lebanon: Summary of Problems and Issues," April 1979, in "Lebanon 1975–1979" file, IX-12-7, MCC archives, Akron, PA.
3. Lybarger, "Defining Presence," 93–94.