

# Surprising Conversations

by Jonathan Bornman

When Eastern Mennonite Mission's Christian/Muslim Relations Team officially formed on January 1, 2013, I was thrilled to be a part of it. After thirteen years of relating to Muslim friends in West Africa, I felt compelled to do what I could in my local North American community to build bridges of peace and witness. I was concerned that there were few if any places that Christian leaders were meeting Muslim leaders.

Our team was asked to help new EMM workers to gain an understanding of the encounter between Muslims and Christians. In an initial attempt to develop the necessary connections, a teammate and I went and stood in the parking lot of the downtown mosque on a Friday before the noon prayers and asked to be introduced to the Imam. We received warm handshakes and friendly words from many men arriving at the mosque and were taken into the office and introduced to the Imam. He readily helped us set up a day when the EMM workers could visit, listen to the Friday sermon, and observe the Muslim community doing their prayers. The visit was a positive first step towards relationship.

When EMM again asked us to train new workers in 2014, we began to explore a relationship with a newly opened mosque outside the city. My teammate and I paid a visit during the Friday prayers and received a warm welcome. Over the following weeks of phone calls and texts, one of the board members of the mosque made himself accessible and indicated that the board was actively seeking relationships with the broader community and especially with Christians. We set up a day for EMM workers to visit and subsequently for a number of other Christians interested in learning more about their Muslim neighbors.

With time, I felt a strong conviction to seek out a deeper relationship. I believe that when Christian and Muslim leaders build and maintain healthy relationships, they create the space for their communities to prosper, to be communities in dialogue. Jeremiah 29:7 says, *"Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*<sup>1</sup> I called and asked this board member if he could meet me for coffee. He was probably as nervous as I and proposed that we each bring along a friend. This was wise on his part because it helped us all feel more at ease.

Why this strong desire for relationship? What would push already busy men to start a new friendship? For me the reasons are deeply spiritual and biblical. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Matthew 5:9 says, *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."*

On the global stage, relations between Christians and Muslims are at perhaps an all-time low. In Syria, a civil war rages and the Christian community is trapped in the middle. The Central African Republic has been swept with violence, first by Muslims burning churches and killing Christians and then by Christian vigilante groups randomly killing Muslims. ISIS and Boko Haram have both declared caliphates and anyone they see as a threat is eliminated. In America, the TV news is flooded with these stories and people everywhere are asking questions. They feel confused and mistrust between Christian and Muslim communities is growing. Mosques are infiltrated by government informants working to protect the country from acts of terror. When I look at some of the postings and comments on Facebook by Christian people I know, I am ashamed at the hateful words and attitudes.

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

It is in this climate that the words of David in Psalm 34, as quoted in 1 Peter 3:11, ring in my ears:

*“Whoever among you would love life and see good days, must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”*

I want my witness to be that I love life, that I want to see good days. Terrorist groups brag that they love death more than their opponents love life. I believe peace is possible; I am not without hope. I still believe it is possible to see good days; the dark fear that is consuming many is not the only option. As I talk about faith and about relationship between Christians and Muslims I am committed to making sure that I am not speaking evil or deceitful things about others who are different than me.

Peter says to turn from evil and do good. The last time the board member of the new mosque and I, along with our companions, got together, we talked about possibly doing a joint service project at the Mennonite Central Committee Material Resource Center. Doing something like that together would be a fitting way to obey this command to “do good.”

Peter says to “seek peace and pursue it.” Currently relations between Christian and Muslim communities in Pennsylvania seem to be neutral but distant. The urgency in my soul is to work now to build peaceful relationships for an uncertain future. Seeking and pursuing peace means building relationships in which we have enough relational capital, enough shared experiences and deposits of trust, that we can hear each other’s witness and each other’s concerns, where we can all be clear about our identities and our convictions. I am working to create spaces where I can listen to my Muslim friend and he can listen to me. All this comes out of my commitment to be faithful to Jesus and to live out his commands.

Three times board members of the mosque have met with my teammate and me at a local restaurant for a cup of coffee. We have talked about our families, our lives, and our jobs. When Mariam Ibrahim was in prison in Khartoum for apostasy, we asked, “Are people free to choose their religion?” Thinking about our local community, we have been asking, “What builds communities that are capable of making space for people of different beliefs to be able to live together in peace?” On this question, we agreed that building healthy relationships between leaders was a good starting point. We also agreed that learning to see our community as something we shared and for which we had mutual responsibility was part of living together in peace.

When I was preparing for a trip to West Africa I learned that one of the board members had spent his youth in central Nigeria with his family and had gone to university there. He was helpful in orienting me to the various ways he had experienced Nigerians of different faiths living together peacefully. The big question that evening was, “What should be done about groups like Boko Haram? What about the Christian vigilante groups fighting against them? Are these faithful expressions of Islam or Christianity?” We agreed that there are forces beyond religion at work in these conflicts. Our conversation veered toward how Christians and Muslims work at peacemaking.

As mentioned earlier, I proposed that we go to the MCC Material Resource Center together to explore a joint service opportunity, and another board member asked, “Who are the Mennonites?” My teammate and I shared the Anabaptist story for more than thirty minutes. We zeroed in on non-resistance, first telling of Michael Sattler who was executed for, among other things, his refusal to fight against the Turks who were invading Europe. Michael was in Switzerland and the battlefield was not far away in Austria. I also told about my own father who was called before the U.S. army draft board to go to Vietnam. He told them he was a conscientious objector and was allowed to serve in Mennonite Voluntary Service in two different hospitals. These were surprising stories for our Muslim friends!

That evening the conversation went on for two hours. At the end my teammate asked if he could pray, which was welcomed by all. When he ended his prayer “in Jesus’ name,” I said, “While we were praying I kept thinking, next time we should invite our wives.” Several persons nodded and one of the leaders from the mosque exclaimed, “That’s incredible! While he was praying I had the same idea!” We all had the shared, amazed sense of God speaking to us.

My teammate and I have also continued to visit with the Imam of the downtown mosque and occasionally with others who are part of that community. After a recent visit, I left deeply concerned about the content of the Friday sermon that had focused on a bloody battle in which Mohammed’s followers took vengeance on someone who had mocked him early on in his preaching in Mecca. His severed head was dragged to Mohammed, who declared that divine justice had been achieved. I was left wondering if the point of the message was that modern day followers of Islam should defend the honor of their prophet in like fashion. After consultation with my teammates, I called the Imam and asked for an appointment.

My teammate and I went to the mosque and I shared my concerns. The Imam assured me that his intentions were not to promote violence, but rather to tell an important story from Islamic history, a story that shows that God avenges his prophets. I replied that while he was preaching, I had been comparing his story to the one of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. When Peter took out his sword and cut off the high priest’s servant’s ear with a misaimed blow of his sword, Jesus told him to put it away and healed the man’s ear. Then after Jesus had been nailed to the cross, he prayed, “Father, forgive them.” The Imam answered, “Islam and Christian faith are different. In Islam, God gave a law that allows people to pay back those who hurt them, up to the same amount they were hurt. This is practical and makes people feel justice has been done. However, the Qur’an does say that to forgive is even better.”

My response was to again ask him to consider the way of Jesus, to which he again replied that Islam takes us a different way. As we prepared to leave, my teammate asked him, “If you preach on violent passages again, could you please tell people explicitly that this is a history lesson and not something to be repeated or put into practice today?” We got up to leave and as we approached the door of the mosque, the Imam thanked us profusely for visiting him and sharing our concerns with him. He said, “I have learned something today, [in my sermons] I need to tell people clearly that I am not promoting violence.” After more goodbyes and a strong invitation to come back as often as we are able, we left the mosque. I was surprised at the freedom we had to share our apprehensions, the openness with which he listened to us, and the warm welcome to come back as often as possible. Two years of building relationship with him has led to an open door for productive dialogue.



*Going where the church is not... yet.*

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