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The Church-Mosque Network: Witness or Compromise?

An interview with Martin Accad

ABTS's Institute of Middle East Studies is implementing various peacebuilding initiatives under the brand "Kerygmatic Peacebuilding". The latest initiative being implemented is the Church-Mosque Network. This is a very daring concept that stretches us as committed followers of Christ, and we have many questions. We asked Martin Accad some of these questions. Following are Martin's answers as he helps us process this new concept.

So, what is the purpose of the Church-Mosque Network?

The purpose of the network is to create a nucleus of good-willed people within churches and mosques in areas and cities where communities are diverse. For instance, a nucleus of Christians in a church is invited to visit a mosque during Friday prayers, and a nucleus of Muslims in a mosque is invited to visit a church during Sunday worship. From this, we derive joint action by Christians and Muslims within the community for the common good.

Martin Accad
Chief Academic Officer and Director of the Institute of Middle East Studies

As people of faith, we have a tendency to fear others who have a different faith. There are many walls and prejudices that are there in our minds. We think that the house of worship of the other is off limits. When we discover that it's actually not, and most of the time we are welcome to enter, we discover the other in their full humanity before anything else. When the walls of fear and hesitation are down, then you're opening the way to real friendship developing between Christians and Muslims. Within those relationships, real change can happen at a personal level as well as the community level.

Is this about syncretism or compromise? Will it dilute the gospel message?

This is an important question because it's the sort of initiative that raises all sorts of red flags for people of faith, and it frankly pushes even us out of our comfort zone, even though we're the ones taking this initiative. The reason is that religions tend to be exclusivist. With this initiative, we are very clear from the beginning that we are not trying to blend religions. We are not trying to invite Muslims to pray in a church or Christians to pray in a mosque. We're inviting them to observe, to listen and to engage afterwards with one another. A basic principle of dialogue is difference. It's not an attempt at making each other the same. It's in our difference that we can engage.

We believe that peace is at the heart of the gospel. We believe that when people engage polemically with one another, this is done at the expense of the gospel. The gospel proclamation is, as the word itself is meant to mean, the *evangelion*, the good news. If it is not good news, then it is not the gospel. Working towards peace and towards the common good of multi-faith communities is at the heart of the gospel. We do this while maintaining the importance of having a vibrant witness to the saving power of the gospel of Christ and to the gospel's ability to transform lives and communities. Peacebuilding is not done at the expense of this proclamation. It is done hand-in-hand with this proclamation.

I cannot use a platform of peacebuilding or dialogue in order to invite someone to abandon their faith in order to embrace mine. That would be against the ethics of dialogue and peacebuilding, but

proclamation is taking place nevertheless. When Muslims are engaging in dialogue with me, they emphasize the beauty of Islam. They emphasize the morality of Mohammad. They emphasize the core message of the Qur'an, which they believe is peace. When I engage with Muslims, I emphasize the centrality of Christ. I emphasize the fact that Christ invited us into a relationship – that Christ is God's initiative to reach out to us as human beings. All of these are done and proclaimed without compromise. We are proclaiming our faith to one another in this relationship as Christians and Muslims without compromise and with no apology, but in a positive way. We are not using any forceful means, and we are not asking people to step over their faith as they engage with us.

How is Christ at the center of this initiative? Where is the Gospel imperative in it?

Jesus proclaims a blessing on peacebuilders. He says, "Blessed are the peacemakers because they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9 NIV). The connection between being a peacemaker and being a child of God is actually quite astounding in the gospels. So being a peacemaker is at the heart of the gospel.

The apostle Paul also says that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. We believe that this peacebuilding and this reconciliation is done at multiple levels. It is done at the level of the individual, a person finding peace with themselves and with God, and at the communal level. Then it also means working toward the common good within our multi-religious communities, seeking peace together in the community.

The reduction of the gospel message to individual salvation and to what we call "being born again" is only a part of the gospel. God's covenant can never be reduced to a covenant with individuals. God's covenant is with humanity, with His entire creation. When we reduce the gospel to an individualistic level, that's the compromise. We need to find ways for the gospel to be holistic and comprehensive. And we want to find as many ways as we can to proclaim the gospel of Christ to our neighbors. The gospel has to be transformative of individuals, but also of families, of societies, and of communities as a whole.

Can you explain our Kerygmatic brand of peacebuilding?

The kerygmatic approach has a few core elements to it. First, it's very Christ-centered. It's not about Christendom; it's about Christ. We do not deny the benefits or the importance of religious institutions, but in interfaith dialogue, we focus on Christ – not on Christianity, so we find that it is more authentic and gives us a better common ground. It avoids pitting two religions that are against one another and gets us out of this battle of religions.

Another component is scientific honesty. I, personally, am a scholar of Islam. I keep learning how to understand Islam better, and I have many critical questions about Islam. They are questions of historical, scientific nature that scholars have been raising about the origins of Islam, about the nature of the Qur'an, about the distinction between the historical Muhammad and the Muhammad of faith, for instance. These are all questions that are of a scientific nature. When I engage with Muslims, I don't want to pretend that all those questions don't exist. I don't want to simply embrace their narrative because it suits my purpose. Scientific and intellectual honesty are very important because we are not there to simply gloss over differences, but we are together as seekers of the truth. We need to distinguish between being scientifically critical and being polemical. Being polemical is a way of attacking the other with the purpose of destroying them or of harming them. Being scientifically critical is a positive starting point that searches for the truth together with the other.

Another core element of the kerygmatic approach is what we call the prophetic voice, which involves two main tasks. I am inspired in this by OT scholar Walter Brueggenann's thinking in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination.* First, there is the task of critical deconstruction and then reconstruction. I mentioned scientific criticism when being critical towards the other. The prophetic applies to me as well. I have to live within my community with a prophetic voice. I want to reduce my tradition to the core of the gospel, back to Christ Himself, His teachings, and His model. Then, I want to reconstruct an alternative vision that God gives to the status quo. I want to critique the dominant consciousness and to envision and revitalize a divine, inspired vision of reality and of consciousness.

In addition to that, we bring two theological dimensions to peacebuilding. One element is inspired by the incarnation and the other by the cross. With the incarnation, what matters is that Christ is Emmanuel, God with us. In Christ, God initiated a reconciling mission towards us as human beings. If I am called to be incarnational in my approach to peacebuilding with Muslims, it means I go to them. I don't allow for any walls to prevent me from reaching out authentically to them, understanding who they are. The model of the incarnation is God becoming human, which is a little bit shocking. I am not suggesting that, therefore, as a Christian I should become a Muslim in order to be incarnational. However, it means really going into the other person's world in order to understand them authentically in order to be able to engage redemptively with them. Then there's the cross. The event of the cross is a manifestation, at a particular point in history, of an essential character of God's nature, which is the self-givingness of God. So, what does it mean for me to do peacebuilding in a way that is self-giving? It means I care more about the other than about myself.

For more on Kerygmatic Peacebuilding, read our blog
What Does Religion Have to do with Peace?

In your opinion, for this initiative to be successful, what would it look like? Where would you like it to lead at the community level?

I would like to see regional networks of faith leaders across Lebanon, further joining up together into a national network. In many regions of Lebanon, throughout the nation. I would like to see churches and mosques becoming more interactive with one another. Then I am looking forward and anxious to see how communities of faith engaging with one another will play out in the everyday life of the community. What are the challenges that they would want to face together, and what are the difficulties they'll want to address? We think, in many ways, about this initiative also as a preemptive measure – a safety net to fall back into in times of crisis or conflict or violence. How can these networks be activated in times of conflict and division? That is also something that we want to see happening.

Is a MENA Theology PhD Program on Its Way?

Earlier this year, a conversation started among Presidents and Academic Deans of ABTS, BBC (Bethlehem Bible College), and ETSC (Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo), to discuss the possibility of starting a collaborative PhD program in the MENA region. It became obvious very quickly that the time is ripe for this conversation, with the rising need for an accessible, contextual, quality doctoral program in the region for the benefit of the MENA Church. This program can be a benefit for the global Church, as well, with the focus on areas of specializations available within the MENA institutions.

On November 28/29, we hosted a consultation at ABTS for the academic leaders of the three regional seminaries, and we invited several consultants to help us think through the best format for this program. A recent book, *Challenging Tradition: Innovation in Advanced Theological Education*, co-edited by Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj, was recently published to challenge the linear-empiricist tradition of doctoral dissertation that was developed in the West. We invited three of the contributors to this collection to be the consultants guiding our discussions: Joanna Feliciano-Soberano, Dean at Asian Theological Seminary – Philippines, our own Perry Shaw, Professor of Education at ABTS, and Evan Hunter, Vice President at ScholarLeaders International.

The three consultants had a lot to offer during this consultation. Joanna shared with us her experience with the portfolio model as a viable alternative to a dissertation. Perry has been one of the innovation leaders at ABTS for many years. He continued to challenge us to think with a strong focus on a missional imperative for the Church in the region. Evan's contributions were grounded in his vast experience researching PhD programs. Evan has been facilitating this regional conversation from the outset.

We asked the leaders of the three seminaries to comment on their motivation for this initiative. Hani Hanna, ETSC Academic Dean, commented: "We would love to implement something that could be useful to our theology graduates, who can make an impact in the region." "At the same time," he added, "we will be able not only to serve the church, but we will contribute to transforming and impacting society." Munther Isaac, BBC Academic Dean, commented: "The biggest value in this program is our collaboration as seminaries from different Arab countries."

Martin Accad, ABTS Chief Academic Officer, remarked that this program "will shape the thoughts of regional leaders over the next season by producing doctoral level research and tools for the Church. This will bring Christ-like responses and perspectives to our societies, not only in the MENA, but also to the global church, as we all seek to engage more effectively with the unprecedented challenges of the multi-faith and multicultural societies in which we now live." "I believe," Accad added, "that the MENA PhD may be one of the most significant and transformative gifts that MENA seminaries are about to offer the global Church today!"

Elie Haddad, ABTS President, reflected on the fact that the leaders of the three seminaries involved in this conversation are all men. "Women are still at a big disadvantage when it comes to theological education and leadership in our region," noted Haddad. "One reason is the lack of accessibility to higher education. There are many objectives and motivations behind this initiative. A big one for me is making high quality and innovative PhD education accessible to new and diverse segments of our Church population."

We are grateful to God for His bountiful blessings over the past year. We are mostly thankful for His Presence in our lives and for using us as vessels for His glory. We step through the entryway of a new year, and we know that it heralds the further extension of God's Kingdom in the region.
Join us in prayer for these two projects and that we may continue to serve the Church for advancing God's work.

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