

Living peaceably with Muslim neighbors

In the spring of 2013, an unusual worship service took place at the Javanese Mennonite church in Jepara, Indonesia, celebrating the ordination of Danang Kristiawan, a young pastor. The congregation ordaining Danang has a venerable history. In 1854, it became the first church established by the Dutch Mennonite Mission when Pieter and Wilhemina Jansz, who arrived in Java three years earlier, baptized a small group of believers. In the decades since, the Javanese Mennonite church in the region has flourished, so that today it numbers 109 congregations and some 45,000 baptized members.

Still, in the larger context, Javanese Mennonites remain a tiny minority. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation—nearly 90 percent of the country's 240 million inhabitants identify as Muslims. And despite a constitutional commitment to religious pluralism, incidents of religiously motivated violence have been on the rise, driven by a growing number of conservative Islamic sects and fueled by complex issues of regional identity, economic discrimination and ethnic prejudices. A 2013 report by the Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy recorded 222 religious freedom violations across 20 Indonesian provinces, including 132 cases involving violence of some sort.

So it might come as a surprise to learn that Danang's ordination service included poetry read by a Muslim friend, dancing by members of the local Muslim Sufi community, and instrumental music contributed by participants in the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in Jepara. "As a Mennonite church," Danang explained, "we have a vision to be God's family...the mission of the church is to present God's love and promote peace in the world, to reconcile different people, both in the church and in society."

For Danang this means a commitment to peacemaking with his Islamic neighbors. "In my ordination sermon, I said we couldn't spread the love of God if we were hidden behind walls or if we were afraid to relate to others. Love calls us to be vulnerable rather than seek power to protect ourselves."

Danang is not alone in his efforts to work toward peaceful relations between Mennonites and Muslims in Java. In the small village of Tempur, near the top of the Muria volcano, another remarkable story of interfaith reconciliation has been unfolding. In the early 1980s, a young


Muslim woman named Poniyah started attending a nearby Javanese Mennonite congregation and converted to Christianity. Initially, her decision created a great deal of tension in her marriage, but eventually her husband, Suwadi, began to read the Bible and embraced Christianity. "We began to pray for people, and they were healed and decided to follow Christ," Suwadi reported. "Half my *Quran* students decided to convert." When authorities confronted him, Suwadi insisted, "I didn't force anyone to convert. I only preached. It was always their decision if they decided to convert."

When Suwadi decided to build a church in Tempur, the village chief initially opposed the construction. But by then the residents of the village had come to recognize the positive witness of their Christian neighbors. Indeed, after Christians finally received approval for the church, local Muslims joined them in its construction. In 2001, when village leaders decided to build a mosque next to the Mennonite church, the community again joined forces in support of the project and worked out an agreement so the meeting times of their religious activities would not conflict.

During Christmas, Muslims in Tempur, including officials and religious leaders, attend the church service, greet their Mennonite neighbors and help cook for the Christmas celebration. Mennonites have done the same for Muslims during some of their important religious holidays.

In his essay "Religious Violence, Peacebuilding and Mennonites," Sumanto al Qurtuby, an Indonesian Muslim, reflected on his working alongside Mennonites in Indonesia. "It is undeniable that the influence of Anabaptist-Mennonite theologies, identities and practices with regard to peace, non-violence and forgiveness are far-reaching."

Clearly, elsewhere in Indonesia and in other parts of the world, such warm interfaith relations are not always the norm. The recent report of smashed church windows and the violent beating of two Brethren in Christ church leaders by Hindu nationalists in Nepal or the ongoing story of the trauma suffered by the EYN church in Nigeria are painful reminders that religious persecution continues. We need to tell these stories, too, with empathy and urgency.

But as we do, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Mennonite church in Java is also bearing witness, demonstrating the possibility of living peaceably and respectfully alongside their Muslim neighbors. 



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—Danang Kristiawan