

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

The power of parades

ON NOV. 23-25, 2018, more than 1,000 people—including members from the 25 congregations and cell groups that make up the Eglise Evangélique Mennonite du Burkina Faso (EEMBF), numerous former missionaries, several regional representatives from Mennonite World Conference and local church officials from other denominations—gathered in Orodara, Kenedougou province, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Burkina Faso.

The event included a beautifully decorated church, lavish amounts of food, numerous speeches, sermons, seminars and prayers, and lots of music. But by most accounts, the highlight was the parade. Walking and dancing to the music of a marching band, the group snaked its way from the Orodara Evangelical Mennonite Church, through the center of town on a market day, before returning to the church.

We generally think of parades as harmless celebrations. But as the Irish know, in some settings parades can become calculated provocations that trigger violence. More than 60 percent of the population of Burkina Faso is Muslim, with Catholics and traditional African religions comprising another 35 percent. In contrast to some neighboring countries, Burkina Faso has had a long and enviable tradition of religious toleration. But in the fall of 2015, Mennonite church members in the village of Sidi were threatened with eviction from the village for not

participating in the traditional religious custom of contributing sacrificial gifts for the spirits of the land; and in January 2016, the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, suffered terrorist attacks that heightened religious tensions and left the country unsettled. So despite the fact that they worked closely with local officials, EEMBF leaders knew they were taking a security risk when they planned the parade.

Public expressions of memory can be a form of witness.

As it turned out, the parade took place without incident, and participants regarded it as the highlight of the events.

I think I understand why.

Parades serve no utilitarian purpose but are powerful symbols. In the Christian tradition, parades evoke the rich biblical imagery of the Exodus—of a vulnerable people moving into uncharted territory in the confidence that God is with them.

Parades foster a sense of collective identity that is more than the sum of its parts. Each of the scattered congregations in the EEMBF know they are a tiny minority. Yet each congregation—identified in the parade by a distinctive fabric of clothing and represented by 30 delegates—recognized as they walked together through a public space that they were part of a larger body. The parade gathered, if only for a moment, men and

women; young people and elderly; the Senoufo, Siamou, Samogho and other ethnic groups; into a body that announced to the world and to themselves that the church they were part of was real.

As a historian, I also think of that parade as a significant marker of memory. As a rule, Anabaptist-Mennonite churches outside Europe and North America are not very self-conscious about preserving their history. They are more likely to invest resources in mission than in memory. Yet the parade in Orodara served as a modern version of the piles of stone in the Old Testament, built to remind the grandchildren and great-grandchildren that something important happened here. Participants in a parade—a collective action of physical bodies—are likely to remember that event more vividly than any speech or seminar. A parade with a marching band becomes part of a collective memory.

The events that took place in Burkina Faso in late November are powerful moments in the life of the church. They remind us that we have past, that we are connected to each other, that we take up space in our country, that we are embedded in a culture and that public expressions of memory can also be a form of witness.



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