BRIDGING THE GULF

Review of 2019

The country I come from, Finland, celebrated Mid-Summer last week. It is originally a Christian celebration marking the birth of John the Baptist. Whilst this occasion is still celebrated in the churches, Mid-Summer is also known as the time for light and brightness. After a cold winter there is the brightness of long summer nights. Finland is located on both sides of the Arctic Circle and therefore at this time of the year the sun barely sets.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic there were no normal flights from Oman to Finland and thus we have been celebrating Mid-Summer here in Oman this year. COVID-19 has shadowed a lot of our thinking and acting this spring. Therefore, it is nice to look back to last year. Last year at exactly this time I – just like my colleagues – was visiting supporting churches in the US and later on in Finland.

There were also so many other beautiful events taking place during the year 2019. I am happy to announce, that Al Amana Centre has released its Annual Report 2019 this week as well. It can be found here! Before you open the whole report, I want to share some aspects of our year 2019 with you.

Al Amana Centre was very successful in the year 2019. We had a number of new initiatives we had not done before. Like the Symposium we organized in April 2019. It brought together dozens of people from around the world to talk about the role of religion in reconciliation. We hoped to have such a Symposium as part of our program portfolio annually and regret to inform that this year’s Symposium needed to be postponed until further notice due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also hosted a group of faith-based peace mediators at Al Amana Centre and provided them with a quiet place to relax in the midst of all their stress. Such a retreat is also something Al Amana Centre wants to concentrate in future years. And for the first time ever – the Gulf Churches Fellowship Annual Meeting here in Oman. Church leaders from Catholic, Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican traditions came to Muscat for two days to discuss about the joys and challenges of churches here in the Gulf. I have described this as a peer support group for church leadership. Churches are all minority here in the Gulf and it is important for their leaders to come together once a year and discuss among equals. Al Amana Centre is honored to be able to work as secretariat for such a noble group.

Many times, we are asked about concrete results of our work. While it is challenging to measure change that happens in people’s minds and it is difficult to measure progress in inter-communal and inter-faith relations, there is something we can measure. In the year 2019 we hosted more than 220 participants from 23 different countries. This is a very impressive figure for us: a more than 50% increase in the number of participants compared to the previous year. And as our participants went back to their home communities, they were able to share their experiences from here in Oman. They were able to share how people of faith are living in harmony here in Oman. There is a drive for hospitality, there is great commitment to minority-majority relationships and there is a strong sense of respecting one another. Bringing back these experiences to the US, Finland, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania and many other countries is vital for building peace and reconciliation in one’s communities back at home.

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As you can see, we had a number of things happening over the past calendar year. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it all feels like ancient history, but it is good for us to remind ourselves how much we have been able to achieve. We continue to work towards the same goals during this year. Thanks to your continuous support this is possible. We have a new credit card donation possibility set up in collaboration with Al Amana International. If you want to test that option, you can find the link here.

Rev. Aaro Rytkonen
Executive Director

Summer 2020
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On Wednesday April 1st, I woke up to the news that Muttrah had been identified as the epicenter of COVID-19 in Oman and would accordingly be isolated from the rest of the country until further notice. The souq had already been closed, but now all shops and restaurants would be closed except the pharmacy, Muttrah Health Centre, and a few of the shops selling food. Police stood at every intersection and patrolled in cars to enforce the instructions to wear masks and stay home unless absolutely necessary. Overnight, the once bustling city of Muttrah fell silent.

Thankfully, I am an introvert, so my experience of being isolated at Al Amana Centre in Muttrah was not as bad as it could have been. However, time grew slow; days turned to weeks; weeks turned to months. Peaceful solitude became anxious isolation. This once rejuvenating retreat became a suffocating confinement.

I spent 75 days trapped in Muttrah before the lockdown was finally lifted. If you’re having a hard time imagining how long 75 days is, it included my 25th birthday, Easter, Mother’s Day, Pentecost, the entirety of Ramadan and Eid. I had a fever and was too sick to leave my bed for 17 days. I finished 10 books, learned to do a handstand, tried desperately to focus on my work and Arabic studies (often failing to do so), and cried every single day. Black Lives Matter protests captivated national and international headlines, and I watched the police tear-gas and shoot my friends with rubber bullets on Facebook Live. I cried harder. And then I stopped because a white woman crying about racial injustice doesn’t solve anything. And I began a period of focused internal work against racism. My isolation became a liminal space of sorts; a private threshold in which I could explore my own mind and all its dark corners.

Through reading books, watching documentaries, and meeting weekly on Zoom with my family to discuss racism, I am working to understand the racial injustices I never learned about in school. And I am paying more attention not only to how I view race in America but also in Oman. During my 75 days in Muttrah, I did not see another White person. Every time I set foot outside my house people watched and stared; I had lost the privilege of anonymity. And yet, despite being the extreme minority, I still possess unearned power because of my race.

In Oman, my light skin color, my English language, and my American passport give me absurd privilege compared to other migrant workers. On the first day of the Muttrah lockdown, I was able to talk my way through the police boundary to go to Lulu’s Hypermarket but Asok, the Al Amana Centre driver who is Indian, was immediately turned away. The protests in America were written about daily in Omani newspapers, and they have sparked new discussions for me with my Omani friends about racism.

I believe the USA, and indeed the world, are in a season of transformation right now. An American friend said, “This all feels like the apocalypse.” And in fact, the word apocalypse comes from the Greek word apokaluptein meaning to uncover or reveal, so in a sense, yes, something deeper is being revealed, especially for White Americans who might be seeing the expansive racial injustices of our nation for the first time. For me, as a Christian and soon-to-be seminarian, racism is not a political or social issue – it is a God issue. And anti-racism is a daily spiritual practice. Anti-racism is also a tool for strengthening interfaith relationships. The conversations I’m having with my Omani friends about countering racism as people of faith has not only deepened our mutual trust but expanded my understandings of Islam, Christianity, and God.

When the streets of Muttrah were finally unblocked, I leapt across the threshold with joy and relief. I am exceedingly thankful for the freedom to shop at grocery stores, order takeout, drive along the coast, exercise outdoors, and visit friends in person. But one of the strange phenomena of liminal spaces is that even when others perceive you to be the same, you, by definition, emerge changed. I do not feel like the same woman who woke up to the Muttrah lockdown on April 1st. I feel changed. A professor once told me, “Transformation happens when we are not in control.” So perhaps I have the lockdown to thank for thrusting me into a liminal space of self-critique and discovery. Perhaps all of us who are facing uncertainty or mourning a previous way of life will discover that we are, in fact, standing on the edge of a new threshold, an opportunity for transformation.
Healing Wounds

In May Al Amana Centre hosted a training by the Bible Society. The Trauma Healing training leads participants through the grief and pain of trauma as well as healing and forgiveness.

Theresa, one of the participants, shared how she planned to take the session on rape. However, her daughter needed help with school the morning of the session. So Theresa decided to attend the next day’s session on suicide instead.

“I didn’t think this lesson to be of significance to me at the present time,” said Theresa, “but I found it very insightful and took a lot of notes.”

When businesses were shut down in mid-March and everyone was asked by the Omani government to stay home until further notice, Al Amana Centre staff were at a loss. What projects could we initiate or develop during this time of physical distancing? Al Amana Centre staff have been talking with the Bible Society in the Gulf about bringing their Trauma Healing training to Oman. Could this be offered virtually?

We contacted people who might be interested, hoping to get a group of 8 to join a pilot training on Zoom. The response was amazing. We ended up running two groups with 9 participants each! All residents of Oman, they represented 8 countries and 10 church groups!

“God ordained for me to attend the suicide session,” continued Theresa. Two days after the session, she received a call from a Kenyan woman she met 3 years earlier when the woman was imprisoned in Oman. “She cried out to me in hopelessness, and she was contemplating to take her life. The notes I took 2 days prior during the training came alive in me, and I felt ready to put it into practice.”

We are thankful that we can equip Christians in Oman to serve in their communities. Being at home actually helped make room in people’s schedules for this training. We plan to continue supporting Trauma Healing trainings via Zoom and someday in person as well.

Melissa Bos

Introducing Jose: Al Amana’s Summer Volunteer Intern

Jose Suarez Martinez was born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia to a loving Christian family. He shared about his religious experiences: “I have had the privilege of serving in ministry since I was 11 years old. My service experience has mostly taken place in churches and outreach initiatives. I have also worked and served in cross-cultural and interfaith contexts since I was 15 years old.”

Jose is currently a third-year student, majoring in both religion and international relations, at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His summer internship position was developed in partnership between Calvin University, agencies of both the Christian Reformed Church of America and the Reformed Church of America, the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign and Al Amana Centre with the aim to address anti-Muslim bigotry in the U.S.A. and promote interfaith initiatives. His work will predominantly consist of planning and coordinating a Shoulder to Shoulder “Faith over Fear” training program in Grand Rapids and assist Al Amana Centre’s implementation of Scriptural Reasoning courses with university students. He will also develop and network with local faith and organizational leaders that are committed to oppose Islamophobia in West Michigan. Richard Killmer of Shoulder to Shoulder and Jeffrey Bos will be supervising and mentoring Jose.

Jose has already taken the initiative to connect with faith leaders where he lives in Grand Rapids. Connecting with Al Amana takes place virtually. Jose is enjoying being part of the online Scriptural Reasoning group composed of students from Calvin University, University of Notre Dame, and Notre Dame University Bangladesh. In the future, says Jose, “I hope to serve God by sharing and implementing the hope of the Gospel through practical means that meet the needs of communities and have lasting impacts in societies.”

Jose Suarez Martinez

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BUILDING TRUST AND PEACE

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I’m discovering that reconciliation can be a problematic term. What I am learning is that for many people who have experienced abuse and oppression, when they hear the term “reconciliation” it brings feelings of pain and hurt. The term and the process have been used in the past as a way for the privileged and/or the abuser to skirt around issues of justice and reparation. “Reconciliation” has been used to force people back into abusive and unhealthy relationships and systems. When I hear these stories, they are not what I understand reconciliation to be, and it has not been my experience. However, just because these stories are experience and these thoughts on reconciliation are not my thoughts, doesn’t invalidate the experience of others.

Brenda Salter McNeil in her book “Roadmap to Reconciliation” describes her own journey with the term “reconciliation.” She details the other terms she has tried over her work in the field and says that even with all its flaws she says that it “is a biblical concept that is rooted in and modeled by the reconciling work of Jesus, I have chosen to reclaim the term instead of replacing it.” Her reclaimed definition is this:

We are called to go beyond simply making peace or getting enemies to stop fighting—beyond repentance, justice and forgiveness. The Bible invites us further. Reconciliation is about how to relate even after forgiveness and justice have occurred. It’s about how to delve even deeper into relationship with one another. An absence of hostility is possible without a spiritual dimension, but reconciliation is not. Reconciliation is possible only if we approach it primarily as a spiritual process that requires a posture of hope in the reconciling work of Christ and a commitment from the church to both be and proclaim this type of reconciled community.

McNeil, Brenda Salter. Roadmap to Reconciliation (pp. 21-22). InterVarsity Press.

Like McNeil, I want to help reclaim the term and use the gift of reconciliation well.

Many other scholars of reconciliation note that reconciliation is not a going back to some pervious time or reality but that it leads to an act of new creation. Reconciliation is not a going back to Eden but a moving toward the New Creation. This also means that reconciliation can happen between people who were never at one point in community together, but currently find themselves at odds with each other as they move into new ways of being community.

This is where this parable of Jesus describing new wine and torn clothing comes in to focus. We can’t put the new thing that is created through reconciliation back into old systems or onto old realities. The old systems might be unjust, abusive, unhealthy, etc. As we must put new wine into new wineskins, so too must we put a newly reconciled community into new reality, a new system, or else we will lose the hard work of reconciliation as it bursts all over the ground. We can’t put a new patch on an old problem, we must create a new garment to wear, a new community to show the beauty of what reconciliation can be.

Seeing this parable in this way also helps me to make sense of the last line about old wine. I have never understood it until now. Many people like the old wine. They think it is good, they will proclaim it good. It serves their purpose. Many people like the current systems, they think they are good, they are kept in power, wealth, influence, etc. and see no need for new ways of being community. However, the good old wine is not available to everyone. The old systems, to them, were systems of oppression and abuse. The new wine is the only hope they have of tasting something good.

The challenge becomes for those of us for whom the old wine is good, will we take the risk of enjoying the new wine with others. This is the challenge of reconciliation: will we, for whom the system has worked well, hear the cry of those for whom it has not and work for a new garment, and new skin of wine, a new system, and a new way of being community that will be beautiful for all to behold.