Quite suddenly dialogues between Muslims and Christians have become the “in” thing. The rash of attacks by Muslim fanatics—in Great Britain, Spain, India and Indonesia, and especially those of Nine Eleven—have jolted the forces of moderation on both sides into meeting together in an effort to understand and bring healing.

In a comprehensive article “Muslim-Christian Dialogue” Charles A. Kimball (2010) notes that such exchanges are anything but new. They go back to the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Since then these communities of faith have been linked by both theological understandings and geographical proximity. The modern movement for dialogue dates from the 1950s when the World Council of Churches and the Vatican organized meetings between Christian leaders and representatives of other Christian traditions. In 1964 Pope John Paul VI established a Secretariat for Non-Christian religions, which in 1989 was reorganized by John Paul II and renamed the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. The World Council of Churches set up its Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies in 1971, with Muslim-Christian relations as its primary focus.

In recent years hundreds of interfaith and intercultural centers all over
the world have endeavored to counter the centrifugal forces unleashed by fundamentalist and extremist movements. Likewise, various world governments have made efforts to bring together people of moderation, as with the Amman Message originating from Jordan in 2006 and the Saudi Interfaith initiative from Spain in 2008.

October 2007 marked a milestone with the release of an open letter signed by 138 leading Muslim clerics and scholars. Titled, “A Common Word Between Us and You,” and addressed to leaders of Christianity, it invited Muslim-Christian dialogue on the basis of what it stated are the common elements of both religions—love to God and love to neighbor (see www.acommonword.com). Eventually more than 300 Muslim leaders attached their names to the letter.

The open letter sparked a widespread and largely favorable response, with the Vatican, the Archbishop of Canterbury and leaders of the major churches weighing in.\footnote{“A Common Word” was released Oct. 13, 2007. On Oct. 19, 2007 the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists sent an official response, one of the first, applauding the initiative and welcoming opportunity for interfaith conversations with leaders of Islam.} One month after the release of “A Common Word,” a response developed at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture was published as an open letter in the New York Times. This statement, which became known as the Yale Response, (it along with accompanying articles can be found in Volf, Ghazi, and Yarrington 2010) was subsequently endorsed by a large number of Christian theologians and leaders.

Since the release of “A Common Word” and the Yale Response, dialogues between Christians and Muslims have proliferated at all levels from local churches to international conferences. Prejudice and false stereotypes still abound, but large numbers of individuals, both Muslims and Christians, are seeking to understand one another through personal encounters.

Although Seventh-day Adventists are a comparatively small body, we have been involved with dialogues with Muslims for decades, long before the current wave of interest. Our sense of world mission has taken us into lands where Islam is the dominant religion. Adventists have interacted with Muslims at all levels, from casual encounters to friendships formed with leaders of government and religion. Our medical work, with hospitals in several countries of the Middle East, and the long-standing relationships between Loma Linda University and Medical Center and medical and civil authorities in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan have brought Adventists and Muslims into informal dialogue.

Among Adventists who have sought to engage Muslims in dialogue, Jerald
Whitehouse has taken a prominent role. He endeavored to understand Islam and its adherents at a deep level, entering into the thinking of the Qur’an and appreciating the rich history and values of this world religion. For the most part he has worked behind the scenes, unobtrusively, not seeking the limelight. Dialogue?—Adventists have been at it for years with Whitehouse and others leading the way.

**Dialogue Since 2007**

The beginning of 2007 saw a new Adventist thrust in dialogue, however. General Conference President Jan Paulsen decided that the time was right for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to give official recognition to dialogues with the world religions. For some twenty years the Church had engaged other Christian denominations in conversations—Dr. Bert B. Beach initiated these encounters and chaired the Adventist side—but now, with the Adventist Church growing rapidly around the globe and members occupying the same ground with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and so on, it simply made sense that Adventists should be proactive toward these other faiths.

I had just come to the conclusion of a long tenure as editor of the *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World* magazines and was preparing to go back into teaching. Paulsen tapped me to stay on at the General Conference as his personal assistant for interfaith relations. He asked me to take over the chairing of the conversations with other Christian bodies and to initiate contacts with leaders of the world religions at the highest levels, with a view to acquainting them with the beliefs, values, and mission of Adventists and, where possible, to arrange for official dialogue. Because of the global nature and importance of Islam, it was agreed that this world faith should be the initial focus of effort.

I could not have dreamed what I was getting into. I was launching out on a journey that would profoundly impact my life and thinking. I would meet new people, people of sterling character and intellect; I would become immersed in new cultures; I would visit new places; and I would contemplate new horizons with possibilities that would stretch my mind.

I am now into my fourth year (2010) of dialogues with Muslims. These years have been a series of adventures marked by surprise, satisfaction, and ultimately soul-searching as I have been forced to confront new and deeply troubling questions. In no sense am I an authority, let alone an expert, on Islam and Muslims. My experience thus far has been shaped by interactions
in the United States (where I first put a tentative foot into the waters of dialogue), Jordan, Australia, and Turkey.

**Surprise:** I have been happily surprised at how easy it has been to enter into dialogue with Muslim leaders, even when having to work around the obstacles of a foreign language, such as Arabic and Turkish. Especially notable has been the experience in Jordan. I have made three visits so far to that country and have established close relationships with several prominent leaders. Among the dignitaries I have met are the following: The Chief Judge of the civil and *sharia* courts; the Minister for Information and Communication; the Minister for Islamic Affairs; the former ambassador to the United Nations; the director of the Royal Jordanian Institute for Interfaith Studies; the Director of the Arab Bridge Center for Human Rights and Development; the director and staff of the International Moderation Forum; and an Islamic scholar of national reputation. All of the visits with these high-profile leaders lasted at least one hour.

On a recent visit we were received by HRH Princess Basma bint Talal, sister of the late King Hussein. Princess Basma, who earned a D.Phil. degree from Oxford University, is a leading advocate in the Arab world for women’s and children’s rights. She invited four prominent individuals from Amman—one of them a Christian—to join her for our meeting. We sat on opposite sides of a long table, and for some 90 minutes discussed human rights, acceptance of others, social work, and education of children.

The Adventist Church in Jordan is very small, with only about 400 members. We operate no hospital or clinic; we own a large orphanage building, but it closed its doors several years ago. I was astounded that with such a meager church profile Adventists were granted access to an array of dignitaries. In this instance, as in others, the opening to these authorities came about through a personal contact. An Adventist pastor in Jordan, well-known for his weekly column in an Arabic newspaper, with one or two telephone calls was able to arrange multiple high-level meetings.

A further area of surprise has been the warmth with which I have been received. A pattern quickly became discernible: cautious politeness in the initial moments that quickly changed to amazement at learning of Christians who do not eat pork or drink alcohol, who adhere strictly to the teachings of the Bible, and who do not have a pro-Israel stance. Those leaders whom I have met have minimal or zero knowledge about Adventists and our teachings; further, our observance of the Sabbath tends to confuse them. All encounters concluded with expressions of appreciation.

**Satisfaction:** It has given me a sense of fulfillment as concrete results
have come about from these personal contacts. In Australia, a Sufi sheikh who is spiritual guide to some three million Muslims in the Middle East and Europe has developed a deep appreciation for Adventists. Strongly convinced that Jesus Christ will return soon, he has expressed a desire to work with us in telling the world about that event. He invites Adventists to speak at Friday services in his mosque, and frequently tells his followers that they should “live like the SDAs.” I have had extended discussions with him on four separate occasions. Each time the focus was the Second Coming and on each occasion I was entertained with warm hospitality in his home.

In Jordan a public meeting involving international experts on human rights and religious liberty will convene in Amman in cooperation with the Arab Bridge Center for Human Rights and Development. In addition, an organization dedicated to promoting tolerance and understanding, The International Moderation Forum, has expressed a desire to engage the Adventist Church in an official dialogue. Beyond these tangible results, the favorable image of the Adventist Church in TV and newspaper reports has given our members a boost in their self-esteem.

Soul searching: I have come to know some Muslims at a deep level, and the experience has led me to search my heart.

At the superficial level, simply getting to know these children of Abraham as human beings, as friends, has given the lie to the myths that circulate widely in the media and into which many people, Adventists included, have bought. These people are anything but radical and violent. They abhor violence in all its manifestations; they have no truck with extremists and terrorists. Rather, they are kind, hospitable, considerate, and generous to a fault. That others who profess the same religion may be different, and some radically different, I do not doubt. I simply share the impact on me of those with whom I have been engaged.

I think it likely that the close human ties that I have experienced stem in large part from the fact that I am a Seventh-day Adventist. I have become convinced that of all Christians, Adventists are the closest to Muslims. This affinity goes far beyond points of contact in the respective teachings, important as they are, and the mutual prohibitions against pork and alcohol, also a big advantage because they allow for uninhibited table fellowship. No; I have in mind the spiritual dimension—the sharing of heart and spirit in the devotion to the one God. For those followers who take their religion seriously, Islam is a demanding faith: prayer five times each day, fasting during Ramadan, the giving of alms (zakat), and the Hajj. The Muslim experience of God focuses on his oneness, his greatness, his separateness.
For the sincere Muslim, religion is a 24/7 matter, a life lived with the Last Judgment ever in view.

For the Adventist Christian, there is much here to admire and even to emulate. There is a deep resonance of the spirit.

Inevitably, the question of Jesus, never far away, intrudes itself. The crucial issue he himself raised in Ceasarea Philippi cannot be kept in the shadows: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15). And on this very point, Islam, it seems to me, finds itself in tension with itself. On one hand, Islam strives to preserve and protect the oneness of Allah, following its founder who taught the Bedouin tribes to forsake their many gods and worship only one God, the Creator. From this stance, the classic Trinitarian doctrine proclaimed by the Christian fathers is an offence, a blasphemy that substitutes three gods for Allah. On the other hand, Islam gives a high place—an exceedingly high place—to Jesus Christ. Although it teaches that Muhammad was the greatest of the prophets, it also holds that Jesus was born of a virgin. The implications of that admission, which is found in the Qu’ran, are profound. If Jesus was born of a virgin, he is utterly other, apart from every other person that this world has known. Add to this idea the teachings also found in the Qu’ran that he was without fault and that he will come again to this earth, and the Muslim, like the scribe in the Temple courts, is not far from the kingdom of God.

Not far—but one thing is lacking. And a very big thing it is—the Cross. Islam has Jesus, but not the Savior.

So how will the Lord deal with these his children who seem so near and yet so far from the Good News that our Scriptures proclaim? These friends whom I have come to admire and to love, who speak so highly of Jesus as the unique one who reveals God to us—how can they be led to see the light of Calvary? These sincere seekers who submit to the will of Allah, whose history is stained with the blood from crusaders’ swords under the banner of the Cross, how can they be led to see that symbol as one of life and hope?

These are the issues that wrack my soul as a result of my close encounters with Muslims.

My life has been so enriched from these contacts that I wish many others could experience the profound blessing I have received. After I wrote about my encounter with the sheikh in Sydney (2010:25-27), among the many responses from readers was a letter from a man who wrote how fortunate I was to be given such opportunities and expressing the wish that he too might share in them.

In fact, every Christian who so wishes can experience, if not in the same
measure, the essence of what has so impressed me. One does not have to be a scholar of Islam or of the Qur’an or to have gone through a course of training. The principles of dialogue with Muslims are so straightforward as to be accessible to any eager Adventist who has a Muslim neighbor or acquaintance.

**Principles of Adventist/Muslim Dialogue**

Charles Kimball distinguishes between several distinct modes of dialogue: parliamentary dialogue, institutional dialogue, theological dialogue, dialogue in community or dialogue of life, and spiritual dialogue (2010). For Seventh-day Adventists, however, these conversations must be seen as coming squarely under the rubric of Adventist mission. We should think of mission as taking place on three levels: friendship and cooperation, dialogue, and witness. At the first level Adventists interact with Muslims in making friends, offering and accepting hospitality, and perhaps joining in community projects. At the level of dialogue, both parties sit down together and seeking to learn and understand the other’s beliefs and practices. In this process, the intent is not to correct the other or try to prove that one is correct and the other wrong. Dialog develops mutual trust that may open the door to the next level—Christian witness, where we share from the heart what Jesus means to us. These levels are not mutually exclusive.

When I embarked upon my new assignment, no model existed to show me how to proceed. Islam is a religion that encircles the globe, with wide variations from one country to another. It has no pope, no single leader or council upon which one can focus in an effort to introduce Muslims to Adventists and their values. How to start? Where to start?

First, I met with Dr. Jerald Whitehouse, director of the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations, at Loma Linda, California. During the one day we spent together he provided an excellent orientation to the world of Islam, and in particular to the possibilities of dialogue.

A couple months later I had my first experience of Muslim dialogues. The Department of Sharia Studies at the University of Qatar in Doha convened a conference of the children of Abraham—Muslims, Christians, and Jews. This was the fifth interfaith conference organized in Doha. For three days those in attendance, numbering about 200, listened to papers and made speeches. The dynamic that developed was more monologue than dialogue, however. Few if any of the speeches responded to the paper...
just presented; rather they were preplanned statements that were more like diatribes. At times feelings ran hot with participants behaving rudely and storming from the conference room.

The Doha conference provided insights into the religious and political tensions of the Middle East. In terms of dialogue, however, it highlighted for me a negative model rather than indicating the dynamic Adventists should adopt. That conference showed me that dialogue should be kept small (ten people maximum) and involve academics who do not bring to the table a political agenda.

In dialogue one should not try to score verbal points. Genuine interfaith conversation is an exchange of views in an open, honest, respectful manner that seeks to understand and be understood. There are no winners or losers, except as the truth emerges as the winner through the setting aside of false stereotypes and the correcting of misinformation and misconceptions.

Jerald Whitehouse has accurately described the nature of genuine dialogue:

Dialogue implies a mutual commitment between the two or more parties engaging in the exercise to respectfully listen and communicate with each other for the purpose of understanding and appreciation of the other's faith tradition. It seeks to set aside attitudes of superiority and focuses on issues of our common humanity. In doing so it seeks to see the hand of God, or—in the case of faith systems which do not acknowledge a Supreme Being—the elements of our common humanity in the other. Dialogue does not preclude addressing of diversity or differences, but always does so with respect and with the desire to understand the unique elements that provide particularity, without losing sight of the commonalities which link us with each other. It follows that, if engaged in with the proper spirit, such interaction will lead to a growth in spiritual understanding by each of the parties involved. Dialogue, therefore, should not be understood as standing apart from or in contradiction to the evangelistic mission of God’s people in these end times. Rather, it can fill an integral and important role in the overall spectrum of evangelistic initiatives of the body of believers. (Whitehouse 2006)

More recently Bert B. Beach, in his essay “Evangelism and Inter-Faith Relations in a World Parish” (2009:379-388) lists eight key principles for inter-faith relations: high ethical standards, knowledge of culture, standing for morality, no material inducements, pro-family stance, adaptability and context, establishing credibility, and flexible multiple idea approach.

From my experience, the most important principle is the stance one adopts. Who we are is more important than what we present. We should be
transparently open, humble, and honest with no attempt to conceal what we believe and with no hidden agendas. The messenger commends the message.

Over and over in my contacts with Muslim civil and religious leaders, I have had the sense of being sized up. While our teachings and values awaken interest, for them the greater concern is the messenger. When the Muslim becomes convinced that we are genuine, the doors of reserve burst open and warmth and hospitality flow freely.

Before this can happen, however, two types of clutter have to be removed. The first type is the clutter within—the prejudices, stereotypes and myths that we bring to the table. Because of the events of recent history and the influence of the media, we come to the table with suspicions and apprehensions. The violent acts perpetrated by a small number of Muslims have led to a general perception that all Muslims are violent, whereas the vast majority are not.

The other type of clutter stems from the misperceptions and stereotypes that circulate among Muslims concerning the West and, in particular, Christians in general. Muslims think that Christians are pork-eaters and alcohol users with low standards of morality and family and wedded to a pro-Israel, anti-Palestinian ideology.

Many Christians do fit this stereotype, but Adventists certainly do not. In meeting an individual for the first time, from the outset I give a thumbnail sketch of Adventists, who we are and what we believe. I position our church as a reform movement among Christians that seeks to be faithful to the Holy Bible in what we believe and how we live. Our mission is to tell the world that Jesus Christ is coming soon. We observe the Sabbath as the day of worship, not because we are Jewish, but because this is the day taught in the Scriptures. Because we believe that Jesus is coming again, and we must appear before God at the Last Judgment, we seek to live 24/7 as his humble servants. We are keen students of Bible prophecy, but our interpretation does not lead us to assign a special role to Israel in the end-time. We are apolitical: we stand for peace and justice for all people.

As the Muslim leader learns of our teachings and practices, a light goes on. It glows brighter and brighter as he absorbs more information about us. And he opens his heart.

These principles are not new, nor do they require advanced training. They are as old as the counsel from Ellen White:

Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me.” (1942:143)
If we would humble ourselves before God, and be kind and courteous and tenderhearted and pitiful, there would be one hundred conversions to the truth where now there is only one (White 1948:189).

**Conclusion**

Every Christian who so desires may experience the personal fulfillment that comes from Muslim dialogue. In today’s world the followers of Islam are found everywhere; our neighbors, the letter carrier, the doctor, the store clerk. We do not have to go overseas in order to find dialogue.

Ultimately, dialogue comes down to questions of the heart, to love and prayer. Only a heart touched and changed by grace can flow out in love to embrace the Muslim and in turn be open to receive the love that flows back. And only the life that is watered and nurtured by abiding prayer can be ready to discern the *kairos*, the moment of divine opportunity.

**Works Cited**


