It was while greeting the members at the back of the sanctuary following
the close of my Sabbath morning sermon in Auburn, California, that I first
recall meeting Jerald Whitehouse and his family. While Jerald and Judy
already had three daughters well on their way to being young adults, what
stood out for me were the Sudanese twin infant girls they carried. One was
delighted to meet a stranger while the other one seemed absolutely terrified
of me. Jerald and Judy had recently returned from serving in southern Sudan.

After a few months of slipping each girl a piece of candy now and then,
the relationship improved and we became friends. During those years it was
our privilege to serve as Judy and Jerald’s pastor. Also, during that time,
the ADRA Director from the old Far Eastern Division (now divided into
the South Asia Pacific and North Asia Pacific Divisions) visited our church,
recruiting me to serve as ADRA director for Sri Lanka. In our discussions,
he mentioned he needed a director for Bangladesh as well and I mentioned
that Jerald might be ready for another mission stint. Indeed, Jerald and Judy,
along with their twins, arrived in Bangladesh just about the same time we
arrived in Sri Lanka.
From those early days, Jerald, in his quiet and gentle manner, modeled walking with God. Jerald emphasized in both his life and teaching that there is no substitute for being serious about one's walk with God—for one's own life, but also if someone desires to have any hope of developing meaningful relationships with Muslims. It was Jerald who first shared with me that the very words “Muslim” and “Islam” in their context are all about submission to God.

Not long after our arrival in Sri Lanka, a Muslim man showed up in my office with an interesting request. He wanted to earn his commercial pilot's license and wanted me to be his private tutor to get him through the ground school course. After some discussion and negotiations on what it would cost him, we agreed on a price. Over the next several months, we met in my office for a one-on-one ground school just for him. He studied hard, made excellent progress, and finally passed the exam.

Two weeks before our last class, he arrived carrying a brown paper-wrapped package. He mentioned that he had brought me a gift. I asked him if I could open it then or should I open it later? He said, “Please open it now.” I carefully opened the package to reveal a beautiful hardbound copy of the Qur’an. His next words were, “I’ve been with you over these many months and have noticed that you are serious about your walk with God. I’ve brought you this Qur’an today as my gift to you. I am certain that if you continue your walk with God as I see you are now, you will become a Muslim.” I sincerely thanked him for his most thoughtful gift and have treasured it to this day. And I suppose, in the most literal sense, I am indeed a Muslim, fully submitting my life to God each day.

It was not long before I had an opportunity to visit Jerald and Judy in Bangladesh. While there our conversations continued, as I had many questions. I wondered about how I should relate to Muslims when they wanted to discuss who Jesus was, what about Mohammed, and how should I relate to the Muslim name for God, Allah?

As we spent hours in conversation during that visit and many other visits over the years, Jerald helped me consider ways to look at things that I might not have initially seen. Often individuals move into almost immediate conflict over the question of who Jesus was. Jerald encouraged me to look at how Jesus related to those who wanted to know who he was. It became clear that Jesus often avoided giving a direct answer. Studying the situations where he “avoided answering the question,” I came to understand that Jesus wanted to give individuals an opportunity to learn more before he shared too many details, so they would be better able to accept him for who he truly was.
Later in my work, I came to understand more about the name Allah when it was my privilege to work with Middle Eastern Christians who insisted that Allah was simply the name of God in the Arabic Bible, so it would be impossible NOT to understand that Allah is God. Several Indonesian friends from the country with more Muslims than any other country in our world shared that in their language Allah is the name for God and they too understand Allah as the God of the Bible.

Jerald also challenged my thinking on how to relate to the prophet Mohammed, urging me to ask the right questions. What I learned from these conversations sent me down the road of attempting to identify truth, wherever it may be found, as a basis for dialogue. Clearly the Bible is a key part of God’s revelation to the human family, but it is also clear that he has revealed himself through other means, including individuals who have lived since the times in which the Bible was written. Instead of trying to judge the prophet Mohammed, I have found it more useful to identify biblical truths I could also find in the Qur’an and allow those truths to be the basis of conversation and dialogue with my Muslim friends. This approach moves us from the argumentative stage to a point where dialogue and agreement are a possibility, and centering the friendship and discussion on what God has revealed to the human family.

It was also during extended discussions with Jerald that I came to understand how too many Muslims see Christians as those who worship more than one God, worship idols, demonstrate offensive moral values, and use forbidden things such as alcohol and pork, and are into gambling. In many conversations since that time with dozens of Muslims, I have come to understand how important it is to identify myself, not as a Christian with all the baggage that seems to come along with that term, but to a more appropriate identity as an Adventist believer. This term has sparked numerous conversations that have opened opportunities for dialogue where I was able to explain who Adventist believers are and some of the teachings we hold in common with Muslims. It has often been my experience that a Muslim will exclaim that I am a better Muslim than he is.

Some, at times, raise questions about the dangers of syncretism in trying to understand and even reconcile differences between Muslims and others. This has not generally turned out to be an issue even while staying faithful to biblical teaching. While some may raise concerns about going “light” on the identity of Jesus, the comment we hear over and over is, “Now I have assurance of salvation through Jesus Christ my Savior and Lord.” This change, this new understanding is a result of learning how to communicate
with Muslims and as a result, through Jesus Christ, lives are forever changed and life starts anew.

Jerald was instrumental in establishing a variety of approaches to reach into the hearts of Muslims. He did not give up when something did not work out, but kept on going. In one early approach, the leader did not work out well and he had to start over again, but start over he did. He stayed the course in seeking a variety of ways to lead Muslims into a deeper walk and submission to God. Jerald has been an inspiration to many. I have often said that Jerald has been one from whom I have learned a lot over more than twenty years of friendship and discussions. Even in his lighter-hearted moments when he has quipped, “Mike has been a very slow learner,” I’ve appreciated Jerald’s patience in taking time with me and hundreds of others in helping us seek ways to better interact with our Muslim friends.