

## Understanding Islam: Summer 2003 MOSAIC Transcript

Bonnie Jensen:

...God is at work in our Muslim neighbors. There is tremendous faith there in the God of Abraham.

Taha A. Tawil:

We found flowers on the steps of the Mosque here. Letters, love letters, I would call, love letters from our neighbors saying we love you.

Rani Aabdulmasih:

I believe that Christians and Muslims and Jews and other people of other faiths can live together. Not only can they, they must.

Melissa:

Hello and welcome to MOSAIC, the video magazine of the ELCA. I'm your host, Melissa Ramirez. We are in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the heartland of America. It is a place you'd expect to find Lutherans. But Cedar Rapids is also home to the oldest standing place of worship for Muslims in North America. People from the Middle East first came here in the 1920s looking for jobs, land and a new life. Like their more numerous Christian neighbors, they built a house of worship - the Mother Mosque. Some of those neighbors were Arabic speaking Christians who helped their Muslim brothers and sisters start a new life in America.

Today the Mother Mosque serves as an Islamic cultural center. The world has over six billion people. More than a billion are Muslim. Followers of Islam are all over the planet. When North Americans think of Muslims, they often think of the Middle East - places like Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and of course, the land of Mohammad's birth, Saudi Arabia. But Muslims also live in places like Asia, South Asia, Africa and the Pacific Rim. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world. Islam is a growing part of American culture as well.

Some Muslims have been in America for generations. Others are new immigrants. Still others converted to Islam. Few Christians in America paid much attention to Islam before September 11. Today, the religion that reveres Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mary is headline news. But what do North American Christians really know about Islam? Is what we know based on facts and experience, or fear and ignorance? This video will introduce to you the basics of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad. We will also go inside a Mosque for Friday prayer. Then, we will see how Lutherans and Muslims are working together to build bridges of understanding.

Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in one God. We call this form of religion, monotheism. The word "Islam" is Arabic for "Surrender". In religious terms it means "total surrender to the will of God." The word "Muslim" is related and means "One who surrenders to God."

Ghulam Haider Aasi:

It would be considered that all nature is Moslem. As for human beings, they have been given the choice from God. The free will, we would call, and allowed this choice whether they will submit to God or they don't submit to God.

Melissa:

Christians and Muslims have much in common. American Christians use the word "God." Arab Christians and Muslims use the word, "Allah" which is Arabic for God. Each religion values prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor. Both religions honor Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jesus and Mary. In fact, Mary, the mother of Jesus is mentioned more often in the Koran than in the bible!

Bonnie Jensen:

I think the important thing in these conversations is that we start with what is common. What is common as children of God. People created in the image of God. People who trust in God as our creator. And from there, then, we can move to share what we know in Jesus Christ as God's unconditional love.

And that is a special message that we have to share with Muslims who much more in intention the mercy and the judgment of God. And our particular message, if we can live that in word and deed with our Muslim neighbors is that God's love and forgiveness is unconditional.

Melissa:

Islam has six basic beliefs [belief in God, Angels, Prophets, Holy Books, Day of Judgment and Sovereignty of God. On these basic beliefs they have established five pillars or acts of worship. Elements of each pillar can be seen in Christianity and Judaism.

The first is to bear public witness. There is no God but God and Mohammad is the messenger of God. The second pillar is prayer. Muslims are asked to pray five times a day - at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening. Fasting is the third pillar. This happens during the month of Ramadan. The fourth pillar is Zakat, or alms giving. In Islam, giving to the poor is a form of purification and worship to God. The fifth pillar is the Haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

If a Muslim man or woman can afford it, they are required to visit Islam's holiest sites at least once in their lifetime. In 2002 an estimated 2.2 million Muslims went on the Haj.

Ghulam Haider Aasi:

You basically are totally before God. In a sense that you are not a person of the world. You do not know your own self. And millions of people there praising to God. In their own languages and in their own ways. Some in loud ways. Some with whispering. Some just crying. Some sobbing. It looked to me as if the bees are buzzing. With all these humans praising to God. And I am just one little drop in that.

Melissa:

The Prophet Mohammad was born in 570, nearly six hundred years after Jesus Christ. At the time of Mohammads birth, people in Europe were mostly Christian – and the church was the only universal institution. In Arabia, no single religion dominated the nomadic traders who roamed the desert mixing folk religions, Christianity and Judaism. The Prophet Mohammad grew up in Mecca, a trading center on the west coast of the Arabian Peninsula.

Imam Mohammad Ali Elahi:

Mohammad was an orphan. But this orphan became a great father for humanity.

Harold Vogelaar:

We sometimes think of Mecca as a little desert town. As though he came from the sand dunes. In fact Mecca was quite a commercial city. He seems to have been a very bright child. He was given the nick name of El Amine. The trusted one.

Melissa:

When Mohammad was young, the Kaba, a small building in the center of Mecca which Muslims believe was built by Adam, needed repairs. When it came time to put back the black stone, a holy relic from the days of Abraham, leaders couldn't decide which tribe would receive the honor of replacing the stone. Elders agreed that the first person to enter the room would settle the dispute.

Mohammad Ali Elahi:

It happened that Mohammad, peace be upon him, before his prophet hood, was the one who entered first. Out of his wisdom he suggested to put the stone in a large cloth. And have every representative of every tribe and family and community take a corner. And all of them shared lifting the stone. And then the prophet himself moved the stone into place. And that way he put an end to a dispute that would cause a big fight among the tribes.

Harold Vogelaar:

And then a rich widow by the name of Khadija noticed him and offered him a job to take care of her caravans. Which he did. And he so impressed her that she offered herself in marriage to him. So he accepted. When he was 40 he had his first revelation. And it was visual and quite impressive, I think, to Mohammad.

Melissa:

The angel told Mohammad, "Iqra" or "Read." This was a problem for Mohammad who Muslims say was illiterate.

Harold Vogelaar:

So he went home to his wife Khadija rather anxious and often very upset. And she comforted him.

Melissa:

Mohammad continued to receive revelations. Sharing this revelation with family and friends he said, “There is no God but the one God.” The revelations also spoke out against idol worship, slavery and the practice of killing unwanted new-born female children. Local merchants and authorities were uneasy. Mohammad spoke of one, not many gods.

As persecution increased, Mohammed sent some followers to Ethiopia where a sympathetic Christian King took them in. While in Mecca, Mohammad experienced the Night Journey, or Mi’raj. It was a spiritual journey with the Angel Gabriel on the winged horse-like beast, El Buraak.

Imam Mohammad Mardini:

So in that night, he moved by the miracle of God from Mecca to Jerusalem and then went up to heaven to see all of the miracles that Allah set forth for him.

Melissa:

Persecution in Mecca increased. Then, enemies plotted to kill Mohammad.

Ghulam Haider Aasi:

And so the prophet received a command from God as well as guidance that he must leave and migrate from Mecca to Medina. And that is called the Hijira. Which is 622 of the common era.

Melissa:

After arriving in Medina, a city north of Mecca, Mohammad settled local disputes – convincing warring tribes to submit to the will of Allah and become Muslim. While in Medina, Mohammad continued to receive revelations. One focused on the topic of struggle, or self defense. The Arabic word is “Jihad”.

Ghulam Haider Aasi:

And it was...after 622 that the Prophet Mohammad received a revelation after having reached Medina that now, if you are still attacked and you are followed and attacked, Moslems now have the permission to defend themselves. That is where the Jihad came in. That now you must struggle even to... if you have to take the weapons to defend yourself, you can take, now the weapons.

Melissa:

Following a series of treaties and battles with invading forces from Mecca, Mohammad and the Muslim believers eventually conquered Mecca.

Harold Vogelaar:

Mecca then was conquered and Moslems were now in charge. Mohammad went back to Medina. Made one more pilgrimage before 632. Taught his followers as it were, all the things that they do. All the things that they are doing right now. They will all do exactly what Mohammad did on that last pilgrimage. They will follow his routine, his teaching, his example almost perfectly. They have kept it up for almost 1400 years.

Melissa:

Now that you know a bit more about the Prophet Mohammad and the origins of Islam, let's go inside the mosque. Out of respect for Muslim custom, I am going to wear a head covering while inside the mosque.

Melissa:

Hello Imam. How are you?

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

Pretty Good How are you?

Melissa:

Thanks for giving us a tour of the Mosque.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

Welcome to the Islamic Center. Welcome to Cedar Rapids.

Melissa:

Thank you. Before we begin the tour, maybe we should say something about what we are wearing. Particularly my head dress.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

Well actually the head scarf, or we call it the Hijab, it is very much an Islamic tradition that requires a dress code for the lady. That she must cover her body. Nothing should be exposed except her face and her hands.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

Now we have our brother Mohamad here. Our brother Mohammad... he is going to make Udu or ablution before the prayer. He starts with declaring the intention. In the name of God. Then after that he washes his hands, very good. Then after the hands he washes his mouth three times. Making sure to get out all the food or any little things between his teeth.

Then after that he washes his nose. And that is to make sure that he is cleaning very much, what ever part he must wash. Then after that he washes his face three times. And next he washes his hands, arms up to the elbows starting by the right arm. Making sure that he reaches the elbow. Then the left arm. Then he takes some water and wipes his head. One time is enough.

Then after that he washes his ears. Inside and outside. We get to the last part which is his feet. He takes off his socks and shoes and washes his feet starting again, with the right foot and then the left foot. And with that, now he is ready to go to the prayer room and pray.

Melissa:

Now Imam, tell us about this section here. I see a shelf and then another smaller shelf with some linen. Perhaps you can tell us what some of these things are about.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

Well, actually we are here in the sisters section. Where that they are suppose to come here and take off their shoes and put them on the shelves. And the head scarfs and other things, that is for the children who would like to join us at the prayer room. Then they wear the skirts and join us.

The prayer room is kept clean because we bow and prostrate and put our head on the floor. And we take off our shoes inside the prayer room to pray to God. And that is very much what the bible indicates about the prophet Moses, peace be upon him, that he took his shoes off. And he prayed to God when he met with him on the mountain.

Melissa:

Very good. Well, why don't I join you inside. And I'll see you in a few minutes.

Ahmed Elkhaldy: You are going to enter here and I will go to the other side.

Melissa:

Thank you.

Melissa:

Now, I see that there are no chairs in the worship space. And there are lines kind of dictating a direction. Now is this the direction in which they pray? Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

All Muslims all over the world, they face Mecca. In Saudi Arabia. We stand together as men in the front and sisters in the back. No gaps. Straight lines. And we start the prayer, all standing. Then we pray. We bow. We prostrate. And we sit together.

And this system was made by the prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him to give more convenience to the sisters in order to feel more comfortable while they are praying... that no one, a stranger, is standing behind them or next to them. But at home you can pray next to your husband or a brother or a father.

Melissa:

Tell us about this space over here. I notice there is a small carpet here and something on the wall. Perhaps you can share the significance of these.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

Correct. Well actually the prayer rug is made for the Imam. Where he should stand to lead the congregation. And everybody stands behind him. When he starts the prayer he starts with "Allah'u akbar..." Then, all of them do the same thing. And no one moves to the next position of the prayer before the Imam does. This marble, it is just a design, a decoration. It is a beautiful Arabic writing. It says, Allah and Mohammad, peace be upon him.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

In a Muslim country like Egypt or Turkey, you can not miss the call to prayer while you are walking in the street five times a day.

Melissa:

After September 11, many Muslims and people of Middle Eastern decent came under heightened scrutiny. Fear and suspicion mounted. In response, some Christians and Muslims have worked hard to foster understanding. Cedar Rapids, Iowa is about as "Middle America" as you can get. It has 13 Lutheran congregations. Cedric Lofdahl is a retired ELCA pastor.

These days he works with the Cedar Rapids Inter-Religious Council, of Linn County, a grass roots organization that builds bridges of understanding between Christians, Muslims and Jews. One way they build understanding is through a local TV show, "Ethical Perspectives on the News."

Cedric Lofdahl:

Right after 9/11 we had three special half hour programs. We had a Christian, the Rabbi from the Temple and the Imam from the Islamic Center sharing about their concerns and reactions as to what was happening with that. A lot of people don't realize how many other faith groups there are. And then realizing that those people are people just like us. With the same needs and concerns and so forth. And are beginning to appreciate that much more, I think.

Melissa:

First Lutheran Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa is a leader in Christian/Muslim interfaith dialogue. They ask Muslims to speak in their church. Our visit to this large, downtown congregation coincided with Ash Wednesday. Following the service, First Lutheran continued an on-going series of presentations on Islam. Instead of speaking about Muslims, they invited Imam Ahmed Elkhaldy to speak in person.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

I am the Imam of the Islamic Center of Cedar Rapids...

Daniel Kolander:

It has only been in the past year or two that we really have been involved more with Islam. Particularly with the inter religious council here in town. Since the beginning of the year we have had four classes. Three adult classes and one class for high school youth to help us understand the Muslim faith and the Islamic community. In those classes we have had opportunity for people in the Muslim community to be here and dialogue with our members.

I am impressed with the Islamic community here in Cedar Rapids. They have been very open to dialoguing with us. And I think there are some misconceptions about Islam that have come as the result of 9/11 and subsequent terrorism news that we have heard on an almost daily basis. This gives us an opportunity to put some of those stereotypes aside and realize that Islam is not the violent faith that perhaps we have come to believe because of the news.

Ahmed Elkhaldy:

God does not judge us according to our appearances, but according to our deeds and he scans our hearts.

Melissa:

Taha Tawil is an Imam and Director of the Mother Mosque. After 9/11 he was touched by the Christian communities reaction.

Taha Tawil:

It was a positive attitude toward Muslims in the state of Iowa. We didn't have any major incidents. In fact our neighbors have been very much supporting.

Melissa:

Cedar Rapids isn't the only place where Muslims and Christians are working together. Dearborn Michigan has the largest Middle East population of any city outside the Middle East. Rani Abdalmashi leads an ELCA congregation of Arab Christians in this community where one in three speak Arabic. These Arabs aren't Christian converts. Their families come from ancient Christian communities in Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere. The Christians at Abundant Life understand and are used to living alongside Muslims.

Rani Abdalmashi:

The nature of Dearborn which has about 96,000 population has about 35,000 who are Middle Eastern. Out of the 35,000, 90% are of the Islamic faith.

Melissa :

For Rani Abdalmasih, a big part of ministry is building bridges with the wider Arab community. Rani doesn't go by himself. Members of Abundant life are right with him. ...meeting with city officials...

Youssef Joe Beydoun:

What ever we can do as a city or as the assistant to the mayor, me personally, Joe Beydoun I will be more than willing to accommodate you.

Melissa:

...religious leaders.....community activists...

Rana Abbas:

For us to sit back and say, “Well they don’t understand us...” well there is a responsibility that lies there. We need to try to make them understand us.

Melissa:

...and even the consul general to the nation of Lebanon.

Mohammed Skayni:

It is through accepting the other with all the differences that, that other might have, is an essential step in getting a better and more positive future.

Rani Abdalmasih:

I believe that Christians and Muslims and Jews and other people of other faiths can live together. Not only can they, they must live together. Because we do not exist in isolation. Rather, we exist among people who are different than us. Jesus is the greatest example in breaking the barriers. And that is because of the love that he has shown to the world.

He broke all barriers of difference between people. Whether it was ethnicity, with the Samaritan woman, for example, or even the barrier of gender between males and females. It is no longer male or female. Black or white. Jew or Greek. I say, no longer Palestinian or Israeli. No longer Arab or America. We are all one in the spirit that has brought us together in the spirit of love in Jesus Christ. It becomes an important role for the Abundant life and for this, our Christian community, to take a leading role in building bridges in our community among people of other faiths. Especially the Muslim faith.

We as Arabs, as Middle Easterners, have lived with Muslims. As a Palestinian I lived with Muslims and Jews as I was growing up. It is very important to bring those people together. To bridge the gaps. Because I feel especially, in the recent events, that the gap is getting greater. And we need to build education and awareness of others. James said, if you love God whom you cannot see, how don’t love your brother whom you can see? It is a double standard I believe of any person of faith, not to take action towards building understanding among our neighbors and our community.

Melissa:

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to a ministry of reconciliation. That means it is up to us to break down barriers that divide people. We hope you enjoyed this edition of MOSAIC. The user guide that accompanies this video has a list of resources that will help you learn even more about Islam. Thanks for watching. As always, this is MOSAIC, and you are a part of it.