Response to Gabriel Habib:
Mennonite Engagement of Islam

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In addition to responding to Gabriel Habib's remarks, I was asked to review the essentials of the findings from my Master's work which I carried out three years ago. That research took the form of a historical study, an archival study, along with some interviews of personnel connected to Mennonite agencies working in Muslim settings. So I looked at work in Algeria, in the West Bank, Lebanon, Egypt, and East Africa primarily. Some of the themes that I raise will dove-tail with Mr. Habib's presentation.

Compared to the historic and indigenous churches of the Middle East and the Church of Rome, Mennonite engagement of Islam is still very much in its infancy. This is not to say that this engagement has been limited or insignificant. On the contrary, since the late 1940s Mennonite mission, service, and relief agencies have developed programs in regions as diverse as the Levant, North and East Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. This broad involvement has given rise to multiple experiences and perceptions of Islam and to its meaning for the Mennonite mission and service enterprises.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I would like to suggest three overriding forces that have influenced the evolution of Mennonite approaches to Islam. Mr. Habib brought out the whole issue of the context of imperialism and colonialism. One of the things that I tried to bring out in my own study was that Mennonite work has taken place within this broader context and to varying degrees this has been recognized by Mennonite administrators. I just want to point this out by recalling how I perceived that connection between colonialism and Mennonite mission and service work as it come across in documents from the archives, through unconscious use of language, such as thinking of the spiritual darkness in Africa. That is a very striking phrase in the context of Africa. Then again, there have been changes, and conscious attempts to come to terms with this.

The other way I would like to illustrate this point is to relay a vignette. There is a story told of Orie Miller, whom many know as a famous administrator of MCC, and also of Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions. One time he was flying over eastern

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Africa and looking down on the country of Somalia and thinking that this would be a good place to begin a mission. What was striking for me in that story is that you have the intersection of the fact that he is flying in an airplane in the post World War II period and making a decision that we will begin a mission to this country. That is an interesting intersection between the abilities to fly over that area and to make that decision. One wonders how many Somalis were flying over the United States and making the decision to start a mission in the United States. Again this intersection of colonialism and mission is something that is not a conscious thing, it is a part of what we inherit but it needs to be made more conscious, I think.

The second force that I think has been present nearly everywhere in the post-colonial Muslim world is that Mennonite missionaries and service workers have confronted legal barriers and restrictions on their work. This experience has often created psychic tension and identity crisis. One MBM/MCC project worker in Algeria during the 1950s for instance complained that "government stipulations demand that with relief work there be no proselytizing among the Arabs. This is heart-breaking, a heart-breaking command for dedicated Christians in a land where very few Christians exist, where it has been said that there are more graves of missionaries than of Arab converts." I noticed similar sentences over the years in the reporting of Mennonite workers in Somalia, Indonesia, Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere. The need to come to terms with the contradictions that anti-missionary laws have created has led to the adoption of new concepts of mission and service. It has lead in part to new concepts of mission and service such as the notion of presence.

The emergence of the idea of "presence" among Mennonites, first in Algeria then elsewhere, reflected a broader debate among Western church administrators and theologians over how best to pursue mission in the post-colonial context. In the Mennonite world "presence" marks the point at which service and dialogue begin to be seen as distinct and legitimate alternatives to the missionary activities of teaching, preaching and planting new churches. Presence has been an extremely flexible trope. For some it has denoted a strict service orientation—that through one's quiet and loyal work as a doctor or nurse or English teacher one served Christ just as legitimately as through the traditional missionary activities of preaching and evangelizing. Over the years some have radicalized this position, asserting the presence of quiet service as the only legitimate form of Christian involvement among Muslims, given the long history of Crusade and enmity that has periodically poisoned Christian/Muslim relations over the centuries. At times this stance is combined with the theological position that Muslims or any other group need not be converted to Christianity. Since the wisdom and love of God exceeds all human understanding, who are we to presume that Muslims are somehow less happy or less fulfilled or less blessed, simply because they do not proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior? At the same time, however, those with more traditional views on mission have interpreted presence as the minimal form of evangelism possible in the face of anti-proselytizing laws and hostile community response. For the sake of the authorities and hostile neighbors, one was a teacher or a nurse and indeed, one could be true to Christ through selfless service to others, but the great commission

demanded more of the missionary. So one remained alive to the possibilities to share the gospel quietly to those who seemed most open and willing to listen.

Over the years a number of different presence approaches have evolved in this genre of interpretation for pursuing evangelistic goals in ways that avoid provoking resentment and resistance. Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions projects in East Africa and Bangladesh, for instance, have developed and distributed Islamicized materials and Bibles, and implemented other culturally sensitive methods for presenting the Christian story. They have also advocated the adoption of Islamic forms of religious associations such as *tariqa,* or brotherhood, as a model for Muslim believers, an inculturated model. More recently Mennonites have become involved in tent-making ministries, a tactic through which missionaries enter host countries as development workers, business people, or employees of secular institutions, and under that cover are able then to circumvent anti-missionary laws and carry out evangelism.

In addition to legal barriers and local resistance, institutional differentiation has provided the third major force shaping Mennonite approaches to Muslims and Islam. This differentiation manifests itself most clearly, I think, in the evolution of the Mennonite Central Committee. In MCC we see the emergence of a distinct institutional gestalt, to borrow Ray Brubacher's term, or a value structure characterized by the notion of service work versus verbal witness as a legitimate form of Christian mission in itself. Of course a wide range of opinions and positions on mission and service may exist among individual MCCers and Mission Board workers. And there can be areas of programmatic integration and cooperation between the agencies in different regions. Nevertheless I would hold that the evolution of MCC as an institution represents historically both the functional and ideological dissolution of an earlier consensus that linked MCC to the Mission Boards and their evangelizing objectives.

In the Middle East the unraveling of this consensus was aided ironically by an early decision among mission board administrators to suspend active evangelization in order to avoid contributing to the further division of the local churches and thus causing more anti-Western resentment among local church leaders. Instead the emphasis would be on service and development, the very things in which MCC was already institutionally specialized. Hence the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, became an MCC programmatic preserve. Recently this MCC programmatic stake has undergone changes in response to the desires of mission boards to become more active in the region, and in relation to religious and political developments on the ground such as the war in Lebanon, emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, and the Palestinian uprising. The creation of the Mennonite Middle East Reference Group and attempts at sponsoring the training of individuals as specialists of Islam in part represent an attempt at developing a unified Mennonite posture in the Middle East in order, I think, to defuse interagency competition and avoid confusion and loss of credibility among Middle Eastern partners.

Along with the decision to focus on service in the Middle East strong ideological leadership has been another factor in the emergence of distinct gestalt among MCC and the mission boards. Such persons have crystallized institutional world views by

holding conferences, writing books, and attracting like-minded staff members and workers. Three individuals in particular have had a profound impact on the development of distinct MCC and mission board approaches.

First there is Urbane Peachey who served as MCC Jordan country representative in the 1970s and as MCC area secretary in the early 1980s. Peachey's basic approach emerged from the influence of civil war in Lebanon which convinced him of the need to work across confessional boundaries, showing favoritism to none and yet seeking the reconciliation of all. As MCC developed its program in Lebanon, it described itself as "a relief and development agency that offered services 'without regard to race, religion, or international origin,' and worked for non-violent solutions to conflict." As Middle East secretary, Peachey would make his inter-sectarian approach an agency-wide concern. He was the driving force, for instance, behind the 1981 MCC consultation on Islam. This consultation was significant in three major respects. First, it featured reflections by Mennonite women volunteers and scholars on their own experiences and the experiences of Muslim women in general. This was, to my knowledge, a first for any Mennonite institution with programs in Islamic societies. Second, it explored the historical evolution of Christian theological attitudes toward Islam and questioned the traditional insistence on the finality of Christ. Merlin Schwarz was particularly influential in this respect. And finally, this conference for the first time attempted to reflect systematically about the history of MCC involvement in the Middle East and the wider context of neo-colonialism. There were a number of papers that dealt with that theme.

Alongside Urbane Peachey is David W. Shenk, who is among us today and who will be speaking to us, who has also had an enormous impact on the institutional and ideological evolution of Mennonite approaches to Islam. A prolific writer and energetic administrator, David has developed his initial thinking on Islam during his tenure as an Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions worker in Somalia during the turbulent sixties. This experience was marked both by the forging of deep personal ties to Somali communities, as well as dealing with the murder of a Mennonite worker and the expulsion of the entire mission following the Marxist coup in 1969. In the aftermath, David would devote his life to finding ways to reach out evangelically to Muslims in ways that circumvented suspicion and hostility. He was the inspirational force behind the creation of believer congregations in Nairobi, Kenya, based on the Sufi concept of *tariqa* or brotherhood. He also provided the impetus for the People of God Bible translation project which presented Biblical stories in the form of Qur'an-like narratives. As Eastern Board's overseas secretary, David has supported tent-making initiatives and dialogue aimed at presenting the Christian case in the court of Muslim opinion. In inter-agency discussions he has been a strong advocate for a return to the consensus that views service work as part of the larger project of creating new church communities. He has worked for this by calling for a clear emphasis on invitational outreach in the stated objectives for the interagency specialist in Islam. He has also expressed his desire for greater coordination with MCC, stating that "we need MCC to do what we cannot." Shenk has also produced numerous books and articles on

Islam and evangelization of Muslims. A consistent theme in his writing is the need to overcome Muslim misconceptions of Christian doctrine and to work for the creation of self-sustaining communities of Muslim believers in the Christian Christ. It is clear that Shenk, both in his capacity as author and administrator, has had great influence on the development of Eastern Mennonite Board's approach to work among Muslims. It is also clear that he gives voice to a sense of purpose that differs in important theological and practical respects from the one expressed by Urbane Peachey and his successors in MCC.

A third individual, Leroy Friesen, has also had significant influence on Mennonite approaches to Islam. Leroy developed his understanding and experience of Muslims while in the West Bank and Jerusalem as MCC country representative during the early 1970s. His most recent and perhaps his most important contribution, has been as the author of the Middle East Studies Project which got underway formally in the summer of 1988. Although its full significance is still unfolding, the Study Project marks a crucial stage in the differentiation of MCC and Mission Board understandings about outreach to Muslims. Framed as an attempt to coordinate and craft a unified Mennonite program and approach, the Study Project has, I think, ironically, demonstrated the extent to which MCC and the Mission Boards have evolved different conceptions of what it means to be present "in the name of Christ." While some individuals might take issue with me on this point, and while inter-agency discussions and cooperative efforts continue, I would maintain, nevertheless, that Friesen's mighty attempts to design a theological umbrella under which MCC and the Mission Boards could come together, has shown precisely how difficult it is to reconcile a position viewing service and dialogue as initial steps in the larger evangelization program or project, with a position asserting service and dialogue as ends in themselves. Clearly MCC, especially in the Middle East, continues to view its involvement in Muslim-Christian dialogue efforts in terms of the justice, service and reconciliation themes stressed by Peachey and Friesen in the early 70s and 80s. These terms explicitly exclude, I think, evangelization and the formation of communities of Muslim believers.

My intention here is not to exacerbate or overstate, although I probably have overstated interagency divisions, but simply to recognize the existence of very real differences in institutional ethos and world view. These differences will continue to have a powerful influence in shaping individual worker identity and agency philosophies. Mennonites can only benefit by acknowledging these differences and educating their Muslim counterparts in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere, about the diversity of Mennonite thinking. It may or may not be possible to return to the one Mennonite family. What is clear is that that family, like any family, has gone in different directions.

I do not have any specific response to Mr. Habib's comments except that I think that the issues that he raises in the larger context of colonialism as well as his last section on what is to be done are important. Mennonites would do well to give some long reflection to these concerns and to continue to think about the historic decision that was made by Mennonite organizations to suspend evangelization and to support

the existing churches in the Middle East. Equally profound has been the interagency decision to support dialogue with Muslims. We would do well to examine these decisions in light of Mr. Habib's comments, as well as in light of the interagency discussions that have been going on about the role of evangelization and creating communities of believers. What are the moral and political consequences of pursuing "invitational outreach" in the Middle East? How ready are we to allow the conversation to become "two-way" and to let it have real effects on our theological stances and self-conceptions? These are really crucial issues, ones that need to be debated and discussed honestly.