

Across the Border

Learning from diversity

by *Bertha Beachy*

I called my Muslim friend to check the beginning of the month of fasting. She believed it would begin on Monday the first day of September. Because it follows the lunar month, it depends on first glimpse of the crescent moon. Some of the Middle Eastern countries

normally announce the sighting of the new moon.

Every year it begins nearly 10 days earlier.

It is nearly 50 years since I experienced my first Ramadan in Somalia, a 99.5% Muslim country in East Africa. My young students would ask permission to go outside to spit. They began earnestly but usually after a few days, it changed. I learned that all adults fasted from sunrise to sunset, with a few exceptions, without water or food, nor did they swallow their saliva. They broke the fast with dates and tea. After total darkness they shared a special family meal together. Later, the men normally went to the mosque where the Qur'an was recited for many hours and they prayed together. The women prayed at home. After a short night, they might eat again before sunrise.

The end of the month of fasting was marked by three days of holiday. Three days of praying, feasting, and visiting friends wearing new clothing especially for the occasion marked the end of the month. Food for feasting is divided with the neighbor and with the poor, keeping only one third of the food for the family. Everyone had gifts for the children who came calling. It was a time of great joy and public holidays.

I have never managed to fast exactly as my Muslim friends do, but I also believe in fasting. It feels very important to do what I feel called to do. It often connects with special praying I am called to. This year MCC has encouraged fasting and praying on Fridays as a special day to remember our connections with Iran. I visited Iran in 2008 with an MCC Peace group. I also feel the anguish of what is happening in Iraq—the war, the refugees, and the children. I also



*Inside a mosque
in Iran.*

Courtesy photo

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pray for our veterans and their families. I believe God honors our vision and concerns in these matters.

One issue that calls me to prayer and fasting currently is a peace conference to be held in Philadelphia in early January 2009. It is for 300 people from Anabaptist groups but also includes 300 people from traditional churches. I am among those called to bring this whole experience before God daily.

How should we pray and work for peace?

I listen to the anguish of the poor as jobs disappear, food pantries beg for food to feed the hungry, home ownership becomes impossible, millions of Americans struggle without healthcare, and more. How do we care for the poor near us, and for me, how do we also care for the suffering Somali refugees inside Somalia? All of us are connected in different but special situations.

How do we enter this new year? What is our first thought as we relate to our families, our churches, the local community and the

Bertha Beachy and Rebecca Osiro (see story pp.4-6). Rebecca's Master's Degree thesis (2006) was about Christian-Muslim relations. Rebecca is now working on her PhD in Philosophy of Religions.

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world beyond? Do the great changes in the weather patterns affect us—hurricanes, floods and fires? Who is our neighbor? Do we enter 2009 with fasting and prayer? Imagine what might change if all Mennonites fasted for the month of February, or all Christians for that matter.

I find great hope in the words of Jeremiah 29:11–14a. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart. I will let you find me, says the Lord....”

Thus I sit with open hands filled with hope in God. 📖