

Constructive Engagement: Progress in African churches in Christian-Muslim Relations

**Reflections on the 50th anniversary celebration of the Programme for Christian-Muslim
Relations in Africa (PROCMURA)**
(www.promura-prica.org)

“There are multiple ways of looking at the relationship between two of the world’s largest faiths. While some point to existing even worsening tensions, many who are involved in Christian-Muslim relations understand that the moral and social challenges facing us demand that people place God’s love and mercy at the centre of their thinking. This is a challenge for all of us however we think of God. In the UK, Christian-Muslim conversations are a luxury; in many other parts of the world they are a necessity for the simple security of a society.”

From the summary of ‘Christian-Muslim Relations: Hope or Challenge?’ a Bristol University Centenary Lecture, 29 February 2009, Professor Mona Siddiqui, FRSE, FRSA, Professor of Islamic Studies and Public Understanding, University of Glasgow.

The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), which has just celebrated its 50th anniversary, is of particular relevance given the conflict in Jos, Nigeria, in January 2010 involving Christians and Muslims. PROCMURA is about peacemaking. It is about constructive engagement with Muslims in Africa by promoting good neighbourliness, the understanding of Islam in the life of churches and the extending hands of friendship. Its hard won experience, past and present, has relevance in and beyond Africa where limited knowledge, apprehension, fear and political factors can result in the break down of relationships between Christians and Muslims.

For the 50th anniversary celebration between 19th and 24th November 2009, PROCMURA’s key people, the area advisers, gathered in Nairobi. They came from across the continent – from Senegal to Tanzania and from countries to the north and south of that ‘middle belt’. In the bible studies, authoritative briefings, workshops and individual conversations, there was a vibrancy which also provided inspiration for the partner observers from North America and Europe (European Liaison Committee). There are lessons to be learnt from the work of PROCMURA. Its record shows that churches in Africa with varying degrees of success are facing up to the need to improve Christian-Muslim relations. That experience may be of value elsewhere, not least in Britain and Ireland:

1. It is the working theology that marks out PROCMURA as a Christian facilitator for peace and peaceful co-existence. The mission of the area committees and their locally appointed advisers is to share the good news of the love of God by faithfully interpreting the Gospel of Jesus and living out that message in practical ways so it that can be recognised by people of other faiths. It is about encouraging a spirit of good neighbourliness, mutual respect and tolerance; it is not about proselytising. Relationships with Muslims are maintained without betraying the Gospel; indeed experience has shown that Christians may find their faith strengthened through contacts with Islam. However, there is a recognisable tension, evident at the celebration, between the Gospel call to evangelise and the avoidance of conflict with Muslims who are themselves acting out their missionary faith. A prayerful holistic approach in sharing the Gospel is advocated by PROCMURA which engages rather than threatens,

witnesses by example rather than entreats and builds bridges rather than provokes. This sets aside pressures for instant evangelism advocated by some Christians worldwide.

2. The coordinating administration of PROCMURA is from an office in Nairobi. Increasingly known internationally the Revd Dr. Johnson Mbillah, a Ghanaian Presbyterian, is the General Adviser and he hosted the event. In support of the area committees and their advisers, he particularly travels to be with pastors, youth, women and church leaders. He also attends international gatherings as a speaker or consultant, such as at the Anglican Lambeth Conference. Invariably his focus is on faithful Christian witness, constructive engagement and peace building. Other supporting Nairobi staff include Ms. Joy Wandabwa, Project Officer/Finance Director, and Rev Mrs Angele Dogbe, Women and Education Programme Coordinator. They make an impressive specialist team in a position to advocate improving Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and, exceptionally, further afield.

3. Given the current trouble in Jos, with its toxic mix of causes, it is a blessing that the Chairman of PROCMURA is the Rt. Rev. Josiah Idowa-Fearon, Anglican Bishop of Kaduna. Like Jos, Kaduna is in the Middle Belt of Nigeria and there too differences in faith have been exploited by those seeking particular political and cultural identities. It is the complexity of the issues there and elsewhere that warrant the careful scrutiny that press reports rarely give. Lessons from the past can be found in 'PROCMURA at 50', the recently published history which shows how churches in Africa in a variety of circumstances are facing up to the need to improve Christian-Muslim relations. Their experiences and current practice warrant increased recognition elsewhere.

4. The PROCMURA area advisers, found in over 20 countries, are appointed locally, invariably by councils of churches. They arrange conferences and workshops and at those take opportunities to respond to myths about Islam. Being well informed about the different groupings within Islam, as found in different localities, they are available to advise churches how best to both recognise success and respond to difficulties. There are also area committees for the Women's Programme. While focusing on issues of particular concern to Christian women –such as interfaith marriages these also bring Christian and Muslim women together to consider social issues such as HIV/AIDS. The two presentations at the celebration on Women in Christian-Muslim relations were among the liveliest, notably when led by Professor Esther Mombo a theologian at St. Paul's University, Limuru, near Nairobi. It is not only in Africa that such local area work is needed.

5. The local advisers have played a significant part in developing the training of lay people and clergy. The early establishing of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Ibadan provided training for students from all over West Africa. While it eventually evolved into a provision of mobile training programmes, it was responding to what continues to be a need for the training of trainers for engaging with local communities. Appropriately the anniversary programme included a visit to St. Paul's University, Limuru, where, in association with PROCMURA, academic theological training is provided which links the students' practical experience of engaging in Christian-Muslim relations.

6. The role of church leaders in furthering better Christian Muslim relations was powerfully, indeed provocatively, expressed by Bishop Josiah Idowa-Fearon in his sermon at the celebration service in the Nairobi Anglican cathedral. Preaching to the text "The sower went forth to sow..." (Mathew 13.3.), which was the celebration theme, he challenged church leaders to engage with Muslims by urgently seeking constructive engagement, not least when they have a peacemaking

role. There is concern about the considerable number of church leaders who are not interested in interfaith activities. That is not confined to Africa.

7. Practical constructive engagement with Muslims was at the central Jamia Mosque in the middle of Nairobi. It was a moving occasion particularly because of the imam's warm welcome and his subsequent clear and gentle responses to questions. Moving from dialogue to cooperation and on to collaboration is a leap further but working together can enable Christians and Muslims to find out more about what is common between them. An illustration is the PROCMURA consultation in May 2008 which brought Christian and Muslim women together from Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone to initiate a joint project on HIV and AIDS for implementation at country level. On the other hand some issues can be divisive such as the proposal for Kahdi courts within a new Kenya constitution. That became current during the celebration. Local leaders of both faiths were engaged in discussions which limited their attendance. Patience and wisdom are still needed.

8. PROCMURA people work for peace in situations other than those focussing directly on matters of faith. Reference was made to such peacemaking in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. Notable among those present with a longstanding connection with PROCMURA was the former PROCMURA chairman, Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat, a prominent Kenyan who has a distinguished record in conflict resolution efforts in particular in Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Ethiopia and currently Sudan. Ambassador Kiplagat strongly challenged PROCMURA to be pro-active in promoting peacemaking; it is a challenge to those who just see Christian Muslim relations as about dialogue. 'Peace Building in Sudan', recently published by PROCMURA, is an account of a Peace and Reconciliation workshop which it facilitated for church leaders in Malakal, Sudan in May 2009, a town located about where north and south Sudan are said to meet.

9. Participants at the celebration made a mix of denominations. The ecumenical nature of PROCMURA is a success story in itself. Its work brings churches together as, for instance, in Togo where PROCMURA helped form the Christian Council of Togo. While PROCMURA has Protestant roots the General Adviser has, for instance, represented PROCMURA at the Pontifical Council in Rome. While PROCMURA is a sign of what Christians can do together, it also happened that three weeks before the Nairobi gathering there was a Catholic conference in London on Christian/Muslim relations in Africa. Catholic African church leaders present included those from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan. The conference immediately followed the Second Africa Synod in Rome which had the theme 'The Church in service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. Key words at the London conference were 'hope, collaboration and dialogue'. See www.indcatholicnews.com The two gatherings had much in common.

A range of partner mission agencies/churches of different denominations in Europe and North America provide funding for the staff and office in Nairobi. Many were represented at the celebration. The African churches' financial resources are limited and it was clear that the partner organisations also face financial constraints. Notice was given of the proposal to raise some significant finance by developing the prime Nairobi office site.

10. Relevant to the celebration was 'A Common Word between Us and You', a letter addressed to Christian scholars worldwide in 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars, and now signed by many more. The letter says that "finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders....Our

common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.” To support their message, the scholars used quotations from the Bible and the Qur’an and argued that the most fundamental tenets of Islam and Christianity are identical: love of one (and the same) God and love of one’s neighbour. “Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works” they wrote, “Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to (one) another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.” In Africa PROCMURA is well placed for monitoring responses from Christian scholars and leaders and thus further engaging with Islam. The letter is an important contribution to Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue anywhere. For both a copy of the letter and the formal Christian responses see www.acommonword.com

What of the future for PROCMURA? In his introduction to ‘PROCMURA at 50’ Bishop Idowa-Fearon offers a challenge. He “calls on all who are committed to making Africa a model for other continents with a similar number of Muslim and Christian communities to move from workshops, seminars and colloquia to actively engaging with our Muslim neighbours in joint projects so as to practically live what we have been teaching and promoting for these past fifty years”.

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Notes

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email: procmura@wanachi.com www.promura-prica.org
- St Paul’s University, Private Bag, Limuru, Kenya www.stpaulslimuru.ac.ke
- ‘PROCMURA at 50’ and ‘Peace Building in Sudan’ are available from PROCMURA
- PROCMURA Mission funding partners from the Great Britain and Ireland include: CMS, Church of Scotland, Methodist Church, USPG
- Other PROCMURA partners include CEVAA, Danmission, NMZ (Germany), ICCO-Kerkinactie, MWB, Norwegian Missionary Society, Mission 21, Sudanmissionen, Church of Sweden
- The Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, The Song School, 109A Iffley Road, Oxford OX4 1EH www.cmcsoxford.org.uk
- Christian Muslim Forum, 70 South London Road, Vauxhall, London, SW81RL www.christianmuslimforum.org
- Churches’ Inter Religious Network, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 39 Eccleston Square, London, SW1V 1BS, www.ctbi.org.uk.
- Peter Colwell has written an introduction to the letter ‘A Common Word between Us and You’ offering a background to it, a commentary on the issues and some suggested resources for further reading.
(Peter Colwell, ‘Above us and between us’, www.ctbi.org.uk/302)