



# RCA Missionary Update

## from the Fords

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus seeks to train specialized evangelists who will help their congregations reach out in Christian love to their Muslim neighbors. As part of this goal, Peter Ford directs the program in Christian-Muslim Relations at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary. Through his teaching at the seminary and in various workshops, Peter enables Christian leaders to better understand the faith and practice of Muslims in the Ethiopian context, and how they can share the message of the gospel in an honest yet respectful manner.

### Ethiopia facts:

- Population: 65 million
- Size: 704,000 square miles (about twice the size of Texas)
- Major religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, 48%; Islam, 35-40%; Evangelical Christianity, 12%



#### MINISTRY

Theological Education

#### LOCATION

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

#### PARTNER

Ethiopian Evangelical Church  
Mekane Yesus

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Dear Friends,

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We mentioned in our Christmas letter that we would be on home assignment this year—and it has already begun! Many of you in our supporting churches have met or will soon meet me as I hop around the country, sharing about our ministry in Ethiopia. Some congregations are taking advantage of my visit by scheduling a teaching time during the Sunday school hour or a Saturday evening, when I can present some basic information about Islam and how we can better understand and relate to our Muslim neighbors. I'm already finding a great interest in this on your part, and it prompted me to consider using this occasional letter to help you learn something new in this area. I'm thinking about devoting several future letters (not necessarily sequentially) to relevant topics about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, drawing from what I teach in these subjects at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary.

Where to begin? It's hard to know, given all the issues involved in better understanding Islam. For various reasons,

I've decided to start by looking at the holy book of Islam, the Qur'ān. After all, this book provides the fundamental basis for Muslim theology and practice, much like the Bible does for Christianity. Many Muslims have memorized by heart the entire Qur'ān (about the size of the New Testament), and Muslims regularly include passages from it in their prayers. First, you will notice that I did not use the popular spelling "Koran"; although that rendition is technically acceptable according to the dictionary, the preference today is to spell Islamic terms according to their original Arabic letters. "Qur'ān" is pronounced "kur-ahn": the "q" is roughly equivalent to a "k", but "k" represents a different Arabic letter; and the apostrophe in the middle of the word represents a glottal stop, as if you were pronouncing a word beginning with a vowel. "Qur'ān" means "recitation," and it comes from the idea that Muhammad was commanded to recite these words, to preach them to the Arabs, pagan and believers alike.



Peter teaches an "Introduction to Qur'ān" class at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary. The book in the right foreground is his Arabic-English copy of the Qur'ān.

That brings us to the role of

Muhammad, who is revered (but not worshiped) by Muslims as God's final prophet, sent among the Arabs of the seventh century A.D. Muhammad did not sit down and write the Qur'an; in fact, Muslims claim that he could not read or write at all. Instead, he merely recited what he believed to be the words that God revealed to him through the angel Gabriel. This took place on many occasions during the 22 years of his public ministry; the Qur'an is not said to have come down (as some have thought) as an entire single book. Muhammad's followers memorized these passages and wrote them down (sometimes right away, sometimes later), and during the 20 years following Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., they put them together in the book that still exists today. The text of the Qur'an is entirely in Arabic, and although many Muslims are willing to have it translated into other languages for the sake of better understanding, they are very reluctant to call anything but the original Arabic version the "Qur'an." This partly stems from their belief that every word, indeed every letter, came directly from God; Muhammad's role was merely that of the channel of revelation, although he came to be recognized as the Qur'an's best interpreter, as well.

But what does the Qur'an contain? It is not easy to give a simple answer to that question. It consists of 114 chapters (each called a "surah" in Arabic), but these vary considerably in length and they often contain several diverse themes. Also, they are not arranged chronologically, but rather appear to some extent according to length (with the shortest at the end). The Qur'an includes several narrative portions, especially stories about the prophets who preceded Muhammad, such as Abraham, Joseph, and Moses; but the narratives are usually brief and without many details. Mostly the Qur'an is a collection of pronouncements from God. Sometimes God addresses the pagans, warning them of the judgment that will come upon those who do not worship him, and calling them to recognize his signs of creation and to listen to his prophets about how they should behave. Sometimes God addresses the young Muslim community (usually referred to as the "believers"), calling them to praise the one true God, showing them how to live together in peace, or sometimes commanding them to defend the faith by fighting against those who would undermine the new religion. Sometimes God addresses the handful of Jews and Christians who lived in Arabia at that time, alternating between approval for their good works and reproach for their rejection of God's message. Almost all passages of the Qur'an are best understood in light of the particular historical context in Muhammad's life at the time when they were "revealed"; yet Muslims believe that they also speak for all of time.

Probably the most well-known passage of the Qur'an is its first surah, called Al-Fatihah ("The Opening"). It forms

part of the prayer which Muslims repeat five times each day, and it is sometimes compared to the Lord's Prayer of Christianity. It runs as follows:

In the name of God, the Most gracious, the Most merciful.  
Praise be to God, the Lord of the universe,  
the Most gracious, the Most merciful,  
Master of the Day of Judgment!  
You alone do we worship, and from You alone do we ask  
for help!  
Guide us on the straight path,  
the path of those to whom You are gracious,  
not the path of those with whom You are angry,  
nor of those who have gone astray.

This passage, and others like it, might easily have been among the Psalms in the Bible. This shows that parts of the Qur'an are actually agreeable with what the Bible teaches, although we must admit that other parts are incompatible with Christian doctrine.

What should be our attitude towards the Qur'an as Christians? First, I believe that we must show a measure of respect concerning this book—not because we accept all it says (only true Muslims can do that), but out of love for our Muslim neighbors, who consider it God's absolute word. We should not be afraid to read it and learn more about it, for this will help us in our conversations with Muslims. Once we get to know them as friends, it is appropriate to ask them kindly about what is said there, looking first for areas of agreement in our respective beliefs about God. Gradually, and lovingly, we can move on to discuss those areas which are at variance with what we believe, helping them to understand that we base our faith in Christ as savior on the Bible.

What if you would like to learn more about the Qur'an? The professor in me cannot end without mentioning just a few helpful books on this subject. Naturally, a good English translation of the Qur'an is important. The one by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall has long been a standard and inexpensive edition; the one by A. Yusuf 'Ali is very useful, containing numerous footnotes and a helpful index; the recent one by Muhammad Abdel Haleem offers a fresh readable version in contemporary English. For a good basic introduction to the Qur'an from a sensitive Christian perspective, see *Understanding the Koran*, by Mateen Ellass; for an excellent Muslim overview that goes deeper, see *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, by Farid Esack. As our minds gain a better understanding of this important religious book, may our hearts gain a greater love for the Muslims who regard it so highly.

*Peter, Patty, David & Andrew*  
Peter Ford