

GREETINGS OF PEACE, PRAYERS OF HOPE, WISHES OF LOVE

Greetings of Peace from the Sultanate of Oman. For those who do not know, this country is a peaceful Muslim-majority country in the Southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula neighboring Saudi Arabia, Yemen and United Arab Emirates by land as well as having Iran, Pakistan and India a relatively short distance away on the opposite side of the Gulf of Oman. The Sultanate of Oman has a history of being a peace maker in the region, while remaining neutral it has maintained mutual respect and connections with the surrounding countries, as well as other countries who have influence in this region.



Source: The World Fact Book

The greater region of Middle East has been on the news over the past weeks and the situation has been deteriorating. While our country is safe and stable, we have received lots of requests for update on the situation as well as questions how Christians in the US could help with the situation.

Thus we, Reformed, Episcopalian and Lutheran faithful, working with Protestant Church in Oman (www.churchinoman.com) and with Al Amana Centre (www.alamanacentre.org) wanted to provide you with some material for your churches, congregations and individual Christians. We hope you find this useful when preparing for your worship and other services.

Situation Update

The greater Middle East has been unfortunately under serious turmoil over the last years. Wars in Syria as well as in Yemen have caused great pain, loss of life, and sorrow in thousands of families. The last weeks have shown that there is a potential danger for wider escalation of the conflict in Iraq and Iran. Demonstrations at the US Embassy in Baghdad, U.S. and Iranian missile attacks in Iraq, and vocal threats in social media from different countries including the United States have dominated the news cycles. While it appears that both the U.S. and Iran have backed down from immediate violent conflict, the underlying issues remain and the potential for violence continues.

While the Protestant Church in Oman and Al Amana Centre are not political actors in the regions, the politics of the Middle East and Gulf regions has a deep impact on our life and work, as well as on the home countries from many of the people we serve through our ministries. Therefore we follow the ongoings in the region with more than just curiosity.



Al Amana Centre is one of the oldest buildings in Muttrah. // Rev. Joshua Bode leading opening prayer of Gulf Churches fellowship meeting in Protestant Church in Oman in January 2019. (Photos: Rev. Aaro Rytönen)

In Oman, the ruler of the country, HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Said, has ruled the country generously and wisely for almost 50 years. He has elevated the status of women in society, provided well for all of his country and has over seen the fastest development of any other country in the same time period. Recently there have been reports of his declining health. However, official reports say that he is stable and still leading the country of Oman. Sultan Qaboos is the longest reigning ruler in the region, and throughout his reign he has been a staunch advocate for peace and has lead Oman to be a leader in religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence not only between different traditions in Islam, but between people of different religions as well. Most Omanis don't remember a time with Sultan Qaboos has not been in power, and the grief when he dies will be great. However, we pray that he will be able to

rule Oman for many years to come. Oman remains one of the safest countries in the world, and we trust that when a change in leadership comes, the Omani people will remain true to their character and handle the transition in peace and with grace.

It is in this context that we as Christians worship God together, work for peace and understanding between people of different faith traditions, raise our families, earn our livings, and enjoy our recreation. A context of uncertainty about how the super powers around us will respond to one another, a context of desiring peace between all people, and a context of being a small country in a big region.

It is in this context we want to provide you some material for praying for peace. Here and there.

Prayers for Peace in our time

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Last year marked 800 years since St. Francis' meeting with the Muslim Sultan of Egypt.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow peace;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that we may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Prayers for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation

Reformed Church of America: <https://www.rca.org/resources/prayers-peace-and-justice>

Reformed Worship:

<https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2014/prayers-justice-reconciliation-and-peace>

United Church of Christ: https://www.ucc.org/justice_ejcp_ef_prayers

Prayers of Catholic Popes for Peace:

<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prayers-for-peace.cfm>

Evangelical Lutheran Worship:

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELW_Prayers_Violence.pdf

Book of Common Prayer:

<https://episcopalchurch.org/from-book-common-prayer>

Psalm 72

With the words of Solomon from Psalm 72, pray that leadership all over the region and beyond may rule well over their countries and work for peace and reconciliation in the region.

Inspiration for Sermon: Our Muslim Neighbors - a Personal Story (by Rev. Justin Meyers)

When I was 5 years old, and I can honestly still remember this, my parents forced me into a brown tuxedo to be a ring bearer at my aunt's (father's sister) wedding. It itched and I hated the bowtie. My grandmother's sister was a Methodist minister and Aunt Lolo (Lois) was standing at the end of the aisle next to that man I would come to call uncle Nassif, an immigrant from Lebanon. Uncle Nassif was the youngest uncle in our family and would watch cartoons with us kids (the cousins), play in the yard, and horse around when our older fathers and uncles had "worn out". I knew he was a Muslim, but to a 5 year old he was just the fun uncle. Their first born child they named Mohammad. When my Uncle was fasting for Ramadan we would wait for our holiday meals until after sunset. When our cousins came over we have "Christian Pizza" (with pepperoni) and "Muslim Pizza" (no pork products). This was normal for our family. I grew up on a steady supply of Lebanese pita bread and baklava.

Fast forward 30 years: My wife and I land in Oman with our two children. Over the years we become close with many local people, most of whom are Muslim. A couple, in particular, have become family. Shah, a muslim man from Kashmir, is as much an uncle to our two sons as any of our brothers in the US. He is family. We share meals together. We share our hopes, our fears, our holidays, and even our family treasures with each other. (Shah's mom who has never met my wife, has given her a family heirloom scarf as she would a daughter because of our relationship with her son.) My friend of 7 years, Mohammad and I are set to have our 1000's cup of coffee together. I was one of only two non-Omanis at his wedding feast.

To me Muslims are people who return wallets left in taxis, who constantly offer us coffee and dates, who we work with us for peace and reconciliation, who speak to our groups free of charge and answer the same questions over and over again, who pull our cars out of the sand dune, who grin from ear to ear when I speak Arabic to them.

Some people might try to say in light of recent hostilities that Muslims hate Christians and that Muslims hate American. For me, however, the Muslims I know certainly don't hate me as an American or a Christian.

While I know that there are people who claim to be Muslim who do horrible violent things, the Muslims I know and love would never dream of hurting anyone. People may hate others, but it is impossible, and even sinful, to say that a whole people group or religion hates an other religion or group. There are Muslims who may hate Americans and Christians, but there are also Christians who hate Muslims and (insert Muslim majority country of choice). But in all my experience and study, I have not encountered a thoughtful expression of either religion that teach hate. Instead I find the opposite:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" Matthew 5:44

"O humankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other." Qur'an 49:13

The reality is, while there will likely always be people who claim religious affiliation when they perpetuate violence, most people of faith are seeking peace with their neighbor. Most Muslims and Christians I know hold misconceptions of each other that fuels our mistrust and fear, but I hope you hear me when I say this:

"I have never met someone I recognize as a fellow follower of Christ, or an adherent to Islamic teachings, that hates the "other". Instead, I have experienced nothing but love, acceptance and fellowship from my Muslim family and neighbors and I pray they can say the same of me, a Christian." - Rev. Justin Meyers

Religious Diversity in the Middle East

No country in the Middle East is all one religion. And no one religion in a country is from the same tradition. There is a great diversity of religious belief and practice in every country. Because some of these countries are so populous, even when a small percentage of the population adheres to a faith tradition the numbers can be in the millions for even the minority traditions. No one religion can represent an entire country. In certain cases (Syria and Iraq under Saddam Hussein for example) the people from the minority Islamic tradition and the Christian minority are/were in political power over a people from a majority Islamic tradition. (Note: Islam is the religion. Muslims are the people or followers of an Islamic tradition.) All figures (unless noted) are taken from 2018 International Freedom of Religion reports from the US State Department.

	Muslims	Christians	Others
Iran (83 Million)	82.5 Million Muslims 74 Million Shia 8.5 Million Sunni	500 000 - 1 000 000 Christians (500 000 recognized, some estimates up to 1 million)	300 000 Bahai 9000 - 20 000 Jews
Iraq (40.2 Million)	38.9 Million Muslims 23.4 Million Shia 15.5 Million Sunni	250 000 Christians (note in 2002 around 1 000 000. Many fled due to Gulf War and ISIS) 167 000 Catholic 50 000 Assyrian Church Rest combination of Orthodox and Evangelical Christians	500 000 Yezidis 80 known Jewish families
Oman (4.6 Million) Population estimates are not from US report but Al Amana Centre estimates and thus not official	3.6 Million Muslims 2 Million Ibadhi 1.4 Million Sunni 180 000 Shia	500 000 Christians Mostly Catholic and Orthodox (both Oriental and Eastern) 100 000 - 200 000 Protestant/ Evangelical	500 000 Hindu Some Sikh and Buddhists as well
USA (327 Million) From Pew Forum	3.2 Million Muslims	230 Million Christians	6.2 Million Jewish 2.2. Million Hindu 2.2 Million Buddhist

What can you do as a Christian in North America?

Pray: This is something in common for both Christians and Muslims. We are turning to God and praying. As Christians we show God gratitude, we ask for God's forgiveness, we might ask God a favor and most of all - we offer our praise. When you feel there is nothing else you can do, you can always pray. Prayer can also show you way forward. We ask you to pray for the Greater Middle East, we ask you to pray for the people and leadership in the countries here. We ask you to pray for the leadership of the countries who are involved in the situation here in the Greater

Middle East. And we ask you to pray for Americans and other foreign citizens who are living, working or visiting here. We also ask you to pray for the local people whose homes, lives, and families are being threatened by potential and current violence in the region.

Stay in touch: If you know people who are living here in the Greater Middle East, please stay in contact with them. We here at Al Amana Center and at Protestant Church in Oman love to receive your emails, messages and wishes. We do believe in building bridges between religions, cultures and people. It can be done only through human contact.

Commit: There are number of ways you can commit. You can support an organisation's working for the peace and reconciliation both in the US as well as here in the region. If you want to support Al Amana Centre financially, you can do it [here](#). And if you want to support the work of Protestant Church in Oman, you can do it [here](#). But the most important thing is that you keep people living here in their prayers. Be the one who is building bridges. Be the one who is correcting wrong information which might be out there. Be the one who is part of the global worldwide community - the Body of Christ.



The Holy Communion is celebrated regularly in many churches in Oman. And churches are full inside and outside during Christmas time (Photos: Rev. Jeffrey Bos/ left and Rev. Joshua Bode/ right)

Other Resources

Pope Francis' 2019 message to Christians living in the Gulf:

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-mass-homily-full-text.html>

Salaam 2.0 (a project of Resonate Global Mission)

<https://www.resonateglobalmission.org/salaam/about-salaam>

*Peace and blessings,
In Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman
January 9, 2020 AD*

Rev. Aaro Rytönen
Executive Director
Al Amana Centre
arytkonen@alamanacentre.org

Rev. Joshua Bode
Senior Pastor
Protestant Church in Oman
joshua.bode@gmail.com

Rev. Justin Meyers
Associate Director
Al Amana Centre
jmeyers@alamanacentre.org

Rev. Jeffrey Bos
Associate Program Director
Al Amana Centre
jbos@alamanacentre.org

Ms. Emma Wright
Young Adults Service Corps
Episcopal Church
ewright@alamanacentre.org