

# My Pilgrimage in Peacemaking<sup>1</sup>

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I am honored to be with you today. I especially want to thank Dr. Abdel Azim Elsidig for this invitation. Dr. Abdel Azim is a great friend, peacemaker, and bridge builder. I, too, am trying to follow his example and be a peacemaker and bridge builder.

The problem with being a peacemaker and functioning like a bridge between two groups is that like a bridge you get walked on from both sides! As a bridge builder between the Muslim and Christian communities I know what it's like. Christians get upset because they think I am too positive about Muslims. Muslims are suspicious because I am too positive about them.

But I am committed to being a peacemaker for at least two reasons. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt 5:9). First, Jesus promises us blessing or "*baraka*" if we work toward peace. Secondly, he describes peacemakers as God's true children. God's kids work for peace.

A recent survey from USA TODAY says that: ***Two-thirds of Protestant pastors consider Islam 'dangerous'***

By Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-12-21-islam-protestant\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-12-21-islam-protestant_N.htm)

This describes our context and the challenges we face.

Presently I serve the Association of Vineyard Churches for the U.S. Over 600 Vineyard churches in the US and 1000 internationally. To illustrate the challenges of peacemaking... I was talking to my supervisor in the Vineyard. He is a widely-read, broad-minded, big-hearted leader. But he admitted to me, "Rick, I am completely ignorant of the basis for peacemaking in Islam... is there one?" So I got out two Qur'ans and started showing him some verses.

First I read Sura 4:114.

YUSUF ALI: In most of their secret talks there is no good: But if one exhorts to a deed of charity or justice or conciliation between men, (Secrecy is permissible): To him who does this, seeking the good pleasure of Allah, We shall soon give a reward of the highest (value).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Because of time limitations some parts of my talk were omitted from the oral presentation. This paper reflects my full notes.

<sup>2</sup>Here are three other English Translations of this verse in the Qur'an: PICKTHAL: There is no good in much of their secret conferences save (in) him who enjoineth almsgiving and kindness and peace-making among the people.

“Sorry,” he said. “That’s not convincing.”

“Ok,” I said, “how about this verse?” And I showed him Sura 8:61

YUSUF ALI: But if the enemy incline towards peace, you (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah: for He is One who hears and knows (all things).

“Ok, that’s good! Thanks so much. That was very helpful.”

Now let me back up and share a little about my journey as a peacemaker.

I was a child of the sixties, so I spent my teenage years living an immoral, godless lifestyle. But my life was turned upside down when I was 18 yrs old. I had a radical conversion. I encountered Christ and was captured by His love. Ever since then I have been seeking to live in his love and share his love with others.

Like many Evangelicals, though, I was more committed to sharing my faith than I was to making peace. ***But things changed after 9-11.*** God touched my heart with compassion for Muslims and led me step by step into different organizations that helped me grow as a bridge builder.

God led me to join **Evangelicals for Human Rights (EHR)** where I serve on the Steering Team. (<http://www.evangelicalsforhumanrights.org/>). EHR was raised up by God to be a prophetic voice, seeking the abolition of torture. Our focus: No Torture, No Exceptions.

The disturbing scenes from *Abu Ghraib* caused me to join EHR and speak out against torture and the unjust policies of President Bush. Like you, I believe terrorists should be brought to justice. As you know, many, many Muslims have been taken into custody with no real evidence against them and without due process. But whether terrorists or not, no one should be tortured! We are all created in God’s image and deserve to be treated with dignity.

I am happy to say that the first stage of our campaign was successful as President Obama signed an Executive Order Banning Torture. We are still seeking to secure an independent Commission of Inquiry that will investigate and disclose the torture policies and practices of the U.S. government since September 11, 2001.

One key aspect of being a peacemaker is working for justice!

Next I was led to do postdoctoral studies in peacemaking at **Yale’s Reconciliation Program**.

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Whoso doeth that, seeking the good pleasure of Allah, We shall bestow on him a vast reward.

SHAKIR: There is no good in most of their secret counsels except (in his) who enjoins charity or goodness or reconciliation between people; and whoever does this seeking Allah's pleasure, We will give him a mighty reward.

KHALIFA: There is nothing good about their private conferences, except for those who advocate charity, or righteous works, or making peace among the people. Anyone who does this, in response to GOD's teachings, we will grant him a great recompense.

The goal of the Reconciliation Program is to promote reconciliation between Muslims and Christians, and between Muslim nations and the West, drawing on the resources of the Abrahamic faiths and the teachings and person of Jesus (<http://www.yale.edu/faith/rp/rp.htm>).

There I had the privilege of working with a team to put on an international dialogue referred to as the **Common Word**. This great peacemaking effort was initiated by Prince Ghazi of Jordan. He was the key human agent that mobilized 138 Muslim leaders from around the world to sign a declaration and invite Christians to dialogue around the theme of Love of God and Love of Neighbor. What a joy and honor it was to meet with 75 High Level Muslim Leaders and 75 High Level Christian Leaders to dialogue about these important issues!

Because of my involvement in the Common Word, I was invited by **World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)** to be part of a new Peacemaking Initiative they were starting. **WEA** is a network representing over 420 million Evangelicals around the world. It is my privilege to serve on their Executive Steering Team (<http://www.weapri.org/>).

The Preamble to their commitment statement summarizes why Evangelicals, including myself, have been slow to engage in peacemaking:

God has created the world to be recipients of His love. Because of sin, we live in a world rife with conflict. God's mission is the reconciliation of all things through Christ, and He invites us to participate with Him in the pursuit of right relationships. We honour the faithful examples of peacebuilding and reconciliation in our history. We confess and repent of our failure, whether through our action or inaction, to bear witness to the Gospel by faithfully living out the peaceable ways of Jesus Christ. In particular, we acknowledge that in our zeal for evangelism, we have often overlooked the biblical mandate to pursue peace. We commit ourselves anew to this mandate within our homes, churches, communities, and among the nations.

I just spoke on a Human Rights Conference in D.C. with Muslims, Christians and Jews. My topic was human rights in a Post 9-11 world. I was grieved when I read through what Jesus teaches about love of neighbor and considered the plight of Muslims in the U.S. Followers of Jesus have fallen short of God's standards in the *Injil* (Gospel). I cannot represent all Christians, but I must say publically: May God forgive us, and may you – my Muslim neighbors – forgive us.

I am no longer going to be just joining other peacemaking efforts. In the next month, I am starting a new organization called **Peace Catalyst International**. We will be catalyzing peacemaking efforts around the world, with a special focus on bridge-building between Christians and Muslims.

Let me close my talk by sharing a poignant story about Imam Ashafa and Pastor James, two Nigerian leaders who founded the **Interfaith Mediation Centre** in Kaduna, Nigeria – a city which has been an epicenter of conflict.

*Pastor James was born in Kaduna... As a teenager James joined the Christian Association of Nigeria, and at 27 became general secretary of the Youth Wing. When fighting between Christians and Muslims reached Kaduna in 1987, James became the head of a Christian militia. James used Scriptures to justify the violence.*

*At age 32, a fight broke out between Christians and Muslims over control of a market. The Christians were outnumbered, and 20 of them were killed. James passed out and when he woke up he found that his right arm had been sliced off with a machete.*

*Imam Ashafa comes from a long line of Muslim scholars. In 1987 when religious violence hit Kaduna, Ashafa, like James, became a militia leader. He says, "We planted the seed of genocide, and we used the scripture to do that. As a leader you create a scenario where this is the only interpretation." But Ashafa's mentor, a Sufi hermit, tried to warn the young man away from violence.*

*In 1992, Christian militiamen stabbed the hermit to death and threw his body down a well. Ashafa's only mission became revenge: he was going to kill James.*

*Then, one Friday during a sermon, Ashafa's imam told the story of when the Prophet Muhammad had gone to preach at Ta'if, a town about 70 miles southeast of Mecca. Bleeding after being stoned and cast out of town, Muhammad was visited by an angel who asked if he'd like those who mistreated him to be destroyed. Muhammad said no. "The imam was talking directly to me," Ashafa said. During the sermon, he began to cry. Next time he met James, he'd forgiven him entirely. To prove it, he went to visit James's sick mother in the hospital.*

*Slowly the pastor and imam began to work together but James was leery. "Ashafa carries the psychological mark. I carry the physical and psychological mark," he said... At a Christian conference in Nigeria... a fellow pastor pulled James aside and said, in almost the same words as the Sufi hermit, "You can't preach Jesus with hate in your heart." James said, "That was my real turning point. I came back totally deprogrammed."*

*For more than a decade now, James and Ashafa have travelled to Nigerian cities and to other countries where Christians and Muslims are fighting. They tell their stories of how they manipulated religious texts to get young people into the streets to shed blood. Both still adhere strictly to the scripture; they just read it more deeply and emphasize different verses.*

*Sadly, the imam is frequently accused of being a sellout because he associates with Christians. He identifies himself very much as a fundamentalist and sees himself as one who emulates Muhammad. Although he and Pastor James don't discuss it, he also*

*proselytizes among Christians. “I want James to die as a Muslim, and he wants me to die as a Christian. My Islam is proselytizing. It’s about bringing the whole world to Islam.”*

*Such missionary zeal drives both men, infusing their struggle to rise above their history of conflict . . . Pastor James still believes strongly in absolute and exclusive salvation mandated by the gospel: “Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’” He still challenges Christians to rely on the strict and literal word, and he’s still uncompromising on fundamental issues of Christianity.<sup>3</sup>*

Please note: both Pastor James and Imam Ashafa engaged in peacemaking and respectful witness! In a conflict zone, the Muslim carried out da ‘wa (the Arabic term for Muslim outreach), while the Christian evangelized – and yet they remained friends and worked together for peace.

I want to be a peacemaker like Pastor James, and I am looking for Muslims like Imam Ashafa. Who will join me in this great task of peacemaking?

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<sup>3</sup> This is a summary with some direct quotes from The Atlantic, March 2008, “God’s Country,” by Eliza Griswold, pages 40-55. The same story is found in “Warriors and Brothers” from Peacemakers in Action (Little 2007).