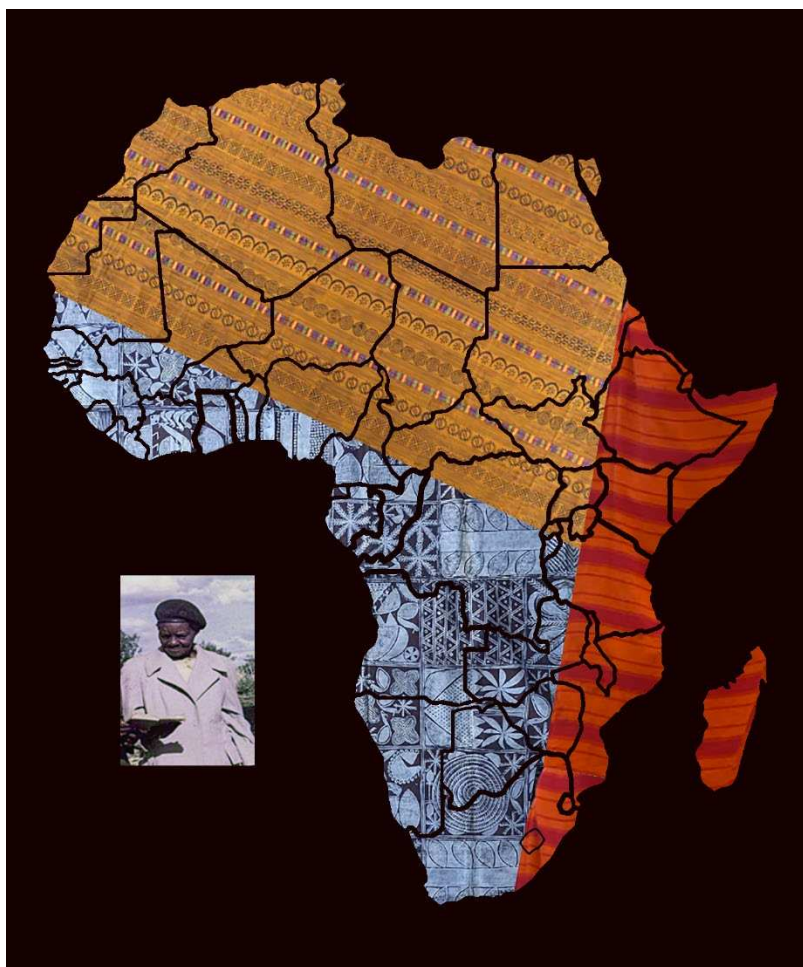


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Focus: Catechists and Evangelists

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Featured Interview

“Courage in Our Conviction: A Conversation with Pastor Abtidoon”¹⁰⁶

By Aweis A. Ali

The Somali people in the Horn of Africa have been exposed to the Gospel for over a century by different intrepid missionaries of various denominational persuasions. The most significant Big Three are the Roman Catholics, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM),¹⁰⁷ and the Mennonite Mission. The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) is also one of the earliest pioneers in Somalia. The SOLC set up a mission base in Kismayo, southern Somalia, in 1896 and eventually expanded its mission work to Jilib, Mugaambo and Jamaame, all in southern Somalia. While evangelism was the primary focus, the SOLC’s ministry was holistic, opening schools and clinics for the local people.¹⁰⁸

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) opened a mission station in Somalia in 1881 and started ministering to the Somali people.¹⁰⁹ The Cathedral in Mogadishu, built in 1928, was the biggest in Africa up until the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹⁰ According to Venanzio Francesco Filippini, the RCC Bishop of Mogadishu, there were 40,000 Somali Catholics in southern Somalia by 1940.¹¹¹ The entire Somali population in Somalia proper was estimated in 1940 to be about 1,150,000 according to the Italian colonial authority and 1,200,000 in 1950.¹¹² This makes the Somali Christians in 1940 to be about 3.5% of the population. This is a significant growth in a Muslim country where local Christians have not been statistically crucial in the last several decades. However, other competent voices like Bishop Giorgio Bertin, the RCC Bishop of Djibouti and the Apostolic Administrator of Somalia, doubt the high figure

¹⁰⁶ This article is reproduced with permission from Ali, Aweis A. “Courage in Our Conviction” in *SBS Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, version 2. Dec. 2020: 57-63.

¹⁰⁷ This mission organization changed its name a few times over the years but always kept is the acronym, SIM. It is known today as Serving In Mission.

¹⁰⁸ Abdurahman M. Abdullahi (Baadiyow), *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*, (Adonis & Abbey Publ. Ltd. 2015), 122. The name has been changed and the text modified for security reasons.

¹⁰⁹ Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, volume 1 (Brill Academic Publisher, 1991) 120.

¹¹⁰ “A Surprising History of Christianity in Somalia,” Alex of Esther Project (2017). <http://theestherproject.com/surprising-history-christianity-somalia/> (accessed 30 September 2017).

¹¹¹ Paolo Tripodi, *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia, Rome and Mogadishu: From Colonial Administration to Operation Restore Hope*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 66.

¹¹² “Catholic Hierarchy,” Diocese of Mogadiscio, (nd). <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dmgds.html> (accessed 26 April 2018).

of 3.5%.¹¹³

French fathers from the RCC started a high-profile ministry in the northern Somali village of Daymoole, near the port town of Berbera, in 1891 by opening an orphanage and a school.¹¹⁴ The RCC schools were expanded to southern Somalia with the financial support of the Italian colonial government in 1939.¹¹⁵

The Mennonite Mission (MM) entered Somalia in 1953 and the SIM in 1954.¹¹⁶ Unlike the low-profile mission work of the RCC, both the SIM and the MM demonstrated the proverbial missionary zeal.¹¹⁷ Both mission' organizations won numerous Somalis to the Lord within a short time. A Somali Muslim fanatic killed an MM missionary in Mogadishu in 1962. Merlin Grove was "only 33 years old when he was stabbed to death in Mogadishu, Somalia."¹¹⁸ The RCC was not spared martyrdom. Bishop Pietro Salvatore Colombo, 66, is the highest profile martyr this church has produced in Somalia. He was shot and killed in the Mogadishu Cathedral in 1989.¹¹⁹

The 2017 World Watch List places the Somali Church as the second most persecuted in the world.¹²⁰ This church often makes the infamous top two slots of the World Watch List.¹²¹ It has been on this list since 1992.¹²² According to Open Doors,¹²³ "The mere suspicion of one's having renounced Islam leads to a rushed public execution."¹²⁴ The most prominent Somali martyr is arguably pastor Liibaan

¹¹³ The Bishop made this claim in an e-mail communication with the researcher on April 17, 2019.

¹¹⁴ Abdurahman Moallim Abdullahi, "The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)." (PhD. Thesis, McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2011), 121.

¹¹⁵ Saadia Touval, *Somali Nationalism: International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa*, (Harvard University Press, 1st edition, 1963), 77.

¹¹⁶ Abdullahi "The Islamic Movement in Somalia," 21.

¹¹⁷ Abdullahi, "The Islamic Movement in Somalia," 111.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 129. See also: Ruth Myers. *When the Lights Go Out: Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia*, chapter 18: Murder in Mogadishu (Acorn Press, 2016)

¹¹⁹ "Taking the Catholic Pulse: Somalia one of world's great danger zones for Christians," Crux. (2016).

<https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/10/25/somalia-one-worlds-great-danger-zones-christians/>

¹²⁰ "World Watch List," *Open Doors USA*, (nd).

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/> (accessed 20 Feb 2017).

¹²¹ "World Watch List," *Christianity Today*, (2017)

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/january/top-50-countries-christian-persecution-world-watch-list.html> (accessed 3 July 2017).

¹²² "About Somalia," *Open Doors USA*, (nd).

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/somalia/> (accessed 30 September 2017).

¹²³ "About Somalia," *Open Doors USA*, (nd).

¹²⁴ J. Gordon Melton. *Faiths across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History [4 volumes]: 5,000 Years of Religious History*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. 1897. Kindle Version.

Ibraahim Hassan who was martyred in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1994.¹²⁵ One of the most prominent Somali Christians is the late Michael Mariano Ali who served his country as an elected member of parliament, cabinet member and an ambassador.¹²⁶ While the Somali constitution was tolerant of the tiny Christian population in the 1960s, the 2009 constitution was amended to make it Sharia Law compliant, thus adding insult to injury in the eyes of the already besieged Somali Christians.¹²⁷

Pastor Abtidoon is one of the oldest known Somali Christians in the world. Following is the interview I had with this eminent Somali pastor. The interview has been edited for space and clarity.

Interview

AAA: Tell me about your childhood.

Pastor: I was born in the Somali inhabited region of what is now North-East Kenya in 1932. My father died when I was about five years old. My mom raised me. I grew up herding cattle and camels in the Horn of Africa. No one could steal my camels. I was a fearsome warrior who would lay down his life for his cattle and camels. When I was about 19, a lion grabbed my favourite heifer in broad daylight in the North-East county of Wajer, Kenya. I seized the lion by the ear and then stabbed it in the neck with my double-edged dagger. The lion jumped off the heifer and groaned in pain. It disappeared into the forest.

AAA. How did your father die?

Pastor: My father was inside a shallow makeshift borehole collecting water for his cattle in the Afmadow district in southern Somalia. Two oxen fought at the mouth of the water well, and one of them fell into the borehole smashing my father to death.

AAA: When did the Lord find you and what challenges did you face as a new disciple?

Pastor: The Lord found me in 1969 after an American tourist had witnessed to me. Somali Muslims started persecuting me; relatives, neighbours, and even total strangers targeted me. My fellow Somalis could not comprehend the idea of a Somali Muslim leaving Islam, and following Jesus. To them, I committed religious treason, an apostasy. My Ogaden clan is known for their violence and religious fanaticism. I feared for my life, yet I was determined to stay with the Lord.

¹²⁵ Somalia - Trusteeship and Protectorate: The Road to Independence. Country Studies. Nd. <https://country-studies.com/somalia/trusteeship-and-protectorate:-the-road-to-independence.html> (accessed 31 March 2019).

¹²⁶ "Somalia," *Voice of Martyrs Canada*, (nd). Somalia. <https://www.vomcanada.com/somalia.htm> (accessed 30 September 2017). See also: "Somalia," US Department of State, (2011).

¹²⁷ "Ali burnt some people and this news reached Ibn 'Abbas, who said, "Had I been in his place I would not have burnt them, as the Prophet said, 'Don't punish (anybody) with Allah's Punishment.' No doubt, I would have killed them, for the Prophet said, 'If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him.'"

AAA: How are you still alive if so many people wanted to kill you for your Christian faith?

Pastor: I had kept a very low profile until 1971 when I started to share my new faith with my close family members openly. Like apostle Paul, the Lord has revealed himself to me and encouraged me not to waver in my walk with Jesus. My own Damascus Road encounter gave me extraordinary courage in my conviction. I was never the same.

AAA: Tell me about your birth family.

Pastor: My family are nomadic pastoralists. While they own cattle, sheep, and goats, they are best known for their camel herding prowess. My entire clan is also known for their pride; they believe they are the best people ever created by God! I belong to a warrior clan that is feared by many. While my clan could choose to kill me anytime, no one from another clan would have the guts to lay a finger on me because my Muslim clan will strike back with a vengeance. While my Ogaden clan protects me to this day, my sub-clan, Mohamed Subeyr, protects me the most.

AAA: Why would your Muslim clan protect a Christian convert whose punishment should be death according to the teachings of Islam?²²

Pastor: In popular Islam, the clan is more important than Islam! If a man from a different clan kills me, my clan would see that as humiliation because they could not protect one of their own from a rival clan. My clan is not protecting me as an individual, they are also protecting their honor.¹²⁸ My Ogaden clan is the most numerous clan of all Somali clans. We reside in Somalia, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and North-East Kenya.

AAA: Should Somalis continue being an integral part of their clan after the Lord finds them?

Pastor: Absolutely. This Somali proverb best illustrates my point, “both your shoes and your clan protect you.”¹²⁹ The Somali clan system is a mixed bag, but I like to focus on the positives. The clan system offers protection, social security, and a safety net for its members.

AAA: Were any of the Somalis whom the Lord found in your ministry martyred for their faith?

Pastor: I am aware of eight who were martyred in North-East Kenya.

AAA: I heard from multiple sources that you are the first known Somali to follow Jesus in

¹²⁸ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, translated by M. Muhsin Khan 4:52:260, (Kazi Pubns Inc1995). <http://cmje.usc.edu/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/052-sbt.php#004.052.260> (accessed 01 April 2019). See also: *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 9:89:27. <http://cmje.usc.edu/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/089-sbt.php#009.089.271> (accessed 09 May 2018). Arab Law Quarterly, vol. 13. No. 3, Brill, 1998. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i276475> (accessed 04 February 2019). Nomadic background Somali Christians martyred for their walk with the Lord in Somalia since 1991 were killed in regions where their clan is not the dominant one.

¹²⁹ *Tolkaaga iyo kobtaada dhexdaa looga jiraa.*

Kenya. Tell me about this.

Pastor: That is correct. There were no known Somali Christians in the Somali inhabited counties of North-East Kenya and the entire country of Kenya before the Lord found me. For decades, I was the only visible Somali Christian in Kenya.

AAA: What do expatriate missionaries ministering to the Somalis do well and what could they do better to be a better witness to the Somalis?

Pastor: Bringing the Gospel to my Somali people is a huge blessing. I am thankful for the sacrifices of expatriate missionaries to make Christ known to my people; they do this well. Expatriate missionaries often struggle to understand the Somalis. We are proud people and sometimes arrogant even when our stomachs are empty. Missionaries assume Somalis to be docile and humble because we are poor with limited formal education. They are shocked when they learn we are hawkish, proud, and sometimes egotistical. Many missionaries then get discouraged; they should not be disheartened because their sacrifices are bearing fruits.

AAA: How do the Somali Christians and missionaries see your ministry?

Pastor: Many of them think my strategy is too reckless because I share my faith very openly. I do not blame them! I preach with no fear. Many Somali Christians and missionaries believe that keeping a low profile in sharing the Gospel is the most effective way in this hostile environment. I must admit they have a point. Despite our different strategies, we serve the same Lord, and we pray for one another. I believe that what is inspired is the Gospel, not the strategy we employ to communicate it.

AAA: What has helped you the most to become mature and prominent minister of the Gospel?

Pastor: I joined a local church shortly after I was saved; this community of faith and the larger spiritual family in the denomination helped my faith to deepen. Many Somali Christians do not understand the value of a denominational family; mission workers with parachurch organizations often encourage new believers to attend Bible study groups and fellowships that often meet in the living rooms of these missionaries.¹³⁰

AAA: Why do you think missionaries with parachurch organizations do not often encourage new Somali believers to attend a local church in addition to the Bible studies and fellowships?

Pastor: Missionaries with parachurch organizations are often territorial; they do not want to lose their hard-earned fruits to a local church with its own denominational distinctive. So, these missionaries who do not share a theological persuasion or doctrinal unity isolate the new believers. This makes the new believers weak and confused. The mature Somali Christians I know belong to established local churches with denominational links. The weakest ones I know only attend intermittent Bible study and fellowship meetings held in the living rooms of missionaries with

¹³⁰ Ahmed Ali Haile and D. W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 111.

parachurch organizations.

AAA: Could you name one or two missionaries who had the most positive impact on your life and ministry?

Pastor: Yes. They are Larry and Debbie Kitchel of Christian Mission Aid.

AAA: How are the Kitchels different from most of parachurch organization missionaries?

Pastor: The Kitchels always knew their ministry was to strengthen the church, not to replace it or compete with it. The many African church leaders the Kitchels trained and equipped will agree with me.

AAA: Tell me one unforgettable favor the Kitchels did for you.

Pastor: The late Larry Kitchel once visited me when I worked in Nairobi; he asked me how he could best help my ministry. I requested from him about 200 Bibles to smuggle into Somalia for believers; he gave me 220 Bibles next time we met. I donated 20 of the Bibles to Somali believers in North-East Kenya. I put the remaining 200 Bibles on the back of a he-camel and started walking seventeen days from North-East Kenya all the way to the southern Somali port town of Kismayo. I donated some of the Bibles to believers in Kismayo and walked with my camel to Jamaame, Jilib, Wanlawein, Baidawa—all in southern Somalia—and finally Mogadishu. I blessed all the Somali believers I met with Bibles, and I prayed with them. I then walked back from Mogadishu to North-East Kenya. It was an epic journey; I cannot do that anymore. I am an old man.

AAA: What most excites you about the people of God?

Pastor: I sometimes see tourists, visitors, and other foreigners with no ministry assignment but they still share their faith with wisdom and courage. These Great Commission-minded believers excite me the most. I love them.

AAA: How could the community of faith pray for you?

Pastor: I need plenty of prayers for God's protection from the evil one. When Satan fails to undermine our relationship with the Lord, he targets our loved ones.

Epilogue

The Somali church is the product of a partnership between various innovative expatriate mission organizations, churches, and valiant Somali believers; it is this divine effort that gave birth to what is often described as the second most persecuted church in the world after North Korea. Expatriate mission workers do not only bring the Good News to the Somalis but also education, healthcare, impeccable work ethics and a host of other benefits. This is the holistic ministry that appeals to many Somali Muslims, some of whom become disciples of Christ. Many of the Somali Muslims who do not follow Jesus pick up some Christian values and develop a friendly attitude towards the Christian minorities.

While parachurch organizations like the SIM are overrepresented in the Somali ministry, church-based mission organizations like the MM most benefit the Somali ministry eventually because they can deliver their evangelistic message with consistent and coherent doctrines shared by all the mission workers. New Somali believers also learn the importance of belonging to a local church and to a larger denominational family. While parachurch organizations like the SIM lack this distinction of doctrinal unity, they still have a lot to offer to a people group that is Muslim majority. After all, Warren and Dorothy Modricker pioneered the modern mission work among Somalis in 1933. The Modrickers later joined the SIM and expanded the Somali ministry to the entire Somali peninsula. The Modrickers are considered as the First Family of the Somali Church. One would be hard-pressed to find a Somali Christian whose faith journey is not directly or indirectly traceable to the Modrickers.

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