

JANUARY-MARCH 2021 | VOLUME 57 ISSUE 1

# EMQ



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January–March 2021, Volume 57, Issue 1

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**EMQ (Evangelical Missions Quarterly)** is published quarterly for \$26.95 (US Dollars) per year by Missio Nexus, PO Box 398 Wheaton, IL 60187-0398.

Subscribe online at [MissioNexus.org/emq](https://MissioNexus.org/emq)

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# The Case for Denominationally Based Ministries Among Somalis

Aweis A. Ali

The purpose of this article is to highlight the benefits of denominational ministries among Somali people. There has been a trendy policy among some mission organizations since 1950s that insists on not planting denominational churches among Somalis but to encourage only generic Christianity with no denominational labels and foundation. Such mission organizations very rarely attempted even to call the fruits of their labour "churches" identifying them instead as "fellowships." Missionaries avoided calling the organized, regular gathering of Somali Christians "church" since recognizing the gathering as such could result in a community of faith with its own unified doctrinal and theological persuasions.

While the Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) had only thirty-nine years of ministry (1896–1935) in Somalia, it planted Lutheran local churches in the Jubaland regions of Somalia, especially in Jamaame, Mugaambo, and Jilib.<sup>1</sup> The SOLC ministry of starting Lutheran local churches was so effective that all the regions of Jubaland were on the verge of a church planting movement before the Italian colonial authority expelled SOLC. Likewise, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) was never in the business of generic Christianity; Roman Catholic ministries produced influential Somali Roman Catholics who won the admiration of Somali Muslims in the Somali peninsula because of their education, ethics, and patriotism.

A prominent Somali Roman Catholic political leader won multiple national parliamentary elections, once for the Somaliland parliament in Hargeisa and again for the united Somali parliament in Mogadishu. This trained lawyer also became a cabinet minister and a Somali ambassador to Zambia. He died in Mogadishu in 1985 and received a state funeral. Also, ethnic Somali Roman Catholics held prominent government positions in Djibouti and Ethiopia serving as parliamentarians, ambassadors, and cabinet ministers. The first governor of Djibouti's Central Bank was an ethnic Somali Roman Catholic.

The Anglican and the Mennonite churches have each produced one prominent Somali Christian. One was a colonel in the Somali National Army and a medical doctor. This well-known Somali Christian also served as an ambassador and an advisor to two Somaliland presidents. He died in Hargeisa in 2016 and received a state funeral. The other Christian was an academician and a peacemaker who was appointed by the

Somali government to a cabinet position in 1991; he declined the nomination. This eminent Christian leader and university professor died in 2011.<sup>2</sup>

While the Protestant mission organizations have led many Somalis to the Lord, the RCC ministries have historically been the most successful among Somali people. Somali Muslims even acknowledge the quality of their Muslim converts. The moniker "Catholic" remains a badge of honour among some Somali Muslims who include it in their names. The late Mogadishu-based Somali militia leader, Ciise Catholic, is a relevant example here. Ciise Catholic lived as a practicing Muslim and died as one; neither he nor his birth family had any Christian background though he deeply cherished his Catholic nickname.

The clear majority of Somali Christians belong to the Protestant wing of the church, but that is as far as their denominational identity goes. This vague "Protestant" label often promoted by some missionaries with interdenominational para-church organizations keeps the Somali Christians weak and disorganized. Some church-based para-church organizations buy into this generic Christianity strategy when they could have planted Somali churches with a solid denominational identity. The generic Christianity phenomena has disadvantaged the Somali Christians for decades.

## About Denominations

While denominations are not found in the Bible, they are a practical way to express Christian faith and heritage and hold one another accountable, lest we stray from the right path. There were no denominations prior to the Great Schism that divided the one universal Church into two: the

Roman Catholic church and Eastern Orthodox church in AD 1054. For the first time in history, Christians had a choice of which church and denomination to belong to and remain a true disciple of Christ. In 1517 the Protestant Reformation further introduced a third wing to the church. This third denomination further splintered into other denominations while they all stayed true to the five solae of the Protestant Reformation: *Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria.*

Seeing Bible believing denominations as different but valid ways to express our Christian faith and identity is perfectly fine, but what is not acceptable is to consider your own denomination as the only legitimate one and the rest as distractions from the true historical and traditional Christian faith. No membership in any denomination makes one born again; what makes one a disciple of Christ is their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Denominations are a badge of honour in Christian communities in the Somali peninsula, which is one more incentive for advocating for denominational identity. Denominations in this world area are known as a force for good and an incubator that promotes a high view of Scripture and the transformative authority of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Denominations are not unique to Christianity. Muslims have their own denominations as well. There is no generic Muslim among Somalis. Every Somali Muslim is a member of a Muslim denomination (*madhab*), and even possibly a religious order (*dariqa*). Somali Muslims take these Islamic denominations very seriously to the extent that leaving one's Muslim denomination is somewhat akin to denying their Islamic faith. Almost all Somali Muslims adhere to



the Shafi'i madhab (denomination) and jealously guard it. Somali Christians are therefore in their element when they too belong to a Christian denomination.

### The Reasoning

The interdenominational para-church organizations give an interesting reason as to why Somalis should not belong to denominational based churches. One central claim is that Somalis do not understand denominational loyalty and are not yet ready for such commitments. The Somali Roman Catholics have disproven this theory because their loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church is as deep as their clan identity.<sup>3</sup> The fallacy that Somalis are neither ready nor can comprehend a denominational loyalty became a self-fulfilling prophesy. Fifty-five years ago when the SIM and the Mennonite Mission (MM) agreed in Mogadishu not to support or establish a denominationally based Somali church, the Somali Christians were not impressed with this pact and most of them mobilized very quickly to join the Mennonite church on 02 May 1966.<sup>4</sup> This decision distressed the SIM director.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the MM and SIM deteriorated so much that the SIM director, "required that all contacts between Mennonites and SIM missionaries terminate,

even on the social level."<sup>6</sup> The MM and the SIM rift eventually healed to the demise of the nascent Somali Mennonite church.

The SIM disapproval of the union between the Somali Christians and the Mennonite church took its toll on the new church, which eventually disintegrated within a few years. There are of course other factors that may have contributed to the collapse of the nascent Somali Mennonite church other than the sustained SIM opposition. The early demise of one of the most promising denominationally based Somali churches brought discouragement to the Somali Christians who considered generic Christianity a dead-end cause.

An international denomination from the holiness tradition joined the Somali ministry in 1996 with the intension of planting denominationally based Somali local churches in the Somali peninsula. The success of this denomination attests to the fact that Somali Christians are both ready to and understand the benefits of belonging to a denomination which they liken to a large Christian clan. This denomination trained and mobilized Somali Christian ministers who facilitated the planting of creative access house-churches among Somalis in the Horn of Africa. During the first several years of ministry, this

denomination ordained 7 Somali Christians as ministers of the Gospel. This denomination understands that if a Christian ministry is to succeed among Somalis, trained and trustworthy Somali Christians must lead the ecclesiastical effort.

### Generic Versus Denominational Christians

The benefits of a denominational identity include impeccable accountability and assured orthodoxy since all main Christian denominations adhere to the basic tenets of the Christian faith. While Somalis are known for their independent and sometimes sectarian spirit, they remain communal to the core as demonstrated by their age-old clan system. The Somali clan structure is the only time-tested social safety net Somalis have. A denominationally based church is the closest thing to the Somali clan system with additional spiritual benefits.

The most committed and the most successful Somali Christians are those who have denominational roots. Such Christians understand the importance of belonging to a local church and the privileges and the responsibilities that come with a denominational relationship. Denominational Somali Christians also have a high level of biblical

literacy and are better informed about the necessity of ecumenical relationships between Bible believing churches.

The generic Somali Christians are often less committed, freewheeling, and more prone to heretical teachings because they lack a denominational heritage to guide them. Such unfortunate Somali Christians hop from one missionary to another to attend a fellowship or a Bible study when they feel like it; their Bible knowledge is often insubstantial.<sup>7</sup> Such Christians are often less Christ-like and are more susceptible to becoming rice Christians. Interdenominational para-church organizations which create and sustain generic Christianity recognize the pitfalls but lack the determination and the sacrificial commitment to change the impotent status quo.

Somali Christians have the capacity to understand and appreciate denominational allegiance. It is the responsibility of interdenominational para-church organizations not to sabotage when Somali Christians decide to belong to a Bible believing denomination as happened in Mogadishu in 1966.<sup>8</sup> Such sabotages did not end in 1966, they still rear their ugly heads each time a denominationally based Somali church seems viable or generic Christians decide to belong to a denominational church. Some interdenominational para-church organizations that minister among Somalis are privy to the reality that they are not churches and thus cannot start denominationally based churches but they will still object to other churches or denominationally based para-church organizations to establish their own churches among Somalis.

Generic Christianity has taken a toll on the Somali Christians who were led to believe it was a viable alternative to historical Christianity. Somali Muslims are by nature generous to their Muslim religious leaders and to their mosques. No mosque pays Muslims a bus fare to attend prayers, yet mosques are often full of worshippers. When these Somali Muslims become followers of Christ, a sense of entitlement often develops and it becomes very hard to convince them to financially support their ministers and their places of worship. In fact, many generic

Somali Christians will not regularly attend worship unless the missionaries pay them bus fares, rent subsidy, scholarship, or an employment.<sup>9</sup> Where did this mind-set come from? Somalis in the RCC and others who belong to denominational local churches do not have this entitlement problem. Generic Christianity is the problem, not the solution.

### Conclusion

It is time to encourage Somali denominationally based Bible believing churches. Denominational labels are beneficial to Somalis because they are an expression of the genuine revelation of God that protects people from perishing. Since the clear majority of Somali Christians are from a Muslim background, they are at home when they are denominationally connected. It is therefore imprudent to expect Somali Christian converts to be generic Christians, without a denominational base, and at the same time expect them to be grounded in their new Christian faith. For the benefit of the Somali Christians, interdenominational para-church organizations should assist existing denominationally based churches to be a better witness to their communities.

It is counterproductive for interdenominational para-church organizations to perpetuate the debunked myth that Somali Christians are not ready for denominationally based identity. It is also morally indefensible when expatriate para-church organizations collaborate to thwart the emergence of a denominationally based Somali church even when such emergence is the will of the Somali Christians. The expatriate Protestant mission organizations must learn from the Roman Catholic Church and acknowledge the reality that the Somali Christians are very comfortable with denominational identity like other Christian people groups in Africa. After all, the Somali people were exposed to the Gospel much earlier than some other Sub-Saharan countries. Christianity among Somalis predates both Islam and the modern missionary witness by centuries.<sup>10</sup> This fact undercuts the Somali Muslims' claim that to be a Somali is to be a Muslim.<sup>11</sup>

Sectarianism has no place in the church.

Despite differences in denominational emphasis, Christians are united by one Lord, and one baptism. Disciples of Christ are one people called out by God to worship him and be His witness; they cannot afford to fracture. A poignant example is when America's founding fathers were to sign the Declaration of the Independence in 1776, Benjamin Franklin is attributed to have said, "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." The same admonition should be heeded by Bible believing Christians of different denominations. They must sustain the ecumenical spirit at any cost or they will fall prey to the father of lies. ☞

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### Notes

1. Abdurahaman M. Abdullahi, *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*, Illustrated Edition (London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd, 2015), 110.
2. David W. Shenk and Ahmed Ali Haile, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 94.
3. The Somali clan system provides its members essential services that the state is either unable or unwilling to provide. Such services include, protection, visitations, financial assistance for medical care and marriages. Such finances are collected from other clan members in the form of qaraan, clan wide contributions. As the Somali proverb says, *tolkaaga iyo kobtaada dhexdaa loogaa jiraa* (stay in your shoes and stay in your clan. As shoes protect your feet, your clan protects all of you.)
4. Helen Miller, *The Hardest Place: The Biography of Warren and Dorothy Modrick* (Canada: Essence Publishing, 2006), 196.
5. Miller, *The Hardest Place*, 196.
6. David W. Shenk, "A Study of Mennonite Presence and the Church Development in Somalia from 1950 Through 1970" (Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, School of Education, 1972), 281.
7. Shenk and Haile, *Teatime*, 71.
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9. Shenk, *Mennonite Presence*, 368.
10. Ben I. Aram, "Somalia's Judeo-Christian Heritage: A Preliminary Survey" in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 4 (2003): 3.
11. Ali Abdirahman Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History: The Origins and Development of Arab Enterprise and Cultural Influences in the Somali Peninsula" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 1977), 109.



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