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# Still Building Bridges

*Daniel S. Sormani, CSSp*

Shortly before I left the Philippines for home visit back in the States, I received an invitation from the North American Lay Spiritans to be a part of their Annual Meeting in Bethel Park. I was especially happy because their chosen theme was “Building Bridges: Facilitating Muslim-Christian Dialog”. That is an imperative for us all today, and something I have been involved in for the better part of my life: first growing up in the heavily Arab section of Brooklyn, then in the wonderful years of my first assignment in Algeria, and now here on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao.

This island was, until the late 1920’s, a land of Muslim tribes divided into different Sultanates. Even the American government made treaties with the Sultans in its effort to overthrow Spanish rule and then put down the Filipino revolt. But the constant arrival of settlers from the northern Christian islands, as well as governors and mayors appointed and sent from the Christian north, quickly made this island one with a vast Christian majority. But it is the Muslim community that has its roots and culture here.

## **Two separated communities**

So tensions and suspicions run high. The two communities run parallel, and on a personal level almost never meet. At school or at work they can be great friends, but they will not spend an evening in each other’s home or be part of each other’s personal life. “It’s not done,” everyone tells me. Even the neighbourhoods are spoken of as “Muslim area” or “Christian neighbourhood.”

Shortly after arriving here, I was invited by a French priest to join a group he founded in 1992 after a series of violent incidents which were seen as deliberate attempts by some “interest groups” to again sow terror and enmity among Muslims and Christians in our area. These incidents included the 1992 Easter Sunday bombing



of the St. Michael Cathedral in Iligan, the subsequent massacre of a whole Muslim family in the same city, and a series of random killings, victimizing poor Muslims and Christians. So the Ranao Muslim-Christian Movement for Dialog and Peace (RMCMDP) was born, brought to life by concerned religious leaders and educators from both confessions. We meet monthly, alternating between Iligan City, a mixed city of Christian majority, and the Muslim city of Marawi.

## **Coming together**

As an active catalyst for dialog and peace, the movement issues statements and, more importantly, offers its members as partici-

pants or resource persons in peace seminars, dialogs and conferences. Together, we assist the underprivileged, disadvantaged and marginalized in the area through sustainable development programs, and we do our best to promote non-violent means of conflict resolution, management and transformation. Among other things, I have been part of on-going conferences in the Muslim university in Marawi, speaking to students and teachers on the Christian view of reconciliation and peace.

The most important thing for me is that we witness to the very real possibility of friendship and collaboration. Not all our meetings are “discussion and planning”. We’ve gone to the beach, had barbecues, and worked on our Ping-Pong game together! Most of the ulama (religious leaders) have studied in Egypt for many years, and so we usually speak in Arabic. I remember when my Mom died; they all lined up and recited verses from the Quran, and shared traditional blessings and condolences in Arabic. They were truly family.

One of my favorite parts of our monthly meetings is the prayer we have together, both at the beginning and at the close. One is led by a Muslim, the other by a Christian. Together we struggle against violence, dispossession, discrimination, and domination in a cultural, economic, social, political and physical sense. We pledge the best of ourselves to help make the world a brighter, happier, more peace-filled place. When I see us all together, happy to be together, I know we have begun to realize just that. ■