

RELIGION

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RCA chief calls Middle East meet a milestone

OMAN'S LEADERS WELCOME CHURCH OFFICIALS

BY CHARLES HONEY
PRESS RELIGION EDITOR

As he spoke about religious issues with leaders of the Reformed Church in America, the sultan of Oman recalled a vivid childhood memory: being inoculated by an RCA medical missionary in the 1940s.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said's recollection of Dr. Wells Thoms underscored the RCA's long history of humanitarian work in the Middle East and symbolized the promise of warmer Christian-Muslim relations.

The encounter came during a historic meeting last week between six RCA leaders and political and religious rulers in Oman.

The RCA's top official called his meeting with the sultan a milestone in the denomination's relations with the Muslim world.

"This was, by far, the most extraordinary encounter with any head of state I've ever experienced," said the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the 284,000-member RCA. "It was quite moving."

Granberg-Michaelson flew from his office at RCA regional headquarters in Gaines Township to Oman and Bahrain, countries where the Reformed Church has done medical, education and mission work for more than a century.

He also met with Sheikh Abdullah al Salimi, Oman's minister of religious affairs, who invited the delegation after speaking to the RCA General Synod last summer. U.S. Ambassador Richard Baltimore III and four European diplomats joined in a discussion that touched on Christian-Muslim tensions.

"We were able to have a discussion about the fact that, in today's world, you can't have peace between nations if you're not able to establish peace between religions," Granberg-Michaelson said.

The Rev. Bruce Menning, RCA director of global mission, two seminary



The Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson



RCA ARCHIVES PHOTO

A gift: RCA General Secretary the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson last week presents a framed photo of early RCA missionaries meeting with the royal family in 1900 to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said in Oman.

CHURCH HAS LONG HISTORY IN REGION

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deans and two pastors traveled with him on the weeklong trip.

The visit continued the RCA's commitment to the Middle East, where it has maintained missionaries since 1889. That year, seminary graduates James Cantine and Sam Zwemer established a mission outpost in Basra, Iraq.

Over the next 20 years, the RCA set up stations in Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

Early efforts focused on building hospitals and medical clinics. Although most facilities eventually were turned over to the governments, the RCA still maintains the American Mission Hospital in Bahrain.

The RCA-founded National Evangelical Church of Bahrain celebrated its 100th anniversary this year, and RCA-sponsored teachers work at the Raja School there.

In Oman, the RCA operates the Al Amana Centre aimed at improving Christian-Muslim understanding. The Rev. Michael Bos trains military chaplains there and oversees visits of students from Holland's Western Theological Seminary.

Bos is a graduate of Western Seminary and of Grand Valley State University. He grew up in Caledonia and served as executive pastor of Sunshine Com-

munity Church, a Christian Reformed congregation, from 1991 to 1994.

The Al Amana Centre is able to pursue interreligious education and dialogue because of the sultan's "larger vision," Bos wrote in an e-mail.

"He recognizes that we live in an age of globalization, and our futures are now interdependent and interconnected," Bos wrote.

Granberg-Michaelson said the center affords the RCA a rare forum for understanding in the Middle East.

"Within a Muslim country, to have a center like this that is so strongly affirmed by the government is a tremendous opportunity," Granberg-Michaelson said. "It's a society really committed to religious diversity, freedom and pluralism."

Since taking power in 1970, Sultan bin Said has modernized the nation of 3 million on the tip of the Arabian peninsula. Granberg-Michaelson sees Oman as an example to the West of how a Muslim society can embrace progress and religious tolerance.

He found al Salimi, the minister of religious affairs, eager to learn more about American Christianity.

Al Salimi knows the RCA is biblically rooted but not "right-

DR. WORRAL REV. S. M. ZWEMER REV J. CANTINE MRS. BARNY REV H. J. WIERSUM



DR. AND MRS. THOMS KATHRINA MRS ZWEMER REV F J. BARNY

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARABIAN MISSIONARIES.

TAKEN BY MUHSIN PASHA, JAN. 1900.

RCA ARCHIVES PHOTO

Trailblazers: In 1889, RCA seminary graduates James Cantine and Sam Zwemer, seen above, established the church's first Middle East mission outpost in Basra, Iraq.

wing extremist," Granberg-Michaelson said.

"The RCA is seen as a major point of linking to the Christian world and to the United States," he said.

The RCA's long history in

the region provides firm ground to honestly discuss differences and build cooperation, he added.

"We've demonstrated the real meaning of Christian faith within that culture and society

over the years, so we have the ability to really speak and listen. That's pretty rare in today's world and is desperately needed."

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