Proposal on Project for Peace

in

Kemissie, Ethiopia (Summer 2007)

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Christians and Muslims have a long history of co-existing peacefully in Ethiopia. However, since the conflict between the West and Islamic fundamentals started to make headlines around the world, religious intolerance and sectarian violence are surfacing all over the country. Kemissie, a small town which is located about 325 Kms north of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia and whose population is dominantly Muslim is one of many towns that have had such experience. Like in many other places, the terrorist act of 9/11 marked a sharp turning point in the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Kemissie. It was obvious that some “popular” Arab satellite TV stations such as Aljaazera have played a significant role in spreading extremist feelings among Muslims of all age groups in the town. I remember how quickly things started to change shortly after 9/11. T-shirts and watches decorated with pictures of Osama Bin Laden became fashionable among many Muslims; some people named their newly born children with uncommon names such as Osama; frequency of Muslim prayers in public places including schools, which quickly became the cause of confrontations between school authorities and the Muslim youth, increased dramatically. These new trends caused fear and confusion among the Christian minorities in the town. These developments eventually led to a bloody conflict between Muslims and Christians in January 2002 on the day Christians were celebrating Epiphany. In this conflict many people mostly Christians were injured and a huge amount of property was destroyed.

After this incidence, all the government did was deploying more police force in the town. While this improved the security of the Christian minorities, it never helped defuse the cloud of miss-trust and hatred between the two parties. In my opinion, the only solution to the problem is dialogue but no one has ever made an attempt to get people talk about the problem. I left Kemissie in August 2003 when I won scholarship to study at United World Colleges (UWC) in Norway, where I was exposed to so many new views/issues. One of the most valuable lessons I have learned from my experience in UWC is the value of dialogue. While I was at UWC, I have seen students from Israel and Palestine sitting around a table and talking about peace; I have attended a joint presentation and discussion led by a Serbian student and a student from Kosovo. What these two examples have in common is that the participants in the dialogues disagree on a lot of issues but they all truly believe that dialogue is still the best and the only option they have to solve their problems. I also believe that the only choice Kemissie has to overcome its challenges is dialogue and by working closely with the people on the ground, I would like to contribute all I can to cure its ill.

After reading my draft proposal on a peace project for Kemissie, two of my high school teachers and three of my friends have expressed interest to participate in the project. All of them still live in Kemissie and are active members in their community. They also represent the two religions proportionately. Their roles in the project are briefly explained below under “Week III and IV (Workshop Period).” The details of the project proposal are the following:

**Week I and II (Preparation Period)**

1. I and the five people that are going to be working with me will spend the first two weeks preparing the grounds for the actual project. This will include:
   - Publicizing the project
   - Finding a meeting place to rent
   - Renting DVD players, TV etc.
   - Purchasing materials (stationary, refreshments, stage materials etc.)
   - Recruiting 20 motivated and talented high school and university students from both religions (10 from each religion). Since the participants on the project will be taken on a tour as part of their learning experience, the participants or their parents will be required to sign a liability agreement.
   - Studying the materials that we are going to use in the workshops (Explained below)
   - Reviewing the outline of the project
   - Deciding on who to invite as guest speakers at the workshops
   - Meeting with different people (local government officials, religious leaders and prominent individuals in the town) that might be able to help us
Week III and IV (Workshop Period)

2. We will have two week-long intensive workshops and discussions in order to help the students get a better understanding about the history of Christianity and Islam, the relationship between the followers of the two religions now and then, human rights, religious freedom, conflict resolution etc. We will make sure the students seriously think and talk about the problems Kemissie is facing and challenge them to come up with innovative ideas to help the town but the discussions will not be limited to a local issue!

- **Nigussie Mihiretu** (History teacher, Christian) will lead workshops on historical aspects of religion as well as global current affairs with the focus on the politics of religion.
- **Girma Ali** (Civic Education teacher, Muslim) will lead workshops on human rights, religious freedom, conflict resolution etc.
- **Dereje Gudeta** (myself, Christian) in addition to facilitating the six-week-long project, I will share my experience in UWC and the United States with the students to help them think about the ways they can put together all the knowledge they get from their experience and share it with their community. I will also be responsible in organizing educational and fun games and various activities to help the students socialize with and learn from one another.
- **Mahmoud Jemal** (Muslim), **Jemal Mohamed** (Muslim) and **Mirimir Endale** (Christian) will be responsible to assist me in facilitating the project. They are all university students.

Week V (Tour Period)

3. We will take the students on a tour to one sacred Christian site and an Islamic sacred site (both sites have been recognized by UNESCO as “world heritage sites”). During the tour the students will have the opportunity to interact with each other and other people they meet at the sites. This will help them understand the two religions better. The two sites are:

- **Lalibella (The New Jerusalem)**: are famous groups of rock hewn churches curved out of rock in the 12th century in an attempt to recreate Jerusalem in Ethiopia.
- **Harar**: is a walled town located in eastern part of Ethiopia which is considered by some people the fourth sacred Islamic site in the world. There are 82 mosques in Harar alone.

Week VI (Reflection Period)

4. After the tour, the students will have the opportunity to work with each other and reflect on what they have learned from their experience using art and literature (music, drama, painting, drawing, poems etc.) At the end of the sixth week, the students will put on a show/exhibition for the residents of the town. We believe one week should be long enough to put everything together since every student will be encouraged to keep a personal diary starting from day one and also work in groups to think about the best way of presenting what they gained out of their experience. Following the show/exhibition, we will have a panel discussion in which religious leaders and other prominent individuals in the town take part.

This project might not cure the ill of the town over night but we are confident that it will bring Kemissie one step forward. At the end of this peace project, we hope the experience will have a positive impact on the lives of the participants as well as the life of their highly divided community. We also believe that the participants in this project will be able to create strong bond with each other which will enable them form a legally recognized Youth Leadership Group and continue to work together to advocate peace and religious harmony even after the six-week-long project is over. During and after the project, we plan to explain the importance of such youth-driven projects for the good of the town to local business-men, local government officials, religious leaders and other stakeholders and hopefully convince them to support the participants on this project in logistics and moral so that they can continue playing a pivotal role in developing and experimenting similar projects in the future. We also would like to have the national TV and Radio cover this event so that other towns and cities that have similar problems can learn from our experience.
Rough budget for the project

- Digital camera and accessories $350
- Video camera and accessories $500
- Honoria for individuals who help us the most (Eg. Guest speakers) $600
- Bus tickets (tour) $1,200
- Hotel rooms (tour) $1,000
- Food (tour) $1,100
- Tour guide fees $200
- Refreshments (workshop) $500
- T-shirts for participants (≈ 26) $250
- Round trip ticket to Ethiopia and back $1,800
- Stationary and materials to be used for art and publicity $600
- Books, movies, documentaries etc (I am currently doing research on what kind of materials we may need to use) $500
- Fees for renting meeting place, auditorium, musical instruments etc $900
- Raffled prizes to encourage people to come to the final show/exhibition $300
- Other expenses $200

Total $10,000

Note: The figures in the budget proposal represent the rough estimates I came up with after doing a little research and consulting with all of the five individuals that will be working with me on the project. I believe the $10,000 grant from philanthropist Kathryn Wasserman Davis will be enough to finance the project but I am also willing to make a personal contribution of up to $1,000 from my service scholarship fund (Bonner scholars program) just in case we needed more money to complete the project successfully.