



Letter from Abu Dhabi

Recognizing and Respecting Ramadan

By Pam Mandich

Imagine no food, no drink, not even a sip of water, from sunrise to sunset every day for a month.

Imagine getting up around 4:30 a.m. and fasting until about 7 p.m. This is what it is like for Muslims as they observe holy month of Ramadan.

Why do they do this? For those who practise the religion of Islam, Ramadan is a time to focus away from the body, the self and the material world. Fasting forces you to experience what many in the rest of the world face every day, building compassion and understanding for those less fortunate than you. It helps you appreciate what you have.

But Ramadan is also a time of giving and sharing what you have with others. Families and neighbours often exchange food for their evening meals. One taxi driver told me his boss lets him keep all the fares he earns during Ramadan. Giving to charity is emphasized, much as it is at Christmas.

First and foremost Ramadan is a time to get closer to God. It marks the time on the Islamic calendar when the prophet Mohammed received the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, from the Angel Jibril (Gabriel). During Ramadan, many people make a concerted effort to read and recite the Qur'an and concentrate on celebrating their beliefs.

For most people who live in Canada or any non-Muslim country, the observances of this month will be invisible. But for me and other non-Muslims living in a Muslim country, they are anything but. While we may not follow them ourselves, we are expected to show respect for those who do.

There are no restaurants, coffee shops or food courts open during the day and there is no eating or drinking or smoking in public, although some offices with large non-Muslim populations have a room where you can eat or drink. Office hours are shorter to compensate for the lack of food and sleep, and everything gets done at a much slower pace. Drivers need to be more careful, as tired and hungry people are not the best drivers. Malls, usually bursting with activity, look like ghost towns in the daytime.

But at night, the world comes alive. Restaurants compete to offer the best Iftar (the meal that breaks the fast). Most places offer tantalizing arrays of food, including many items you will see only during Ramadan. Malls overflow with people shopping and eating well into the night. Families spend time together, sharing meals and visiting.

The end of Ramadan is marked by Eid ul Fitr, a three day celebration when people go to the mosque to pray, dressed in their best clothes. All those who can afford it are expected to donate to the poor, often contributing food items which are collected and distributed by the mosque, before sharing meals and enjoying special foods with their families.

So as I struggle to not drink water outside during the day when temperatures are around 42 degrees, I try to follow the example of the Muslims surrounding me and recognize just how lucky I am. Ramadan Mubarak! (Happy Ramadan).

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Mennonite World Conference

In July, Andy and Joanna Reesor-McDowell attended the Mennonite World Conference in Paraguay, a gathering that brought together 5,800 Mennonites and other Anabaptists from 60 different countries.

"Andy was on the council, which is made up of representatives from all the areas where Mennonites live," explained Joanna. The couple has travelled to many countries as church representatives and supporters of an international child development project, linked with Andy's work, called Learning through Play.

"Our recent trip to Paraguay reminded me again how fortunate we are to live in Canada and how much we take our infrastructure and government services for granted," said Joanna. "I feel impatient if I hear a Canadian complain about high taxes or speak as if we get nothing for our money."

But her gratitude is tempered by her awareness of others' difficulties. "We met Mennonites living in economically deprived and politically oppressive and unstable countries. It is unjust that we have so many comforts, and they have so many challenges in their lives."

Today there are more Mennonites in Africa and Asia than in Europe and North America, she noted. "I celebrate the increasing diversity of our church. It will gradually help dispel the stereotypes about who Mennonites are, for example, the idea in some parts of North America that Mennonites are people of German-speaking background who drive

horse and buggies and eat pie and sausages."

Mennonites are united internationally by acceptance of the Anabaptist understanding of the Christian faith, a movement that emerged out of the turmoil of the Protestant Reformation in Europe during the 1500s. While sharing central Christian doctrines they also believed in adult baptism, pacifism and the importance of community, including economic sharing, explained Joanna.

The Paraguay conference renewed Joanna's interest in the Russian Mennonites. "A group of Mennonites fleeing persecution in Central Europe migrated to Russia in the 1700s at the invitation of Catherine the Great," she said. Their colonies began to thrive until the advent of the Russian Revolution. "During the years following they were assaulted with massacres, famine, typhoid epidemics and the terrors of the Stalinist years, when many men were taken to slave labour camps in Siberia."

A significant number found refuge in Paraguay, where they experienced acute hardship in the unforgiving climate of the Chaco, the land they were given by the government. "Their story is one of overcoming adversity. The Mennonite communities in Paraguay now produce 80 per cent of the country's dairy products, and provide employment to 10,000 aboriginal people on their farming cooperatives."

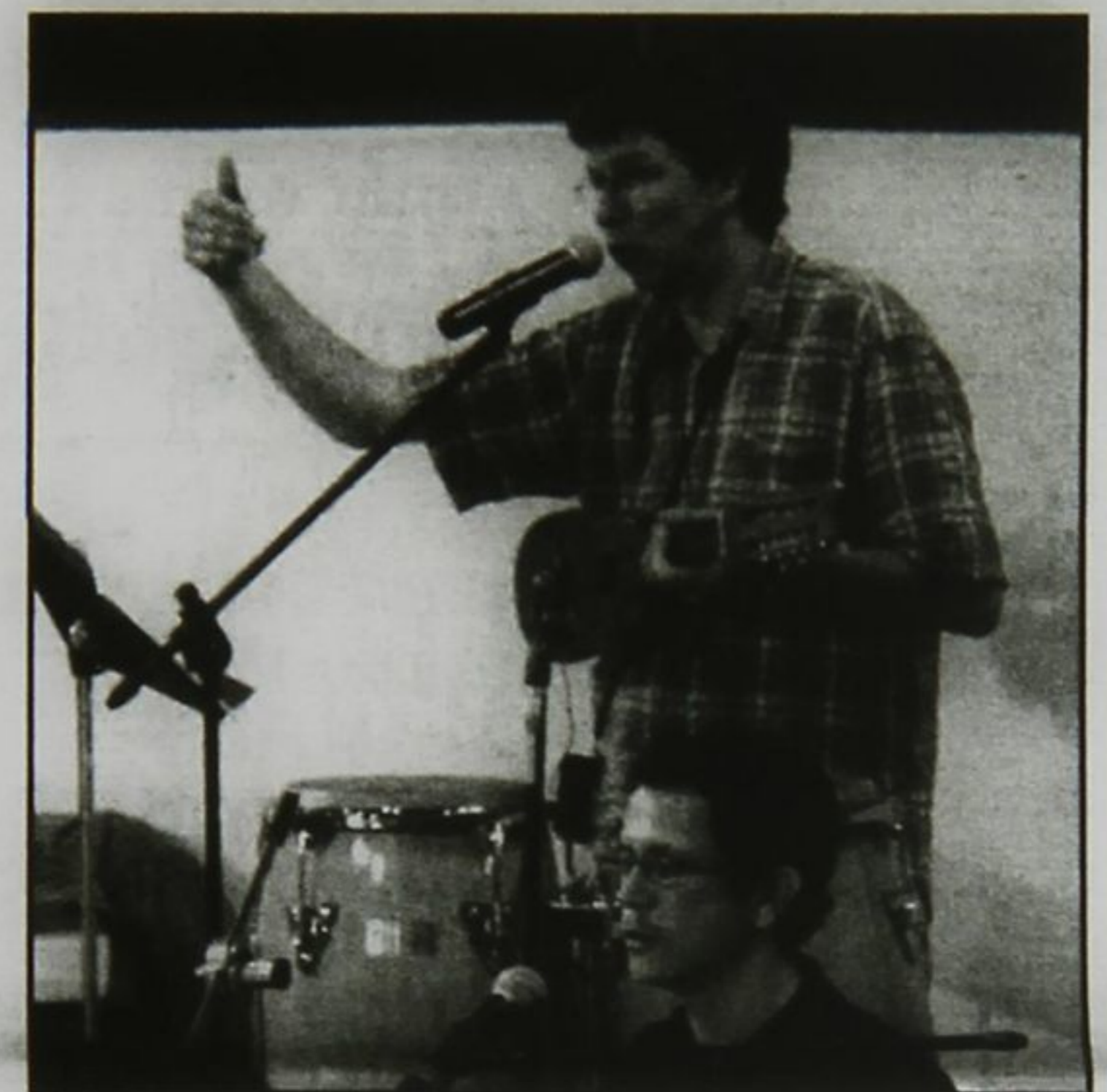
Joanna was particularly affected by a ceremony which took place during the last worship service at

the conference. "Fifty years ago, a young Mennonite man was speared to death by a young warrior while working in missionary outreach to a tribe of indigenous people in Paraguay," she said. "The warrior, now an elderly chief of his tribe in the northern Chaco, presented the spear to the victim's brother in an act of reconciliation. They embraced as Christian brothers."

Music was another conference highlight, and was led by a 15-member international team that included Bryan Moyer Suderman, a composer and musician from Stouffville,

who was attending his third Mennonite World Conference. "It was an amazing experience, with such a diverse group," said Bryan. "Sometimes people sang the same song in different languages at the same time."

He wrote the theme song for the Paraguay conference, *Tengan La Mente De Cristo* which is featured on his latest CD, *A New Heart*. "It's based on the theme text of the assembly, which was Philippians 2:1-11," he said. The song is available as a free download from Bryan's website www.smalltallmusic.com.



Stouffville composer and singer Bryan Moyer Suderman (top) wrote the theme song for the Mennonite World Conference this summer in Paraguay. The song is featured on his latest CD, *A New Heart*.

Raising A Glass To Whistle Radio

By Jim Priebe

Another great show is coming your way on The Whistle! Tune into 102.7 FM at 4 p.m. on Saturdays for *The Pub*.

Host Bill Perrie knows his stuff. He is the author of several books including *Pub Lover's Guide to Ontario* and *Craft Brewers of Ontario* and promises a beer show that will be educational and fun. Now there's a mouthful! The first show on Sept. 5 features special guest Alan Connelly, a Juno award winner who plays with Toronto-based band Glass Tiger. Don't miss it.

Ryan "Fabs" Fabro will be back in September for his fifth season of calling Spirit Hockey play-by-play. Check out whistleradio.com for our broadcast schedule.



Author and beer connoisseur Bill Perrie will host a weekly show on Whistle Radio, starting at 4 p.m. Sept. 5.



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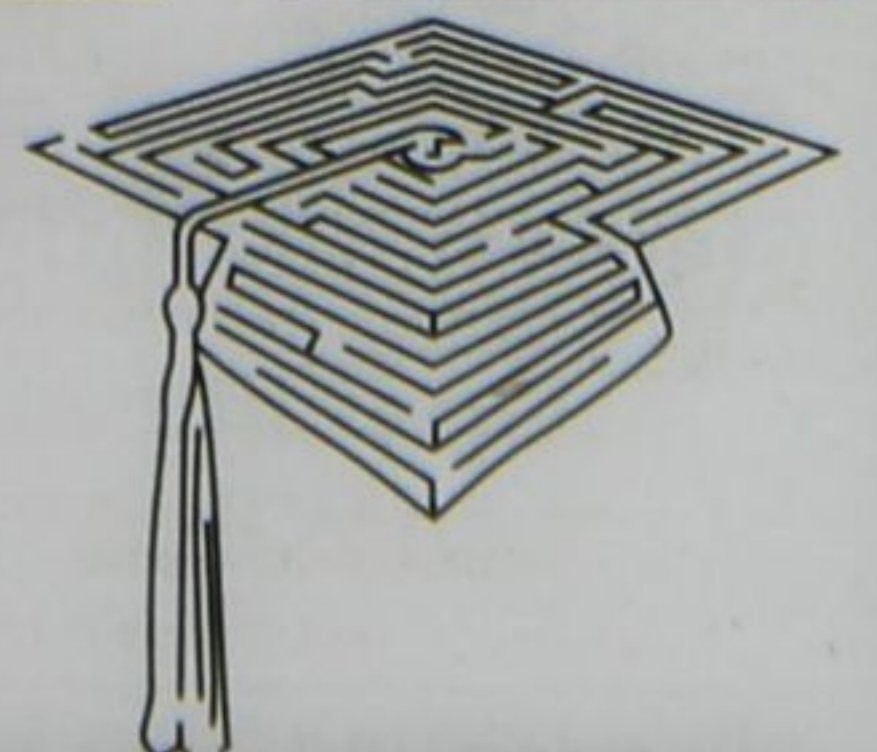


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