



Connecting Faith and Life

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Session at a Glance

Many are deeply troubled by the horrific violence demonstrated by ISIS. What is ISIS? What issues are at stake as we seek ways to address their actions? How does our faith help us sort through these issues?

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ISIS

by Peter Surran

ISIS? ISIL? Islamic State?

Recent news reports have been filled with stories of horrific violence committed by a terrorist organization that calls itself the “Islamic State” but has been called the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) and the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL). It is important to discuss the meaning behind those names and what they tell us about this group, but first it must be acknowledged that the group is responsible for some very disturbing and horrifying acts of violence.

On October 2, 2014, the United Nations issued a report detailing some of the acts for which the group is being blamed. “These include attacks directly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, executions and other targeted killings of civilians, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual and physical violence perpetrated against women and children, forced recruitment of children, destruction or desecration of places of religious or cultural significance, wanton destruction and looting of property, and denial of fundamental freedoms,” according to the report. We in the United States might have heard of some of these atrocities, but the ones that have captured the most attention in this country have involved the beheading of American captives.

On September 9, 2014, a video was released by ISIS showing the beheading of journalist Steven Sotloff. This was the second such video, following one about a month earlier of the execution of journalist James Foley. Who is this group that resorts to such awful measures in promoting their cause? Why have there been different names for them in the media coverage? How did they develop?

In a September 13, 2014, broadcast, National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* gave a description of the different acronyms used to identify the group and what they mean. According to the report, the decision to call them ISIS or ISIL depends on how you translate the Arabic word *al-Sham*, which refers to the Levant, “an area that extends beyond the current borders of the Syrian State and into Lebanon and even Palestine and Jordan.” ISIL, then, is how the US government refers to the group, but most media outlets have chosen to go with a translation of that Arabic word that refers only to part of Syria, so it’s ISIS in the major news outlets.

The members of the group, however, have tried to rebrand themselves by dropping all geographic references in their name. They want simply to be called the Islamic State. This change emphasizes

Core Bible Passages

It would be a mistake to ignore the existence of violent passages in Scripture, particularly in Old Testament stories about the conquest of Canaan and in some of the prescriptions of the Law that require stoning as a punishment for a variety of transgressions (**Joshua 6:21; Leviticus 20:27**). Also, **Revelation** has some scary images (see **Chapter 6** as an example). It would be good for Christians, therefore, to think twice before basing a characterization of another religion as inherently violent on a verse of their scripture divorced from the entire witness of the book.

For example, we believe that, contrary to the passages cited above, the overwhelming witness of the Bible is that God desires to reign in peace and love over all the earth. **Isaiah 65:17-25** proclaims God's vision for "a new heaven and a new earth," where "wolf and lamb will graze together" and no one will "hurt or destroy." The Gospels teach that Jesus' first message as he roamed the hillsides of Galilee was, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" (**Matthew 4:17**).

The ethics of that kingdom are presented in the Sermon on the Mount, **Matthew 5-7**, and in summary form in the Beatitudes (**5:3-12**). During the Crucifixion, at his lowest point, Jesus showed the "default mode" of his heart when, instead of condemning or threatening those responsible, he uttered the words recorded in **Luke 23:34**. How does this witness of Scripture, then, influence the way we respond to acts of terror?

what the group actually wants to do: establish an *Islamic* state—"a physical state that aims to expand its borders."

ISIS began as an Al-Qaida off-shoot in Iraq following the US invasion in 2003. It is made up of Sunni Muslims, a minority group in Iraq (see the sidebar "Diversity Within Islam"). In 2006, the group's second leader, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, changed the name of the group from Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) to ISIL in order to highlight the group's territorial ambitions. The group has exploited unrest in Iraq and Syria to become more and more powerful over the years since their founding.

The World Responds

The rise in power and influence of ISIS, along with their violent extremism, has sparked a variety of responses. Most notably, the United States and other nations have begun air strikes to assist Iraqi soldiers in preventing the group from taking over more territory. These air strikes expanded from Iraq to Syria on September 23, 2014.

Several Arab nations have participated in the strikes, including Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. This fact alone illustrates the truth that even though the group prefers to call itself the Islamic State, not all Muslims condone the violence they perpetrate. Recently, some prominent Muslim clerics have issued *fatwas*, or edicts, condemning ISIS. One of them is Abdullah bin Bayyah, who heads a group called the new "Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies." He calls for "dialogue about the true tenets of Islam and, over the course of many pages, questions just about everything for which ISIS says it stands."

Other such statements have been made against ISIS. Vatican Radio reports that an organization representing 57 nations and 1.4 billion Muslims issued a statement condemning ISIS' attacks on Christians in Iraq, saying "they have nothing to do with Islam and its principles that call for justice, kindness, fairness, freedom of faith and coexistence." The same report stated that the top Muslim cleric in Turkey also made comments condemning the violence.

Issues Raised by ISIS

What issues arise as people of faith struggle to address the violence ISIS brings in its wake? First, it is important to understand that as sensational and frightening as the acts committed by ISIS are, as with all terrorist groups, we must recognize that they do not represent all of the adherents of Islam; nor do all of these adherents approve of the violence the group is committing. This point was emphasized in the previous section by describing the anti-ISIS and violence statements made by prominent Muslim clerics. It needs to be reiterated, however, because in some facets of the media, negative portrayals of Islam are being painted in very broad strokes.

This is not just happening on "the right." A recent debate by actor Ben Affleck and comedian Bill Maher, both well-known for their liberal

Diversity Within Islam

When hearing news reports about the Middle East, you might hear the names of different groups within Islam. The main division within the religion is between the Sunni and Shia groups. The Sunnis comprise the majority of the world's Muslims, between 85 and 90 percent. This group believes itself to be in line with what Muhammed, the founder of Islam, taught.

The Shias (or Shiites) became separate from the Sunnis not long after Muhammed's death. They believed that Muhammed's son-in-law, Ali, and his family had a right to lead the community. In countries like Iran and Iraq, the Shias are in the majority. ISIS is a Sunni group, thought to have partially arisen due to their experiences being in the minority in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein.

Another group is the Sufis. This is the mystical branch of Islam, meaning they "seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God." Interestingly enough, some scholars say that about half of all Muslims are in some way influenced by the Sufi tradition. This gives some peacemakers hope, as the nonideological and rigid Sufi teaching might be the antidote to the doctrine of the extremists. If such a large number of Muslims have a Sufi connection, perhaps this might be developed as a path to peace.

views, got substantial media attention. On the one side, Maher made some blanket statements about Islam; on the other, Affleck challenged Maher's "stereotyping a religion of 1.5 billion people."

A recent Pew Research Center survey showed that, indeed, Muslims worldwide are concerned about the rise of extremism among their ranks. They surveyed "14,244 respondents in 14 countries with significant Muslim populations from April 10 to May 25, 2014." What they found was that the vast majority of people in the countries polled had negative views of extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaida.

In addition to avoiding making blanket condemnations about people of a particular religion, it must also be recognized that there are voices calling to escalate a military response to stop the group. There are also voices, most notably in the Muslim community, as mentioned in the previous section, asking for dialogue and peace within the Muslim world, hoping to end such extremism at its roots.

Good people of faith, then, will likely disagree about the use of force and further violence as a means to stop ISIS. (See "Core Bible Passages" for a discussion on peacemaking and love being the overarching witness of Scripture.) If this is the case, how can we seek to be peacemakers in our local contexts and on a global scale?

Making Peace

We might not be in a position to impact the behavior of a terrorist group on the other side of the world, but we may be in a position to make our local community a more unified and peaceful place. If there is a Muslim community near your congregation, consider how you might engage in dialogue with them on matters of faith, peace, and justice. Perhaps it could be something as simple as inviting the group to your church for an event—intentionally reaching out to show welcoming hospitality. It might also include inviting a guest speaker to your church to talk about the real beliefs of Islam, over and against the rhetoric of violence and terror.

If the *modus operandi* of groups like ISIS is to commit horrific acts to inspire fear, shouldn't the counterbalance of this be people of faith and goodwill coming together to commit acts of love and service, to inspire peace and understanding? For United Methodists, this response to terrorism would mean simply following the first two of the three rules of John Wesley's United Societies: to "do no harm" and to do "good of every possible sort . . . as far as possible, to all [people]" (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012*; ¶104).

Islamic Service Organizations

There is so much media coverage of terrorist groups operating in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, that we can sometimes lose sight of those who are actively working to provide acts of service instead of acts of violence. Highlighting groups that work to alleviate poverty and suffering, instead of focusing on groups that inflict them, may go a long way to changing the perception of people of other faiths in the United States.

One such group is called the Red Crescent. This is the Islamic counterpart to the Red Cross. In fact, the international umbrella group is called the “International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.” It performs the same works as the Red Cross, often in some of the most dangerous areas. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent works in Syria and has experienced the loss of volunteers through death and injuries.

Closer to home, Muslim Family Services (MFS) provides many of the same services as United Methodist Family Services (UMFS), including foster-care programs, counseling, and emergency services to provide basic needs in times of crisis. There are branches of this organization all over the United States. This is just one of the groups working to serve the needs of others and with comparable Christian organizations. The umbrella organization that oversees MFS and other such charities is called the “Islamic Circle of North America.” Their logo features a green circle and written within that circle are the words “Muslims for Humanity.”

United Methodist Perspective

Paragraph 105 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012* is concerned with “Our Theological Task.” It says this task includes “the testing, renewal, elaboration and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling ‘to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.’” This includes our encounters with people of other faiths. In this same section, under “Ecumenical Commitment,” the *Discipline* states, “In these encounters, our aim is not to reduce doctrinal differences to some lowest common denominator of religious agreement, but to raise all such relationships to the highest possible level of human fellowship and understanding.”

A February 2014 article on *UMConnections*, a blog about The United Methodist Church, describes the results of a survey conducted among bishops from Africa, Europe, and the Philippines to determine the “extent of the church’s ecumenical and interreligious activities.” When discussing the results, Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, part of the agency that conducted the survey, said, “Clearly, bridging religious differences and reaching out for spiritual relationships are in the DNA of United Methodists globally.”

The article goes on to describe all of the “bridge-building” activities the church is involved in around the world, including work with other Christian denominations and other religions, like Islam. Though the bishops would like to see more joint action in working for justice, discussions and dialogue go a long way to building up “human fellowship and understanding.”

Helpful Link

<http://www.ifrc.org> — This is the website of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Here you can learn more about the programs the group administers and how they are working throughout the world to serve victims of violence and terrorism.

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ISIS

What is ISIS?
What issues are at stake
as we seek ways to
address their actions?
How does our faith help
us sort through these
issues?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your
group members and
your group time,
choose from among
the OPEN, EXPLORE,
and CLOSE activities
or from “Teaching
Alternatives” to plan
the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Use the following words or your own prayer:

God of love and peace, we come before you in sorrow for lives lost through the violence of extremists. Help us, above all else, to be a people of peace, bridge-builders between people of all faiths. May we seek understanding during this time of study and be open to what you have to teach us. Amen.

EXPLORE the Topic

Discuss Current Events

As you explore the topic, ask participants for their initial reactions when they hear the term *ISIS*. These may be emotions or one-word responses. Write the responses down on a markerboard. Then ask participants to discuss what they have heard about *ISIS* in the news media. Ask: Do you know the reason why the group is known by different acronyms? What are some of the horrible acts that you have heard of the group committing? How has the world responded to these actions?

Explore the Names

Read or review highlights of “ISIS? ISIL? Islamic State?” Have a map of the Middle East handy, and point out the areas referred to as the Levant, according to the description provided in the section. Ask: What do you think is the reason behind *ISIS*’ desire to be simply known as the Islamic State? Why do you think that change would be significant?

Consider World Responses to ISIS

Read or review highlights of “The World Responds.” Recall the discussion held previously about *ISIS* in the news. Ask: In the media, what has been the most widely covered response? What thoughts or feelings do you have about the statements made by Muslim clerics? What surprises you, inspires you, or challenges you about the statements?

Consider Diversity Within Islam

Read or review highlights of the sidebar “Diversity Within Islam.” Ask: How do you respond to the information about this diversity? What similarities do you see between this diversity and diversity in Christianity? Why do you think peacemakers would consider engaging with Muslims from the Sufi, or mystical, branch of Islam as a means to promote peace?

Have a Bible Study

Explore the Scripture passages in “Core Bible Passages.” Form pairs, and have each pair discuss how the passages present a vision of the kingdom of God. Ask: Based on these passages, how does God want that kingdom to look? What thoughts or feelings do you have about peace and love as the overarching witness of the Bible? How would embracing this witness influence how we respond to groups like *ISIS*?

List Issues

Ask participants to throw out words that they think people in the larger society might use to describe Christians. Write them on the board as each one is stated. Ask: What thoughts or feelings does the list raise about a stereotyped view of Christians in American culture?

Read or review highlights of “Issues Raised by ISIS” and “Making Peace.” Ask: How have Muslims been stereotyped in this country? How does the information gathered by the Pew Research Center cited, along with descriptions of Muslims speaking out against ISIS, break down stereotypes of Muslims? What are the pros and cons of using force against ISIS? What are some other ideas of how to engage Muslims and people of other faiths or cultures in addition to the ones mentioned in these sections? What are some of the difficulties people face when they start to consider whether to reach out to others? How might these difficulties be overcome?

Consider United Methodist Perspectives

Read “United Methodist Perspective.” Ask: What thoughts or feelings do you have about The United Methodist Church partnering and dialoguing with people of other faiths? In what ways does such engagement bolster our Christian witness? In what ways can we work with people of other faiths and honor our own beliefs and traditions? How can we respond with respect for the beliefs and traditions of the groups with whom we work? How can your congregation work to support the work that United Methodists are doing around the world to foster unity and peace?

Discuss Islamic Service Organizations

Read or review highlights of “Islamic Service Organizations.” Ask: What is your response to the existence of these service groups within Islam? to the Red Crescent? What similarities do you see between this service organization and the Red Cross? How would supporting these groups move the world further along the way of living according to God’s kingdom?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

Use the following prayer or one of your own:

Lord, even in the midst of great tragedy, violence, and terror, you are working and will be at work until the end of the age. Give us the wisdom, strength, and grace to cooperate with your work in the world. May we never be complacent, and may we never consider the suffering of others not to be our concern, even if it is happening on the other side of the world. All the world is yours, and all the people in it are yours. Help us never to lose sight of that. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- Contact a nearby mosque, and ask to visit during a time of prayer. Ask the person in charge to stay and talk with your group. Be prepared with polite questions. Invite the group that you are visiting to attend worship at your church, and be prepared to answer their questions. If there is no mosque near you, videos are available on websites like YouTube. Go to <http://tiny.cc/wtcunx> to see a Sufi Muslim group performing the “dance of the heart” (dancing around their heart, where God resides). After viewing this video or one like it, discuss it as a group.
- Write letters to a local member of Congress or to the President, either as a group or as individuals, advocating for a response to ISIS that is consistent with the group’s views on how the Bible would call them to respond. Prior to doing this kind of advocacy, invite a representative from the General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church to talk about the church’s position on the subject of war and the kind of peace-making advocacy the group does.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Organ and Tissue Donation

Today The United Methodist Church celebrates Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday. What are the fears and misconceptions about organ and tissue donation? What are the benefits? How does our faith guide us as we consider whether we wish to become donors?