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# United they Stand

## One Hundred and Ten Years of History for Interfaith in Oman

By Dr Patricia Groves

**M**ANY in Muscat are familiar with the work of Dr Don and Eloise Bosch, but few are aware of the legacy the Bosches carried forward. That legacy goes back one hundred and ten years when, in the early 1890s, American missionaries, Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine, were travelling the Middle East in search of places to establish outposts and were attracted to Muscat.

It was Samuel Zwemer's brother, Peter, who, in 1893, arrived in Muscat to begin what would become an important historic endeavour. James Cantine soon joined Peter Zwemer in the mission, which, as it took shape, began to focus on medical practice and education.

In the meantime, Samuel Zwemer continued his travels in the region and was surprised to find his traditional missionary attitude disintegrating on impact with the nobility of the Islamic faith and the grace of the Arab people. It was replaced with the desire to learn. Samuel Zwemer became a serious scholar of Islam.

The compelling story of the two Zwemer brothers, their colleague James Cantine, and their successors, was the subject of an HAO lecture by Michael S Bos, Director of the Al Amana Centre here in Muscat. Michael Bos is a theologian of Comparative Religion and has just begun work on his doctorate at the University of Bristol with a focus on Ibadhi and Western religious scholars.

As you will see, this is a story that weaves together and separates the strands of education and medical service in pre-Renaissance Oman. Before coming to Oman in the late 19th century, Samuel Zwemer and others had trained themselves in some basic practices in the medical field, but their skills were not sufficient to make a significant contribution. This would have to await the arrival of qualified medical personnel.

In the meantime Peter Zwemer started up a small bookshop in the Muttrah souq, which very soon took on the atmosphere of a majlis — a place where people met and friendships developed. Zwemer's small shop in the souq expanded and eventually evolved over the next eighty years into its present incarnation as the Family Bookshop.

In 1896 Peter Zwemer started a school to educate sixteen discarded slave boys who had been brought



Dr Sharon Thoms was the first physician to arrive in Oman. During the first year he treated 10,000 patients in his home as there were no hospitals. He is shown here with his son, Wells, who would follow in his father's footsteps and devote his life to medical service in Oman.

ashore at Muscat and given into his custody. Though Zwemer died two years later and this particular school closed when the former slaves graduated, in 1901 James Cantine carried on the legacy by initiating a school for the education of Omani children. This school continued until 1987, and this was the school in which Eloise Bosch would teach from mid-century onwards.

In 1902, very shortly after Cantine began the new school, nursing professionals arrived from America. Among them was a star, Elizabeth De Pree, a dedicated and talented young woman who captivated James Cantine and became his wife. Elizabeth De Pree had a vision of a medical infrastructure beyond the services of a few individual expatriates and was a catalyst in the advancement of medical services in

Oman. Elizabeth's work among women would blossom into a women's hospital in which 2,000 healthy babies were born each year.

Seeing the great need, Elizabeth De Pree pleaded for doctors to be sent from America. The first to arrive, in 1909, was Dr Sharon Thoms, bringing with him a young son, Wells, who was later to follow in his father's footsteps, devoting his life to medical service in Oman.

As we journey on in time into the 1940s, we find young Dr Wells Thoms developing a rich and warm relationship with the Omani people. He was greatly loved, as were his two sons, Peter and Norman, who also became doctors in the service of Oman.

But when Dr Sharon Thoms arrived in Muttrah in 1909 there were no medical facilities and so his home became a clinic. In the first year Dr Thoms treated 10,000 patients. Three decades later, in 1939, when his son Wells was ready to practice, a hospital had been built in Muttrah. By the 1950s when Dr Don and Eloise Bosch arrived, the mission was the largest employer in Oman (besides the Army), treating nearly 30,000 patients per year.

The great majority of the hospital staff were Omanis. The mission had established a nursing school to train Omanis to work in the hospital and Omanis were also teaching at the mission school. These medical and educational ventures are representative of a true partnership between the two cultures.

When the two mission hospitals were

transferred to the new Ministry of Health in 1971, the total annual caseload was 85,000 patients. The tiny mission of 1893 had come a very long way and had made a remarkable contribution to the development of medical practice and education in Oman.

The Al Amana Institute, which Michael Bos heads, is dedicated to fostering understanding, acceptance, trust and peace between Islamic and non-Islamic communities in Oman and the Gulf. It promotes a model of interfaith harmony based on the legacy of tolerance and mutual support in the last one hundred and ten years in Oman.

Michael ended his talk with the moving statement: "There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. And there can be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions." — (H Kung).

The question period was a good example of inspiring interfaith dialogue in which one participant observed that the differences in our faiths, which share the same historical roots, lie only in schools of thought. The one God worshipped is the same.

**MICHAEL S BOS,**  
Director of the  
Al Amana Centre, told  
the story of 110 Years of  
History for Interfaith in  
Oman, at the Historical  
Association of Oman



Elizabeth De Pree arrived in Muttrah in 1902, with a vision of a medical infrastructure for Oman and was a catalyst in the advancement of medical services. Her nursing work blossomed into a women's hospital in which 2,000 healthy babies were born each year.



Samuel Zwemer was moved by nobility of the Islamic faith and the grace of the Arab people. He became a serious scholar of Islam.



In 1901 James Cantine founded a school for the education of Omani children. The school continued until 1987. This was the school in which Eloise Bosch would teach from mid-century onwards.



Most of the staff at the Mission Hospital in Muttrah were Omanis. The mission had established a nursing school to train Omanis for hospital work. By the 1950s when Dr Don Bosch arrived in Muscat, the hospital was treating nearly 30,000 patients a year.