



# Following Jesus: Harold Vogelaar's Faithful Journey

by Jan Boden

Papers balance in 12-inch stacks on the shelves and floor. Books line the walls, leaning slightly to the north and south. File folders, binders and manila envelopes crowd the floor, desk and top of a single file cabinet crammed in next to the bookshelves. Two chairs huddle near the simple built-in desk signaling that visitors are welcome. This is Harold Vogelaar's office. Classes, speaking engagements, building interfaith relationships and mentoring students take priority over keeping his office neat and tidy.

Although Harold Vogelaar will retire as LSTC's professor of world religions in June 2006, it is likely to be 2008 before he will have time to clean out his office. For the next two years, he will be busy establishing LSTC's new Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice and doing what he does best: promoting relationships and better understanding between people of different faiths.

How did a young man who grew up in a small town in Iowa become an expert in Arabic and Islam? Harold Vogelaar's long journey began with a sense of curiosity and wonder.

## ***Translating squiggles that make sense***

When Harold Vogelaar got his driver's license at 16, his world expanded far beyond the typical teenager's glimpse at the next town down the road. A neighbor who had lost his ability to drive asked Harold to help him get around. As they drove together, Dr. Gerrit Pennings told his young chauffeur about the 40 years he'd spent as a missionary in Iraq and Kuwait.

"He was always translating these little squiggles on the paper—and they made sense," Vogelaar recalled. "He told me about the Arabs and Mideast culture." Pennings' stories captured the teenager's imagination. He decided to become a missionary to the Middle East.

## ***Living in the Middle Ages in the Middle East***

In 1963, after completing college and seminary, Harold and Neva Vogelaar and their four children traveled to the Middle East for the first time. The Reformed Church in

America sent them to Bahrain for two years to learn Arabic before they began their missionary work in Oman.

In Oman, they lived in a town with no electricity, roads, or running water. "It was like living in the Middle Ages," Vogelaar explained. "Our drinking water was brought in goat skins. We had to strain and boil it, and then let it cool in clay pots. We cooked on a kerosene stove and cooled things in a fridge powered by a kerosene burner."

Every experience, every sound, site and smell, deepened Vogelaar's understanding of the land, its peoples and languages. "From our rooftop, we could hear the sounds of the camels bedded down at a nearby camel park," he said. "There's a theory that the 'ayn' sound in Arabic comes from the sound camels make. Many in the West can't pronounce that letter." Vogelaar learned the proper inflection in Oman.

Vogelaar served two congregations in Oman, one Arab and the other expatriate. He was also the chaplain for the only mission hospital in the country. The hospital was so crowded that many patients slept in the hall ways, in closets and under the trees. It was a sobering and life-changing ministry for a young man from the Midwest.

## ***In Egypt, Israel and Palestine***

After several years, the Vogelaars returned to the United States so Harold could study Middle Eastern languages at Columbia University. He received a Ph.D. in 1971. That same year, the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) interviewed him to work with a new project it was starting in Israel and Palestine.

The Reformed Church approved of the LCA project and agreed to a 50/50 split of Vogelaar's salary and expenses. From late 1971 up until a few years ago, the Lutheran and Reformed churches co-sponsored his work.

Harold and Neva went to Egypt in 1972 as a prelude to working in Israel and Palestine. They soon discovered Egypt was the center of much that was happening in the Arab world. They made Egypt their base, with periodic



Vogelaar said. His way of trying to change policies has been to tell what he's experienced. "You talk and you show slides. You write articles and you try to bend the ear of anyone who you think will listen," he said. He chuckled as he told the response their children devised when asked about their life in the Middle East: "Do you want the one minute answer, the five minute answer or is

trips to Israel and Palestine. "The LCA didn't want us to start any new Lutheran projects," Vogelaar explained. "They asked us to work in the churches and institutions already in Egypt, Israel and Palestine. So I started teaching at the Presbyterian seminary in Cairo and taught there for about 14 years."

### ***Dialogue with Muslims as Christian witness***

Vogelaar has spent more than 30 years in the classroom but admits it is not the setting he likes best. "My first love was to go and visit the mosques, where I would sit with imams and their friends in back rooms, sip tea and talk about issues of life and death, in fact all kinds of things."

"I had come to accept that for me Christian witness was the key element," he explained. "Evangelism but not in the sense of pressing for converts, not proselytizing. Within the framework of friendship, we could talk on any subject, and did...I found it to be a very fruitful ministry. It's where I'm most comfortable."

While in Cairo, Harold and Neva acted as mediators of two different cultures. They became friends with students at the American University, where Neva taught English to students planning to travel to America for advanced study in different fields. During those same years, groups from the U.S. visited Egypt and the Middle East. To give them a deeper understanding of the region and of Muslims, Vogelaar helped plan programs, gave lectures, and brought groups to the mosques he loved to frequent.

### ***"Politics to politics; people to people"***

As American Christians living in the Middle East during a turbulent 25 years for the region, they saw the issues, politics and policies from a unique perspective.

"People in the Middle East always expressed the hope that if Americans only knew what the Palestinians were experiencing they would call for different policies,"

this a serious question?" They soon discovered that most people only wanted a one minute answer."

In 1979, after Egyptian president Anwar Sadat had signed the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, Vogelaar and others sensed that Sadat was losing touch with his own people, even though he was a hero in the west. "Many Egyptians said, 'We made peace with Israel and we got Sinai, but the really hard issue was ignored. If something isn't done for the Palestinians, there's never going to be peace.' Everybody within the whole Arab world understood that to be a critical issue."

Despite the hostilities around them, Vogelaar said that they never felt threatened. "In 1973, when Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal, we never felt any hostility," Vogelaar recalled. "Even when Israelis, with the backing of Washington, swept back into Egypt and Egyptians had every reason to feel angry, we never experienced enmity. They said to us, 'Politics to politics, people to people.'"

### ***Looking for the "birth pangs" of new beginnings***

Hope for peace in the Middle East is still very much alive for Vogelaar. He believes that if the United States were truly interested in peace with justice, there would be a positive response in the Arab world. "It's like when rain falls on the desert: the dormant seeds that are there begin to grow and turn green. Without rain, it looks barren and you think nothing could ever live there. But bring rain and suddenly all kinds of life begins to appear. Peace will do that. The desolate desert of hopelessness and despair, of tyranny and terror, will be transformed...when peace based on justice is taken seriously."

He looks for "birth pangs" instead of "death throes"—for signs of new possibilities and new beginnings. "That's what I've been trying to stress in my own journey, in my own thinking. There has to be a vision inclusive enough to undermine the forces of isolation and separation. It can't be

‘us versus them’ or ‘us at the expense of others.’ It has to be a dream that has something in it for everyone; not just for Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but for the world. That, to me, would honor God. It would be a harbinger of hope, a sign of Christ’s presence and his coming again.”

### **Following Jesus**

Harold Vogelaar’s journey with Islam helped him rethink his own faith and why he remains a Christian. “Muslims say, ‘Now that you’ve studied Islam so long, and you’ve seen the light, why don’t you convert?’ I say, ‘If that’s a serious question, let’s sit down and I’ll tell you why.’ The key is to be deeply rooted in Jesus Christ. I am so thankful that Jesus came and did what he did. Paul’s comment that ‘God was in Christ...’ opens for me many mysteries of faith. ‘If you want to see what God is like, take a look at Jesus.’ That has become central to my thinking...For Muslims, much of what Christians believe appears to be shrouded in ambiguity. They sometimes say that we are hopelessly mystical, full of paradox. I say to them, ‘Yes! That’s true, we don’t deny that nor do we mind it.’ The things we believe and why we believe them are not always clear and logical.”

Muslims have said to Vogelaar that they find the teachings of Jesus beautiful but impractical in this kind of world. If ordinary people tried to do things the way Jesus did, “it would end up disastrously.” Vogelaar responds that while this may be true, Jesus calls us to follow him, not just believe in him. We are to take Jesus’ teachings seriously—not just our teachings about Jesus. Jesus’ teachings are for us.

“It is for this reason we have been promised the Holy Spirit,” Vogelaar said. “Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot be agents of reconciliation. We cannot begin to like our enemies, let alone love them, to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile. I think we would fail miserably. But, with the Holy Spirit, these things gradually become possible. And the good news is that we have been promised nothing less than the Holy Spirit.”

“In my own journey, I’ve moved from a ‘God and country’ piety, which I grew up in, to a non-violent, almost pacifist role for the church,” he added. “I can’t preach the way of the cross and be sincere about the teachings of Jesus if I don’t practice them myself—or at least attempt to practice them.”

### **Bringing people together in Chicago**

Harold and Neva Vogelaar returned to the United States in 1988 for several reasons. Harold felt that he could leave Egypt because he had wonderful replacements at the seminary in Cairo: Mark Swanson and Michael Shelley. By then, all the Vogelaars’ children were living in the United States, and Harold and Neva wanted to be closer to them. Looking back, Harold now sees that Neva was in the early stages of Alzheimer’s when they returned.

In 1990, after two years at New Brunswick Theological

Seminary, the Vogelaars came to Chicago for a two-year appointment at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Harold thought he might return to the parish after the two years ended. “Then the Gulf War came along and there was renewed interest in Islam. We stayed on at LSTC for another year, and then another.”

Neva was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 1993 and passed away in 1998. During those years, the Reformed Church in America continued to support Vogelaar. In addition to teaching at LSTC, he did numerous workshops in Reformed churches.

Several years ago, he met and married Pisamai Hasanine, a Muslim scholar from Thailand. The two of them frequently visit churches to talk about Muslim-Christian relations and Islam and Christianity. They are also very present and beloved members of the LSTC community.

“I’ve been ready to retire for some time,” Vogelaar said. “I’m more comfortable in hands-on situations—bringing people together rather than teaching in the high-stress setting of Hyde Park...Still, Chicago has been good to us—and the students have been so patient and kind.”

His children urge him to think about living near one of them if they don’t settle into their retirement home in Prescott, Ariz. Harold is looking forward to writing, editing, doing overseas volunteer work and woodworking—a hobby he has not been able to pursue for many years. But for the next few years, Vogelaar will be adding new file folders, binders, books and papers to the unruly collection in his office. His journey will continue by doing what he loves most: bringing together Christians and Muslims to speak about all kinds of things, issues of faith, issues of life and death, issues that will lead to justice and peace. And maybe they will sip some tea while they talk.

*Previous page:* Vogelaar studying a text with Schaikh Sayyed at the Muayyid Mosque, Cairo, Egypt, in the late 1970s; *Below:* Vogelaar in the classroom, fall 2005; *On page 9:* Harold Vogelaar in Cairo, Egypt, in the mid-1970s

