

Zanzibar Muslims, Officials Stop Church Building, Erect Mosque

On an island off the coast of East Africa where the local government limits the ability of Christians to obtain land, officials in one town have colluded with area Muslims to erect a mosque in place of a planned church building.

On the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar, Pastor Paulo Kamole Masegi of the Evangelistic Assemblies of God had purchased land in April 2007 for a church building in Mwanyanya-Mtoni, and by November of that year he had built a house that served as a temporary worship center, he said.

Masegi intended for the house to serve eventually as his family's home within the church compound, but on Nov. 11, 2007, his congregation began to worship there.

Soon area Muslim residents objected, saying they didn't like seeing the church in the area, said Pastor Lucian Mgaywa of the Church of God in Tanzania.

"This was the beginning of the church's tribulations," Pastor Mgaywa said.

In August 2009, local Muslims began to build a mosque just three feet away from the church plot, Pastor Mgaywa said. In November 2009, Pastor Masegi began building a permanent church structure. Angry Muslims invaded the compound and destroyed the structure's foundation, the pastors said.

Church leaders reported the destruction to police, who took no action – and also refused to release the crime report for court purposes, Pastor Masegi said. When he would inquire about the case, he said, the station head would inform him

that the district police chief had the crime report and therefore it was not available.

“So it’s not possible to take the file to the court, because doing so would amount to defending Christianity,” the station police chief told him, according to Pastor Masegi.

With the district police chief sealing off any possibility of a court hearing, the church was unable to proceed with plans for building a permanent structure. In the meantime, construction of a mosque was well underway. It was completed by the end of December 2009.

The planned church building’s fate appeared to have been sealed earlier this year when Western District Commissioner Ali Mohammed Ali notified Pastor Masegi that he had no right to hold worship in a “residential house.”

The Feb. 16 letter from the commissioner to Pastor Masegi forbidding him to convert his house into a worship center confirmed the decision by the district chief of Bububu police station not to prosecute those who destroyed the foundation of the planned church building, he said.

“Now the Christian faithful are feeling targeted even by the government officials,” said Pastor Masegi. “The region is predominantly Muslim, and attempts at evangelizing are always met with brutal resistance.”

Since the prohibition to conduct worship services in his home, both police and area Muslims monitor Pastor Masegi’s movements, he said, and the congregation has no place to worship.

In predominately Sunni Muslim Zanzibar, churches face other hurdles. There are restrictions on getting land to build churches, open preaching is outlawed and there is limited time on national television to air Christian programs. In government schools, religion classes are limited to Islam.

Zanzibar is the informal designation for the island of Unguja in the Indian Ocean. The Zanzibar archipelago united with Tanganyika to form the present day Tanzania in 1964.

Muslim traders from the Persian Gulf had settled in the region early in the 10th century after monsoon winds propelled them through the Gulf of Aden. The 1964 merger left island Muslims uneasy about Christianity, seeing it as a means by which mainland Tanzania might dominate them, and tensions have persisted.