



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

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US Muslims and Interfaith Dialogue

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EXPERIENCE

I was raised in a small town in Arizona that at the time had a very small Muslim population. At the time there was not an Islamic center and our Friday prayers, Sunday schools, Eid prayers, and breaking fast together during the holy month of Ramadan were conducted on a rotating schedule in a few homes of our family friends. Later on, as the Muslim American community grew, we would host the community in a hall located inside a church that was gracious to lend us their space. The practice of using one another's homes to worship was not uncommon in Yuma. I remember our family being invited to our South Asian friend's homes where we would observe and appreciate their Hindu rituals. Ironically, our small town was rich with religious pluralism even though we did not have proper centers to worship. The Muslim American community in Yuma has since grown and has been able to build an Islamic Center. They have an enthusiastic youth group and are developing young leaders.

Many years later I realized how important it is for communities and

youth to have places of worship. Through my work with the Muslim Public Affairs Council, having the opportunity to visit various and diverse Islamic Centers, I learned the value. Islamic Centers are not just places of worship anymore; they are cultural centers and learning centers. Increasingly, mosques are becoming cornerstones in the communities they are housed in and they are not just serving those who attend them. For example, the Islamic Center of Southern California located in Los Angeles has a blood drive every week where many community members donate blood. ICSC also has partnered with the Los Angeles Food Bank to help mobilize resources to fight hunger in its community regardless of their respective faiths.

Through all this experience and knowledge it has been alarming to see the rise in anti-mosque sentiment and *Islamophobia* nationwide this past year from Park 51 in New York to Temecula, CA.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

In the past year, there has been an increase in anti-mosque sentiment from a vocal minority who are spewing hate in communities when a mosque is being built or expanded by stating this

is a threat to America's way of life and values. The most notable was the Park 51 (Cordoba House) controversy which is a planned Muslim American cultural center which would promote interfaith dialogue, but opponents were offended that it is being constructed blocks away from Ground Zero. This vocal minority forget that Muslim Americans also died on 9/11 and shared in the grief and pain. Since 9/11 thousands of Muslims around the world have suffered and been killed at the hands of Al-Qaeda.

While Park 51 received the most media attention, this anti-mosque sentiment is happening nationwide. This reaction is extremely alarming because it is anti-American and xenophobic. It under-

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mines and threatens the values of our nation including freedom of religion and pluralism. In addition to the anti-mosque sentiment, there has been the hate speech against Muslim Americans by Councilwoman Deborah Pauley from Villa Park, CA, Pastor Terry Jones burning the Quran, and the bullying on a daily basis of Muslim American youth who are being called “terrorists” and told to “go home.” More recently Islamic jurisprudence is becoming the source of a heated and confused debate with the emergence of around 40 anti-Sharia bills in at least 40 states. Sharia will be used as political football on the campaign trail as conservatives debate the role of Islam in the United States. Yet, how Sharia, Islamic jurisprudence, is exactly threatening our nation still remains unclear.

In reality, Muslims have been part of the fabric of America since our nation’s founding. Muslim Americans have been partnering with law enforcement to keep our nation safe. In fact, 1 out of every 3 Al-Qaeda plots threatening America since September 11, 2001 has

*Learn more about the vibrant
and diverse Islamic centers
nationwide*

been foiled with the assistance of Muslim communities. Recently, Rep. Peter King (Chairman of the Homeland Security Committee) held hearings pinpointing Muslim Americans, questioning whether they are cooperating with law enforcement to keep our nation safe. Sheriff Leroy Baca, Los Angeles Sheriff Department, testified at the hearing and countered the accusation that Muslim Americans do not cooperate with law enforcement by highlighting our partnership.

Our partnerships and interfaith allies play a vital role in educating the public about acceptance and ensuring that the civil liberties of all Americans are upheld. It is through these partnerships we have been able to create platforms for healthy dialogue and engage elected officials. During the height of the

anti-mosque sentiment, the Muslim Public Affairs Council partnered with the Progressive Jewish Alliance to get a resolution passed by the Los Angeles City Council promoting policies that would support religious pluralism. The two groups worked together tirelessly for weeks contacting city council and rallying supporters to pass the resolution. Eventually, the Los Angeles City Council passed the resolution unanimously. The resolution acknowledged that *Islamophobia* is a cause of the opposition to the lawful construction and expansion of Islamic centers across the United States.

The resolution received nationwide recognition and many asked how they could adopt a similar resolution in their own cities. We celebrated the victory and how it united all of us from different faiths to stand up against bigotry. However, we have our work cut out for us. With the 2012 Presidential elections around the corner, and the 10th anniversary of 9/11 in September, the climate in the nation will once again be vulnerable to hate speech and bigotry.

REFLECTION

As Americans we are fortunate to have the right to freedom of expression and should cherish this right. It allows us to have a voice and speak out on issues that are important to us, especially when we engage our government and fellow citizens. While this right is of great importance, it is also important to use it responsibly and call those out who use this freedom to promote hate and intolerance. While some of the hate speech and bigotry may not be illegal it is definitely immoral and anti-American.

It is the collective responsibility of all community and faith leaders to work together to ensure that the voices of hate and bigotry are not the loudest ones. Each of us shares the duty to direct the public discourse and educate our communities on accepting one another. If this type of hate speech and bigotry continues, it will affect the Muslim American youth the most. Even

though I was raised in a small town where I was accustomed to being the only Muslim girl, I never felt isolated or experienced any type of hatred. My heart goes out to the Muslim American youth who are growing up in a post 9/11 era and are the ones experiencing bullying and being questioned about

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their Muslim American identity. This is not fair to any youth regardless of religion or race. These are opportunities for all of us to work together and learn from each other in an effort to counter bigotry and stand up for religious pluralism.

ACTION

1. Form an interfaith coalition to pass a resolution on religious pluralism by your local city council.
2. Join the Standing Together program which is a curriculum put together by the Christian-Muslim Consultative Group that provides guidelines to interfaith dialogue. Encourage the leadership of your church to pair up with a neighboring Islamic Center and get to know each other and work together. To learn more about the Standing Together curriculum and to order it please visit www.cmcg.org.
3. Plan an event around the 10th anniversary of 9/11 to honor the first responders and remember those who lost their lives. Work together with other faith communities and elected officials to create a service project that would benefit your local community.
4. Learn more about the vibrant and diverse Islamic centers nationwide by subscribing to the blog 30mosques.com
5. For any assistance or more information contact saadia@mpac.org or visit www.mpac.org.