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Episcopalians begin to battle “backlash violence” against Muslim neighbors

by Jan Nunley

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(ENS) From the moment the second jetliner hit the World Trade Center on September 11—confirming suspicions that a terrorist attack was involved—irate talk show callers began sounding the call to indiscriminate anti-Arab and anti-Muslim violence. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported more than 400 anti-Muslim incidents in the week after the attacks, including shooting deaths in Arizona and Texas. Mosques and masjids have been the targets of bullets, graffiti, and protest demonstrations.

Episcopalians and other Christians, while acknowledging the evil of the attacks by religious extremists, began planning ways to counteract the backlash against innocent Muslims within hours of the dual tragedies.

Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold issued a request to bishops and diocesan ecumenical officers to promote contacts with Muslim neighbors. “As interfaith services are planned, please make every effort to include Muslim as well as Jewish (and other) voices,” Griswold wrote. “Secondly, if possible, reach out to a neighboring mosque in your community and to Muslim, Arabs, and Sikhs who may feel especially vulnerable at this time.”

“American Muslims, Arabs, and Sikhs are suffering what they call double anguish at this time: the heart-wrenching pain of the loss of loved-ones coupled with the deep hurt brought by finding themselves the victims of generalized blame through ignorance and stereotyping. Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ but to love our neighbor we must know our neighbor. We would urge you to take new (or renewed) steps toward interfaith and intercultural education,” he concluded.

Practical help

Bishop Christopher Epting, deputy for ecumenical and interfaith relations, wrote to Judi Amri, the director of the Islamic Schools’ League of America, assuring her that Episcopalians are “redoubling our efforts to teach our constituency that Islam’s very essence is peace” and “encouraging our parishes to reach out to their Muslim neighbors.” Amri replied that “many Muslim schools have reported very positive interactions” with non-Muslims in the wake of the

attacks—even volunteering to sit outside a Muslim school in Falls Church, Virginia during class hours to “keep an eye on things.” She expressed appreciation for Epting’s offer of help.

In Rhode Island, a parishioner—who asked not to be identified—at St. John’s in Newport began organizing assistance for Arab-American women who were afraid to go shopping or run errands for fear of reprisals. So far, three local Episcopal congregations have agreed to serve as points of contact for women seeking assistance. “If no one calls, that’s fine too,” said the parishioner. “My whole point is offering the help.”

On the Sunday following the attacks, the Rev. Henry Atkins, Episcopal chaplain at New Jersey’s Rutgers University, announced in his sermon that St. Michael’s Chapel at Rutgers would serve as a sanctuary and “safe haven” for Arabic and Muslim students experiencing harassment.

A group called Senior Pastors of University Congregations in Austin, Texas, headed by the Rev. Kevin Bond Allen of All Saints’ Episcopal Church, issued a statement denouncing the firebombing of an Austin mosque and a Muslim-owned gas station. “We call on every citizen of Austin to ask God to help us cope with our grief, fears and anger that can lead to such sinful actions,” the statement said, “to unite with each other in prayer, blood donations, financial relief donations and to care for and protect one another, despite our differences, in support of our country and the freedom it stands for.”

Encountering difference

The Rev. Caryl Marsh, rector of St. Paul’s in Salt Lake City, Utah, went with other parish staffers and clergy from a number of denominations to Friday jummah prayers at the Khadeeja Mosque. Parish administrative assistant Jody Smith reported being “uncomfortable and embarrassed” at the announcement that the Muslim congregation had to establish a hot line for Muslim children who were being harassed and victimized in their schools.

Los Angeles priest Lee Walker was driving to the Cathedral Center when he heard radio reports of anti-Muslim violence. On the spur of the moment, he headed for a mosque he’d seen near the USC campus and introduced himself to the puzzled staff. “The receptionist then stood up, came out from behind the reception desk carrying a camera and asked if he could take my picture,” Walker writes. At first he feared they suspected him of being “some sort of right wing Christian religious fanatic” bent on doing them harm, but to his surprise, the receptionist wanted his picture—in full clericals—to send to his mother in Morocco.

“She had called him the night before, crying hysterically and begged him to leave America and come home that very day,” Walker said. “She told him that everyone in Morocco had heard that the Christians in America were about to round up all the Muslims in America and murder them. He said that when she saw this photo, she would have proof that the Christians in America were good people, that he was safe, and that Americans would stand up for each other no matter what their religion or race or country of origin.”

—The Rev. Jan Nunley is deputy director of Episcopal News Service.