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Episcopal bishop defends Islam against Baptist statements

by Robert Brown

(ENS) Missouri Episcopal bishop George Wayne Smith led an interfaith defense of Islam and the Prophet Mohammed during a news conference June 12, called in response to an attack on Muslims by leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

The Baptists were holding their national meeting in St. Louis June 7-12 when the former president of the SBC told a conference of pastors that "Islam is not just as good as Christianity."

The Rev. Jerry Vines, now a pastor in Jacksonville, Florida, went on to call Mohammed "a demon-possessed pedophile" in reference to the fact that the prophet's 12th wife was nine years old when they were betrothed. He also said that Allah was not Jehovah, linking Allah to terrorists. Vines blamed religious pluralism for the country's woes.

The remarks were defended the next day by the Rev. Jack Graham, the newly elected president of the SBC.

The remarks prompted Smith, a former Southern Baptist, to call for the news conference and to invite members of the Interfaith Partnership of Metropolitan St. Louis. He was joined at the conference by 16 religious leaders, including Protestants, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and Jews. Among the Protestants was a pastor of a church aligned with the SBC.

Break down barriers

Standing before the altar in Christ Church Cathedral, Smith spoke on behalf of the Interfaith Partnership in condemning the statements and expressing solidarity with "our Muslim brothers and sisters." He then spoke as Bishop of Missouri, saying, "The statement violates our understanding of the Christian faith, which proclaims a God who calls us to love one another and to break down the barriers that separate us."

Smith said the lessons of the Holocaust taught Western society that it could not let bigotry go unanswered and that people of faith should speak out against it.

The Rev. Dr. Warren Crews, the diocese's ecumenical officer and president of the Interfaith Partnership, said he did not want the messengers (delegates) to the Baptist meeting to go away from St. Louis thinking that such bigotry was tolerated here. His sentiments were echoed by a Southern Baptist pastor. "If I want to build up Christianity, I don't want to tear down other expressions of religious belief," said the Rev. Scott Shavers, pastor of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis.

Thanks from Muslims

Lari Grubbs, a Disciples of Christ minister and chair of the partnership, reminded those listening that the religious pluralism the Baptists blame for the country's ills made it possible for Baptists to flourish in the U.S.

Bataya Abramson-Goldstein, associate executive director for Jewish Community Relations in St. Louis, spoke of the need for "people of good will to speak out." The Rev. Monsignor Richard Stitka, chancellor of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Louis, cited the Second Vatican Council's reaffirmation that Allah is the same God worshipped by Christians and pointed to Islam's reverence for Jesus and Mary his mother. The Rev. Dr. Martin Rafanan, executive director of the National Conference for Community & Justice, called the remarks by Vines "dangerous."

Dr. Ghazala Hayat, her head covered by a scarf and her voice breaking, told how she was very hurt by the remarks she heard from the Baptists, "but I am very moved by the words I hear today." Hayat is vice president of the partnership and past chair of the St. Louis Islamic Foundation. Dr. Waheed Rana, a Muslim cleric in St. Louis, also thanked the partnership "from the bottom of my heart."

The Rev. John Danforth, retired priest of the Diocese and director of St. Louis 2004, a civic pride organization, quoted from the Book of Common Prayer, asking God "to fashion one united people from the multitudes." Danforth, a former U.S. Senator, later told reporters that the remarks by the Baptists had not tarnished fellow Republican George W. Bush. Bush had earlier in the week spoke to the Baptist meeting via satellite on a giant screen television and praised the denomination as an "example of democracy."

Statements 'horrific'

Questions from at least one of the reporters in the audience, representing a Baptist publication, prompted Smith and others to explain the historical and cultural context of Mohammed's betrothal to a young girl. "To equate Mohammed's marriage with pedophilia is horrific," said Smith, repeating earlier statements by Hayat that the marriage was not consummated until the girl was of age. He added that betrothals of children were common in Mohammed's day as a way to unite families. He explained that such customs are not practiced by Muslims today.

Smith, who was baptized in a Southern Baptist congregation as an adolescent and later converted to the Episcopal Church while a student at Baylor University, a Baptist college in Waco, Texas, joined Hayat in asking for a retraction from Vines and Baptist President Jack Graham. Later that night, a spokesperson from the Southern Baptist Convention told a reporter that the convention was “not in the habit of taking advice from interfaith groups.”

On June 14, Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis hosted a midday interfaith prayer vigil. The Very Rev. Ronald Clingenpeel, dean of the Cathedral, said it was a way to “wage reconciliation” in the wake of the week’s events.

—Robert Brown is Communications Director for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri.