

A New Era of Interfaith Dialogue: American Muslims join more active interfaith dialogue in wake of attacks

By Patricia Rice

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The terrorists who attacked the United States on Sept. 11 may have expected that their deeds would separate American Muslims from mainstream American society.

The opposite occurred. A new era of interfaith dialogue has begun.

People of many faiths have reacted to the attacks by inviting Muslims to pray with them and to teach them about Islam.

At the National Day of Mourning service on Sept. 14 at the Episcopal cathedral in Washington, Imam Muzammil H. Siddiqi joined the Rev. Billy Graham and other Christian and Jewish leaders in prayer.

"I never, ever thought I would see a Muslim imam speak at the National Cathedral with Billy Graham," said Ingrid Mattson, a Muslim and a professor of Islamic studies at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn. The school prepares Muslims to be certified for military chaplaincies.

Muslim leaders here, and across the nation, have been deluged with requests to pray or lecture to non-Muslims. Joint worship services that might have had a few Christian and Jewish clergy in August, now include Islamic imams. Bookbuyers and schools are clamoring for more information on Islam.

"We have been amazed," said Dr. Ghazala Hayat, chairwoman of the Islamic Foundation of St. Louis. "No one ever asked me to talk about Islam before."

No one is more surprised than Waheed Rana, a St. Louis Muslim pioneer in discussions and friendships among Muslims, Christians and Jews. The St. Louis University anatomy professor moved to this country from Pakistan in 1961 and counts rabbis and ministers among his closest friends.

In the past four weeks he has had almost as many requests to talk about his faith as he had in four decades.

"The more the people know about Islam, the easier it will be for all of us," said Rana, one of the founders of the Daar-UI-Islam mosque here. "Education is a key to understanding."

Until last month, many of Rana's audiences were clergy and intellectuals already committed to finding the similarities among religious principles. Now requests are coming from a wide spectrum of religious groups.

Muslims have spoken to relatively small congregations like the liberal Trinity Presbyterian Church in University City and to academic groups like the Gateway College of Evangelism in Hazelwood, a Christian group that rarely hears from mainline Protestants.

"In Hazelwood, some of the young people's questions were tough but they sincerely wanted to learn," Rana said.

Now each weekend, Shahinshah Ahmed and Nasir Ahmed, co-founders of the Islamic Information Center of St. Louis; Rana; Hayat; and imams at four local mosques fan out to speak.

The Interfaith Partnership of Metropolitan St. Louis in Kirkwood and the Interfaith Dialogue Group in Clayton have held events with leaders of non-Judeo-Christian faiths for many years, but have been swamped lately with requests for speakers.

The Rev. Vincent A. Heier, the St. Louis Archdiocese's interfaith office director has lectured on Islam at Catholic schools and mailed materials on Islam to hundreds of Catholic pastors, deacons and educators here. To meet public demand, the Interfaith Partnership will start a weekly group discussion group on Islam and interfaith relations for lay people on Oct. 22.

This interest in praying with Muslims and learning more about their faith is replicated across the country, said Jane Smith, author of the 1999 study "Islam in America" and co-director of the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam, in Providence, R.I.

"Clearly there is a genuine interest of many Americans in Islam," she said.

American mosques are the most diverse in the world. Daar-UI-Islam has members from more than 27 countries. Each nation has cultural traditions that intersect with the Islamic faith. For example, so me southeast Asians may say that male guests may not see the bride at a wedding, or that all marriages should be arranged. Neither are religious ideas, but are cultural, Smith said.

Now second-generation American Muslims are looking at the cultural traditions of their parents' homelands and thinking about how those apply to their faith and their lives in the United States.

"Muslims are struggling with the kind of assimilation problems that Jews had in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century," said George "Jack" Renard, an Islamic studies professor at St. Louis University. They "realize how vulnerable they are, how easily they can be misunderstood for Muslims in other cultural settings."

Before Sept. 11, some Muslims here tried to keep one foot in this country and one foot in their mother country, Rana said. Thirty years after arriving here, newer Pakistani immigrants would ask Rana to donate to political causes in that nation. He'd decline. "I'd tell them: you have stood before the flag of liberty and pledged allegiance and you better be an American and forget what happens back home."

In recent weeks, many St. Louis Muslims have taken stock of what the United States has to offer, confirmed what a good place it is to live in, and realized they have no where else to go, Rana said.

In their effort to open church and synagogue doors to Muslims, many houses of worship around the nation, and a few here, have invited Buddhists, Hindus, Baha'is, Sikhs and other faith groups to pray, too.

"Interfaith dialogue is the new ecumenical frontier," said the Rev. Stephen Patterson of Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves.

This religious interaction is only a beginning, he said. It took 50 years for the Christian ecumenical dialogue of 1950s to "bear fruit" and produce the agreement of Catholics and Lutherans on the

doctrine of grace and full communion agreements between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church, he said.

Can the interest in Islam last? Some worry the interfaith dialogue could be cut short when Western bombs fall and if Asian or African nations retaliate.

"I worry about the blowback," said Bruce B. Lawrence, Duke University professor of Islamic studies and author of the new book "Shattering the Myth; Islam Beyond Violence."

"Can we sustain this fragile moment in which we are having a higher dialogue about Islam if we face negative prolonged engagement from Asian or African Muslim nations? Especially if there are American targets? I pray we can."