

Sunday, June 11, 2017

Conflict or Cooperation? Religious Diversity in our Communities

This week, Anti-Muslim protests were planned to be held in over 25 locations across our country. The vast majority of Americans believe in religious freedom and diversity; just look at how Americans from every walk of life came out to airports in support of civil rights and equal treatment following the Muslim Ban earlier this year¹. The turn out for the local Phoenix anti-Muslim rally only drew about 100 individuals this weekend. However, knowing that they are taking place, is alarming.

According to a Pew Research study, in 2014,² over 75% of Americans considered themselves religious, and the diversity of those affiliations continues to grow. Conflict is a natural response to growing diversity within any group or nationality. But it doesn't have to take place.

Over the past years, we have seen Arizona become ground zero for acts of religious hate. You will remember just 2 years ago the Anti-Muslim Biker Rally³ at the Phoenix Mosque or just recently bomb threats against our Jewish Community Centers in Scottsdale and in Tucson in February⁴.

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/29/politics/us-immigration-protests/index.html>

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/05/30/hundreds-gather-in-arizona-for-armed-anti-muslim-protest/?utm_term=.8e17870335f5

⁴ <http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/scottsdale/2017/02/28/bomb-threats-jewish-center-scottsdale-tucson-arizona/98509460/>

However, we have also seen Arizona become ground zero for acts of Diverse Religious Cooperation and Solidarity. In 2015, the religious and nonreligious community alike came together to make a strong statement of solidarity when they showed up to form a human barrier⁵ between the protestors and the mosque. In the following days, over 800 people came out to demonstrate that “Love is Stronger than Hate.”⁶

More recently, when the Jewish Community Centers received bomb threats in February, over 200 faith leaders and community members signed on to a statement of solidarity with the Jewish Community, in support of peace.⁷ “All of our traditions call us to speak out with love in the face of hate, and to stand with those who are persecuted. Know that no act of hate can separate us from you. Though our faiths are varied, our commitment to love and justice unites us,” the letter read.

And it doesn’t end there. Religious organizations are reaching out to each other, hosting interreligious events of dialogue and collaboration in order to promote understanding, dispel fear, and build up the community. Arizona Faith Network, the Islamic Speaker’s Bureau, Valley Beit Midrash, Tempe Interfaith, Sema Foundation, among others, are working fervently to fill the demand for interfaith programming and collaborative opportunities.

For example, to encourage inter-faith dialogue and understanding, two *Interfaith Iftars of Solidarity: Breaking Bread Together* were planned for Saturday evening, June 10th in response to the proposed anti-Muslim

⁵ https://world.wng.org/2015/06/christians_at_phoenix_protest_stand_between_muslims_and_anti_islam_crowd

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/01/islamic-community-center-of-phoenix-vigil_n_7486990.html

⁷ http://www.jewishaz.com/community/multifaith-group-signals-solidarity-with-jewish-community/article_db1b8af8-0056-11e7-ac66-f7c1914c2039.html



events across the country. The *Ifar* is a special meal held during Ramadan to break each daily fast. One Ifar was hosted by The Sema Foundation in Tempe and the other was hosted by the Islamic Center of the Northeast Valley located in Scottsdale. Over 275 individuals gathered at the two locations in solidarity with the Muslim community to break bread together and pray for peace. The gathering included: Muslims, Methodists, Presbyterians, members of the United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalists, Mormons, Buddhists, Jews, Catholics and those claiming no faith tradition at all.

“Breaking bread together, like we did tonight, is a great way to get to know each other. Plus, it marks our common humanity. Which one of us doesn't need to eat, need to drink? We realize through breaking bread, that we all have the same basic needs. It makes it a lot easier to see the humanity in one another, no matter how different we perceive them to be. And then the conversations begin to fill in the rest” said Rev. Erin Tamayo, Executive Director of the Arizona Faith Network of her experience at the Ifar hosted by The Sema Foundation in Tempe.

Rev. James Pennington, Senior Minister of First Congregational UCC in Phoenix reflected that, “the event allowed us an opportunity to talk about our common values of justice and peace and develop new and deepen existing interfaith connections and friendships. A group of members from my community of faith who attended the Ifar at The Sema Foundation were invited by a young Muslim couple, Muhammet and Elif, to their home in the near future for a Turkish tea gathering. This is the gift of interfaith work.”

In response, Muhammet and Elif, stated that “While some were protesting Muslims today, you and your friends came to help make the



world a better and a more peaceful place. Your open minds and hearts mean a lot to us regardless of our differences. I am more optimistic after a gathering like this.”

What happens as diversity grows in a society. Many things can happen, however, we have seen two strong responses: Conflict or Cooperation. Martin Luther King Jr. said: The ultimate measure of a man (or woman) is not where he/she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he/she stands at times of challenge and controversy. We can be moved to cooperate with one another, to share in healthy and life giving dialogue, or we can choose to be in discord and conflict. Our hope is that we will stand in solidarity in these times of challenge and controversy. The gift of these Ifar gatherings offered an opportunity to stand in solidarity in these times of polarization and controversy.

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