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Jews, Muslims seek better ties with 'Twinning'

by Nicole Neroulis by Religion News Service

NEW YORK -- The mistrust and misconceptions between North America's Jews and Muslims may run thick and deep, but leaders of a new nationwide interfaith initiative say the two sides have more to learn than fear from each other.

That was the message issued this weekend (Nov. 21-23) in more than 100 mosques and synagogues that signed up for a "Weekend of Twinning" in hopes of forming relationships to confront the dual threats of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

"For generations, there has been a series of misunderstandings by Jews and Muslims on what the other religious community believes and practices," said Rabbi Marc Schneier, head of the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, which organized the events.

"These misperceptions and other societal and political factors have unfortunately led to tensions between our two communities."

The effort grew out of a resolution passed at the National Summit of Imams and Rabbis last year in New York, which was hosted by Schneier's organization. Kick-off events were held in California, Florida and New York, and Schneier hopes to make it an annual event, expanding to Europe next year.

The Diaspora communities may clash over the long-running Israeli/Palestinian conflict, but they can still find common ground at home, which could eventually contribute to better global relations, said Gustav Niebuhr, author of "Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America."

"Meeting and talking is a significant thing," said Niebuhr, a former New York Times religion reporter who now teaches at Syracuse University. "It doesn't work for everybody, but it leads to some familiarity, and I think anything that goes toward busting stereotypes is a good thing."

America's emerging Muslim community can also learn from the success of the Jewish Diaspora, both in creating strong faith-based programs and in becoming integral parts of government and secular institutions, Niebuhr added.

Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America, who was raised Catholic and has a sister who converted to Judaism, said she encourages interfaith initiatives like the twinning weekend as "a source of wholeness and healing in the community."

Still, she said, many Muslim groups might not be capable of organizing these kinds of events regularly, given that some are currently struggling just to find and fund full-time staff, she added.

"There is a lot we still need to work on internally," she said. "Each community should think about what is appropriate. Some might want to focus on women's programs, others on youth programs."

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For her part, Mattson addressed Schneier's New York Synagogue about the distinctions between religious and cultural roles of women in traditional Islam, while Schneier's wife, Tobi, shared her perspective on the same issue in Orthodox Judaism.

The dual discussion garnered enthusiastic applause from the Manhattan congregation, which included about 200 Jews and two dozen Muslim guests.

"Wouldn't it be great to have something like this every month?" said Joan Lefkowitz, a state Supreme Court justice who had commuted from the suburbs for the event.

During the shared kosher meal after the worship service, Atik Zabinski, a Muslim convert raised in an atheist household, said he planned to attend several other twinning programs, excited by the opportunity to learn more about both his new religion and the faith of his Jewish ancestors.

"Talking is important, because otherwise, we tend to look at people as groups instead of as individuals, and then we lose track of their humanity," he said.

Ultimately, proponents of interfaith dialogue, particularly between Jews and Muslims, hope to help members of their communities realize that despite a few visible differences, they may not be so different after all.

"As children of Abraham, we share both a common faith and a common fate," said Imam Shamsi Ali of Manhattan's 96th Street Mosque. "We are not enemies. We have a very critical issue with the Middle East issue, but it's not the most critical issue."

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