

Religious leaders discuss countering rise in Islamophobia

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Area faith leaders, concerned about a possible new wave of anti-Islamic sentiment nationally and in Western New York, met Monday to discuss how they might counter expressions of hate and resentment toward Muslims.

About 30 people met for a couple hours at the Network of Religious Communities and were joined by Mark Johnson, national executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the world's oldest interreligious peace organization.

Johnson said communities like Buffalo need to start preparing now for the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. "Year by year on those occasions of commemoration we have seen a more and more troubling building up of an Islamophobic response," said Johnson, who encouraged expanded dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims. "I want to suggest we don't wait until September for those conversations to begin."

Just last month, a Florida church went ahead with a burning of the Quran, a sacred text in Islam believed to be the revealed word of God, and Muslims around the country viewed last month's congressional hearings sponsored by Rep. Peter King, R-N. Y., as an effort to single out Islam as a faith that promotes terrorism and extremism.

Dr. Othman Shibly, a Muslim who sat on Monday's panel with Johnson, Rabbi Drorah Setel and the Rev. Pierre Albrecht-Carrie, said he sensed that anti-Islam sentiment had increased "to the point that now it's even worse than right after Sept. 11." And Muslims are by no means the only group of people impacted by the spread of hate and bigotry, he said. "It affects America—who it is and what it stands for," he said.

Muslims, he said, were being demonized broadly as terrorists for political gain, even though the majority of Muslims reject any form of religious extremism. "We do acknowledge that there are extremists Muslims, there are terrorist Muslims. And we are pained twice because of it," he said. "They are from my community, they are Muslims. [But] there is no justification whatsoever."

Setel emphasized the need to make personal connections that will allow people to have candid and open discussions in the event of crisis or misunderstanding, although she also acknowledged that such relationships take time to build and "it's not a quick fix."

"Unfortunately, the people who want to fight have tried to disrupt that process," said Setel, rabbi at Temple Beth El in Niagara Falls. "We don't want to get into those fights. We want to work on what brings us together."

The upcoming Passover holiday should be an opportunity for Jews to remember their harsh treatment years ago as immigrants in the U. S.—which is remarkably similar to what Muslims are facing now, said Setel.

When one audience member suggested that the growth of the Muslim population could help alleviate anti-Islam sentiment, Shibly responded that Muslims would likely always be a small minority in this country.

But education and information could turn the tide around, said Shibly. “This will become a matter of . . . stupidity 50 years from now, when people say, ‘How come we did that to Muslims?’ ”

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