

Muslim group promotes interfaith outreach

IMAN seeks to help needy in partnership with other faiths as part of One Chicago, One Nation initiative

By Whitney Woodward, Special to the Tribune

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Frustrated by the negative Muslim stereotypes fueled by high-profile acts of violence and terrorism, a group of Chicago's faith and community leaders are launching a campaign to eradicate these misconceptions by building new relationships across ethnic and racial divides.

"I think the American population, all of us are susceptible to what happens on a daily basis on the news," said Rami Nashashibi, the executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, or IMAN, a Chicago nonprofit that advocates for social justice. "And quite frankly, over the last couple of months the news hasn't been quite great when you think about the three-second sound bite you hear that talks about Muslims."

IMAN is part of an initiative launched recently to bring together diverse local communities and facilitate change. The One Chicago, One Nation initiative — which includes a film contest, community organizing and a grant program — seeks to eliminate misperceptions about Muslims and Islam while facilitating change by funding projects that unite different faith, ethnic and community groups, Nashashibi said. A grant, for example, may be awarded to a partnership of two faith organizations working to eliminate poverty or feed the hungry, Nashashibi said.

"The best antidote to apprehension, fear and mistrust comes from the uniquely American tradition, a uniquely Chicago tradition, of community engagement for real solutions around real problems," he said.

The project was developed by One Nation — a national philanthropic project founded in the wake of 9/11 to combat prejudicial feelings about Muslims — Chicago Community Trust and Link TV. In addition to IMAN, the Interfaith Youth Core is part of the initiative.

Nashashibi pointed to regular work IMAN does with members of a nearby synagogue and church to address specific issues, including foreclosures and, most recently, providing aid to Haiti. He said that such efforts not only help others, they help to combat prejudicial attitudes through action.

"It's not contrived, it's very genuine," Nashashibi said. "I have no concern that the people in the parish or the priest that we work with do not go home and watch the news and feel that the Muslims that they work with have anything to do with what's happening on a global scale in these (specific) incidents and what's being associated with Muslims on the news."

But organizers don't just want to correct negative misperceptions and stereotypes — it's equally critical to educate the public about Muslims and Islam, said Eboo Patel, the founder and executive director of Interfaith Youth Core. He also serves on President Barack Obama's Advisory Council of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Patel said that many people, including children and young adults, don't know much about Islam or Muslims. He gave the example of his 14-year-old nephew, who attends public high school in a suburb of Houston. The nephew, Patel said, dreads the days when pizza is served because sometimes the school runs out of cheese pizza, leaving only pepperoni. Muslims cannot eat pepperoni because it is made from pork.

"He hates it, he dreads it," Patel said. "He can't eat the pepperoni pizza, and when the kids ask him why, he has to explain he's a Muslim, and then he gets abused. He said, 'People call me terrorist and Osama bin Laden and a whole bunch of offensive things.' "

Chicago is well-positioned to serve as the location for this project because of the city's unique history of overcoming social barriers and rich Muslim history, Patel said, noting the area's wealth of Muslim leaders and diverse Muslim community. In 1893, Chicago hosted the World's Parliament of Religions.

"We're doing it in Chicago because we think Chicago has a great chance of making itself a model for the rest of the nation," Patel said.

The start of the One Chicago, One Nation initiative comes at a critical time, though it was not prompted by a single incident and has been in the works for months, said Asad Jafri, IMAN's arts and culture director.

"When Fort Hood happened, we had a conversation saying now, more than ever, we need this," Jafri said, referring to the arrest of a Muslim man in the fatal shootings at the Texas military base. "But (One Chicago, One Nation) isn't reactionary to one incident. We're really trying to build a sustainable sense of community. Although it's Muslims who right now may be viewed (with suspicion) by some, maybe five years from now it may be another group."

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