



Presbyterian Mission  
**World Mission**

# Building Relationships with Our Muslim Neighbors



## **A Reflection** by Rev. David B. Carver, *First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

Some years ago, a PC(USA) congregation in a neighboring community closed, and the building found its way into the hands of a Muslim community. The property is on a rather prominent corner, and many of our folks would drive by with some degree of apprehension, suspicion or regret over the changes that have occurred. Simultaneously, our own congregation was deepening ties with congregations in Malawi and South Sudan, both of whom often report difficulty in interfaith relationships with Muslims. In an effort to build bridges, we began a series of brief studies on the topic of “Christianity and Islam.” Each series of studies concluded with a visit to the Islamic Center, where we were received graciously.

Following the attacks in the office of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in early 2015, as the media stoked fears of Islamophobia, our congregation sent a letter of encouragement to the Islamic Center, after which we were invited for discussion. We reciprocated, and welcomed key leaders from that community to a gathering of our elders and deacons.

After these tentative explorations, we decided to dive in, and being from Western Pennsylvania, we thought the easiest way for all of us to do that was through food! Our church’s annual leadership retreat provided us the chance to welcome more than two dozen men and women from the Islamic Center for a meal and open conversation. It was fascinating for me, as a pastor, to circulate among the tables. At one, I heard, “It’s easy to join a mosque; you simply stand and recite the truth as we understand it: ‘There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.’ How does that compare with baptism for a Christian?” At another, there was extended conversation about what to do when one person in the community gets stuck with too much work — or wants too much power. “How do you select your leaders?” members from both communities asked. At a third table, there was an earnest discussion as to which local supermarket chain offers the best organic produce. We found out that our kids go to the same schools and we shop in the same stores. When some of our female leaders heard that Muslim women wearing the hijab were sometimes made to feel uncomfortable, they offered to go shopping together.

More meals followed: we have been invited to join the Islamic community on several occasions for the iftar, the breaking of the daily fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. On each occasion, Presbyterians have been received with lavish generosity and hospitality, I’ve had the opportunity to address the worshipping community, and there has

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been vibrant discussion among both men and women as to how our communities might work together to address issues that threaten our region (such as food insecurity and opioid addiction, for instance). Our Muslim friends have been invited to the congregational picnic, and at least two families have begun to intentionally invest in friendship-building activities such as boating, bowling and so on.

At this point, we have been careful to focus on those areas and events where there is limited possibility to give or receive unintended offense. Respecting that our worship is quite different, we have invited each other to observe one another at worship, but with no expectation that we will participate in the worship of the other tradition. We've had open and frank

discussions about belief, but have been careful to introduce our comments with phrases like “In the Christian tradition, we hold that ...” or “Many Muslims would agree that ...” We have looked for places in our traditions that are shared: reading the Psalms together has been a blessing, for instance; at one gathering the imam offered a prayer giving thanks for the gift of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the people of God.

Recently I asked one of the leaders of the Islamic Center, “What do you suppose the members of your community get out of efforts like this? What difference does it make when a few of us come down the hill for an iftar, for instance?”

His response was quick: “Oh, Pastor, we are glad for the chances to come into relationship with members of the Presbyterian Church. It is so easy for us to think of other people in terms of categories — you are white, I am black; you were born in America, I was born in Gambia; and so on. When we talk like that, we use the words ‘us’ and ‘them’ too often — as if the things that differentiate us were threats to avoid, rather than gifts to explore. When you come here, you treat us like men and women — like human beings. We are learning to treat each other as real people, and not as categories.”

I couldn't have said it better myself!

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