

Welcoming the Muslims in our midst

Brice Balmer

In the past ten years, the Muslim community in the Waterloo region has increased significantly as refugees have resettled here and Muslims have found vocational opportunities in businesses and at local universities. Mennonite congregations—along with other churches and federal government programs—welcomed the refugees by sponsorship. We were the “hosts.”

House of Friendship, a large multiservice community organization begun by Mennonites and now enjoying major support from the larger Christian community, serves approximately 30,000 people per year. During the past five years, the House of Friendship staff have noticed a significant increase in

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Muslim participants in our community centres and at our Emergency Food Hamper Program. We have adapted as much as possible by trying to find out which food products have pork and by changing Christmas programs to January potlucks. During the past several years, we have been aware of the month of Ramadan, which has fallen close to Advent and Christmas.¹ Staff are asking how we can celebrate secular and religious holidays for all the program participants.

Henri Nouwen has reminded us that hospitality is a movement away from hostility to a place where guest and host are indistinguishable. Power differentials decrease as the guest changes the dynamic of the relationship by helping the host, having essential knowledge the host needs, or introducing the host to new people and customs. Though the supporting congregations and the House of Friendship have not been hostile toward Muslims, few understand Muslim theology and practices. How can

Canadian staff interpret the variety of Muslim cultures as participants come from Somalia, Jordan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries? Staff and other Canadian hosts need Muslim guests to explain customs and theology.

At the House of Friendship Emergency Food Hamper Program, most food is donated by businesses, churches, schools, and community groups. When participants requested Halal (lawful) food, staff did not know where it could be obtained. We could prepare vegetarian hampers, which meet Muslim spiritual and nutritional requirements, but we had no Halal meat. We have since learned that many products have preservatives and that some prepared food products have added ingredients. We did not know that some gelatin products contain banned substances. Who could tell us how to classify foods, so Muslim food hamper recipients could follow Halal? Who would donate Halal meats?

As chaplaincy director, I began to develop relationships within the Muslim community in the Waterloo region. My first calls to the mosque were futile, as we had no obvious relationship to build on. So I began with a Muslim restaurant owner and an acquaintance who taught at the university. They opened doors to the leadership at the Sunni mosque.² At a community board meeting, a fellow board member was Muslim and directed me to the Shi'a imam (religious leader). The imam agreed to come to the emergency food hamper with several leaders from his mosque. The leaders were surprised to learn that so many Muslims were coming for emergency food. The imam said that Islam asks Muslims to be concerned about all the hungry or poor in the community. He thanked House of Friendship staff for serving Muslims and all hungry people.

These leaders contacted two local Halal butchers and began bringing ten kilos of beef once a month. Later the imam and his associate conducted training for the House of Friendship community and family services staff and helped staff understand Islam better and distinguish between cultural and religious requirements. A Muslim woman was hired at the Emergency Food Hamper Program and was an obvious welcoming presence for Muslims recipients. We hope that some Muslim volunteers will be joining the community programs as role models, welcoming hosts, and co-workers with staff.

As this relationship was developing, the Kitchener Waterloo Mennonite Ministerial invited two Muslim theologians from Qom, an Iranian city with seventy Muslim seminaries and schools of theology, to attend the ministerial and to have Muslim-Mennonite theological dialogue. Mennonite Central Committee had

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sponsored the two theologians and their families to come to North America. They attended Toronto School of Theology and were earning their doctorates while a Mennonite worker was studying and teaching in Qom. This was an important peace initiative for both faith communities.

The Muslim restaurateur, who prepared the meal for the Muslim-Mennonite discussion, asked when other Muslims could participate in this dialogue. The discussion among Mennonite pastors and Muslim

theologians created an atmosphere of deeper understanding and impetus for more gatherings. Host and guest roles were shifting.

Mennonites have been active in welcoming refugees to the Waterloo region through Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, the Refugee Reception House, and the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support. Many churches have sponsored refugees. Significant numbers of refugees in the last ten years have been Muslims from Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Jordan, and other countries. The Waterloo region has one of the three highest influxes of refugees in Canada. The region's culture is changing dramatically as new ethnic and faith communities gain population because of sponsorship not only by Mennonites but also by United Church, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, and other faith communities.

We have welcomed peoples to our area, but has the region and the religious community found ways to encourage open discussion about traditions, theology, and cultures? Do people from other cultures and faith traditions have voices in public discussion? Can the host and guest relationship be more hospitable and can relationships change?

In response to the changing community, the Kitchener Waterloo Council of Churches has decided to create an interfaith

committee and has appointed two or three leaders from each of the non-Christian communities and one each from the Christian traditions. Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Unitarian, Buddhist, and Jewish communities have been eager to participate. Their leaders contact others in the community who have been overlooked by the council. The group expands because it is inclusive; guests have invited other guests from other faith traditions.

As a result of the Kitchener Waterloo Inter Faith Association—the name initially chosen by the committee—new friendships are being formed by the House of Friendship chaplain with additional Muslim groups. These Muslim leaders have assisted the House of Friendship in making contacts with a major producer/distributor of Halal meat products. Skids of Halal products arrive, and all Muslim participants can have Halal meats as part of their emergency food hamper. This is an important contact, as requests for Halal are increasing dramatically. In 2000, there were 980

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requests for Halal; from January through August of 2001, the Halal requests totaled more than 1500. The Waterloo Sunni mosque's youth have volunteered at the emergency food hamper; the mosque has started collecting food for the hamper program. This increased activity assists not only Muslims but all food hamper recipients.

The provision of food hampers is a charitable activity to sustain individuals and families during a crisis. It does not prevent future hunger nor does it create more just relationships in the community. Yet as Muslims and House of Friendship staff work together, community is formed across barriers of race, ethnicity, and religion. Hostility born of stereotypes and misinformation is broken down as individuals, mosques, and churches

work together. Hospitality is demonstrated as Muslims, Mennonites, and House of Friendship staff find a new working relationship where all are hosts and guests.

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as both faith communities encountered fears and apprehension. Phone calls, letters, and gatherings now happen among people who know each other and trust each other enough to be honest and forthright. Working together, we can be a force for increased hospitality in a world that seems increasingly hostile.³

Notes

¹ During Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims fast daily from dawn until sunset.

² Sunni and Shiite are the two great religious divisions of Islam. Shiites regard Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, as the prophet's legitimate successor, while Sunnis regard the first four caliphs as his legitimate successors; Sunnis also stress the importance of the Sunna as a basis for law. The Sunna is the traditional portion of Muslim Law, claimed to be based on the words and acts of Muhammad, but not attributed directly to him.

³ This Canadian story of hospitality in the midst of religious diversity is written in a style similar to many USA experiences detailed by Diana L. Eck in *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001). Dr. Eck is director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. This book focuses on the history and development of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities in USA. Other religions are acknowledged but without historical detail. Americans and Canadians have been both hostile and welcoming to immigrants and refugees from different religions. Dr. Eck has many illustrations of initial hostility being transformed into hospitality.

About the author

Brice Balmer is chaplaincy director at House of Friendship, Kitchener, Ontario. He is a dual citizen of the US and Canada, and has worked in community ministry and congregational pastorates in Denver and Kitchener. He and his wife, Karen, have two grown sons.