

Calvert churches work to expand Muslim-Christian dialogue

While much life has lain dormant under winter frost, a collection of Calvert County churches have journeyed deep into the soils of connecting with local, regional and international Muslim communities.

Broadview Baptist Church and All Saints Episcopal Church, both of Sunderland, reached out to Muslim communities last fall, in the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis. The pastor of Broadview Baptist Church, the Rev. Jennifer Wilder, said in a press release, "Out of all the texts that young Jesus could have chosen as his own personal mission statement, he chose the prophet Isaiah, who explains that God's Spirit anoints Jesus to transform the lives of those who suffer the most. Our challenge today is to do likewise, to transform our community and world filled with anti-Islam rhetoric and violence."

On the day before President Obama announced his visit to the Islamic Society of Baltimore, a group of Calvert County youth and families visited the very same mosque. Members from All Saints Episcopal Church, Broadview Baptist



Valentine's Day Community Conversations inside the prayer hall of the Islamic Society of Southern Maryland in Prince Frederick. Women covered their heads to show respect.

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Church, the Daughters of Abraham and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Chesapeake attended Friday midday prayers at this Baltimore mosque, where often 2,000 gather daily for prayer, the release states.

People from the local churches as well as the president realize the nation stands at a crossroads: "Will we," Debbie Shupe of All Saints Episcopal Church asks in the release, "open ourselves to conversation

that brings us together or continue the hate and violence?"

Calvert County youth have used technology to expand this interfaith dialogue to an international scale, according to the release. The youth of All Saints Episcopal and Broadview Baptist churches "went live!" telecommunicating via facilitated videoconference with Muslim youth from the IEPEC Center in Amman, Jordan. This partnership was established through

the "Face to Faith" Foundation, which recognizes the centrality of religion in world conflicts and trains young people to reject prejudice, extremism and violence, and find solutions for the world's conflicts.

In December, Calvert County and Jordanian youth dialogued about topics such as their career goals and the role of their religion in their daily lives. Jack Dickson-Burke, 15, said in the release, "the videoconference opened doors for new

ideas and acceptance to flow in, and fear and hate to flow out. Especially today, when anything can be said on the Internet, seeing a person face-to-face creates great exposure to another culture, and helps erase previous biases or judgments."

The ability to speak live with Muslim youth across the globe excited Broadview Ministries so much that it spawned a January "Courageous Conversations" retreat where youth and families discussed similar-

ities and differences between the core teachings of the Christian tradition and the 5 Pillars of Islam, analyzed tactics of prejudice, cooked Jordanian food and participated in Jordanian crafts and activities, the release states. The rector of All Saints Episcopal Church, the Rev. Ken Phelps Jr., said in the release, "Modeling and instructing our youth in an appreciation of, and respect for, other faith traditions is critical to the creation of a community in which all of God's children can live together in peace. I am inspired that so many of our adult leaders have joined in this effort — it takes a village to raise a child."

The group recognized the critical need for dialogue and understanding with Muslim neighbors has expanded over the past weeks to include other churches, organizations and Calvert residents. "We cannot," Pat Pease of Broadview Church said in the release, "expect our Muslim neighbors to bear the whole burden of educating the community."

The group shared a meal together and experienced readings from the Qur'an and prayers in Arabic, the release states. Several hours of dialogue ensued, as the Islamic Center hosts answered all community members' questions. Rabia Zahir, one of the hosts at the Islamic Society of Sothern Maryland, said in the release that "honoring diversity in race, language, culture, and religious expression shows ultimate respect and expression of our love to God."

This Valentine's Day Interfaith Community Conversation promoted greater understanding, respect, mutuality, acceptance and love, the release continues. Elizabeth Mandile, 13, said in the release that "our trip to the mosque taught me that Muslims share many of the same characteristics as Christians. Just being Muslim does not link them to terrorist groups." The visit culminated in sharing time in the sacred space for prayer, called the masjid, on the top level of the mosque. The interfaith group brainstormed how to continue and deepen this conversation and shared experiences between faiths.

The Calvert community is again invited to the next event in this interfaith journey this Sunday, Feb. 28. At 9 a.m., all youth ages 12 to 18 are invited to join in a facilitated videoconference with youth in Amman. Arrive at 8:30 a.m. for breakfast and orientation. Parents and community members are invited to observe.

Following, at 10:30 a.m., Zahir of the Islamic Society of Southern Maryland will lead the community in part II of the Interfaith Community Conversation entitled "Islam Today." These events on Sunday will be held in the Parish Hall on the campus of All Saints Episcopal and Broadview Baptist churches, 100 Lower Marlboro Road, Sunderland. For more information, go to www.broadviewmaryland.org/youth or email the Rev. Jennifer Wilder at revjenn@broadviewmaryland.org.