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*'I don't think we can be silent anymore'*

Frowning on  
extremist views,  
local Muslims desire  
dialogue, unity

By **RICK BOYD**  
rboyd@somdnews.com

Rabia Zahir came to the United States from Pakistan at age 16. Fifteen years ago, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, she joined with a group of Calvert County women to form the Southern

Maryland chapter of Daughters of Abraham, an interfaith group that explores the common foundations of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Abraham is seen as the father of monotheism, the worship of one God, in all three religions.

On Valentine's Day, Zahir and other Muslims who worship at the Islamic Center of Southern Maryland in Prince Frederick

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STAFF PHOTO BY RICK BOYD

Dr. Zahir Yousaf, left, talks with Thomas B. Surles, retired from the U.S. Army, and Jane Trent Surles, an Episcopal priest, at the Islamic Society of Southern Maryland on Feb. 14.



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welcomed members of the Daughters of Abraham and members of churches throughout the region to the mosque to share a meal and to talk.

"I wish more people could have this experience," she said during that gathering, where she was asked how Muslims in the community view what is going on in the Middle East, and the Islamic State — the terrorist group that is also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh.

What is happening in Muslim countries wouldn't occur if the rulers were leaders of democratic societies, she said, where the social structure would be better. The group may call itself the Islamic State, "but there is nothing Islamic about it," she said. "The way I see my faith, it is so alien to me."

Other Muslims who worship in Prince Frederick, and at mosques in Lexington Park and La Plata, also say they don't recognize the faith they practice in the words and actions of the Islamic State and other extremist groups.

And they don't recognize their religion in the portrayal of Islam in the media and in much of the political rhetoric of this political season.

"We have the same fears as the rest of Americans" about terrorism, Omar Ali said recently at the Islamic Center of Lexington Park.

"Those people committing these acts are nut cases and labeling it as Islam, when clearly to us it is not," he said. "We say this not out of fear [of being labeled as sympathetic to terrorism], but out of our own belief."

The Quran teaches, Zahir said, that "God will not show himself to anyone who is not just and loving." When the time of judgment comes, she said, "God is not going to look at them ... God is not going to look at them."

"Hatred is going to take us nowhere," she said. After this life is over, "I want my creator to say, 'Well done, Rabia, well done,'

and not have him turn his face from me ... those responsible for killing and bloodshed will go to their graves and will have to face their future.

"For me it's just painful," she said, to see the violence that costs innocent victims their lives.

"What those people are doing is from a lack of understanding of Islam," she said. There is a lot of poverty as well as other socioeconomic issues. "If they understood their faith, they would never do it."

The emphasis on Valentine's Day, through a film called "Christianity and Islam" and in questions and conversation, was on understanding the common roots of the three major religions. All believe in the same God, and Allah is the Arabic word for God, Zahir and other Muslims in Southern Maryland explained. The holy books of all three religions tell of Adam, Noah and Moses, and all three religions see the Ten Commandments as the received law of God. Jesus and his teachings are central to Islam as well as Christianity. Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet, Zahir said, a messenger of God sent to restore a sense of spirituality to the way the laws set down by Moses were being applied, that he was raised up by God before the crucifixion and that one day Jesus will return.

Muhammad was born in 570, and at the age of 40, Muslims believe, began to receive revelations from God. "We do not believe Muhammad is divine," Zahir said. "God sent him messages through the Angel Gabriel." The prophets were human, and Muslims "only worship God."

The Feb. 14 gathering at the mosque in Prince Frederick stemmed from an outreach of Broadview Baptist Church and All Saints Episcopal Church, both in Sunderland, last fall. Youth from the two churches have developed a partnership and began telecommunicating with young people from Amman, Jordan, talking about career goals and the role of religion in their daily lives.

On Feb. 28, young people

from ages 12 to 18 were invited to join in a video-conference with youth in Amman in the parish hall of All Saints Episcopal and Broadview Baptist churches. Later that same day, Zahir led another interfaith community conversation about Islam.

These are the kinds of things ordinary people can do to counter misunderstandings, Zahir believes. The key, she said, "is just communicating and knowing each other." After she started meeting with the Daughters of Abraham 15 years ago, "over time the hesitation slowly dropped," she said. "I was no longer a foreign person to them."

This is a common thread in conversations with Muslims in Southern Maryland, who say that in their daily interactions with neighbors and coworkers their faith is rarely an issue. But after terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, Calif., earlier this year, and suggestions during the primary election season that Muslims should be temporarily barred from entering the United States, some feel uneasy about how they are perceived by other Americans.

"I don't see any change in how people react to me," said Hasan Masud, who works in a bank in Charles County. "We are living very peacefully in this community ... there have been no incidents, but there is a fear."

"We have never had an attachment to [terrorists], but now it looks like we have to differentiate ourselves from them," he said at Masjid Abdul Moghni in La Plata — Masjid is another name for mosque. Now, hearing Donald Trump and other political figures talk about Muslims, he wonders, "How much do my neighbors really feel like this?"

Hammad Matin is a lawyer, born and raised in La Plata. His father was one of the founders of the La Plata mosque. The people of Southern Maryland, he says, "are an incredibly kind, generous and good people."

After the terrorist attacks in Paris and in California, he asks that Muslims "not



Rabia Zahir answers questions Feb. 14 at the Southern Maryland Islamic Center in Prince Frederick during a visit by members of Calvert County churches.

be judged by generalizations, but be judged as individuals."

During a January meeting at the mosque, he said he understands the concerns of people who know little about Islam. "If I've never met someone

from Norway and I hear that Norwegians are blowing things up, I'm going to have that perception of Norwegians."

"Islam gives basic rules to live by, and the acts of ISIS so clearly violate all these teachings," said Ma-

sud. "If you know Islam, what they are doing is clearly prohibited" by the religion, he said.

"The life of any person in Islam is very important,"

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Dilshad Umer said in La Plata.

The Koran says if you take one life, you take all lives, Dr. Anwar Munshi and others said.

Terrorists "are bad apples, just like there are bad Christians and bad Jews," Munshi said in Prince Frederick. "It is your deeds that make you good or bad."

Extremists misquote a handful of verses from the Koran, he said, that were applicable in times of war during a particular era when two armies would come together to fight. Even then, he and others said, the Koran says those fighting can't destroy homes or even cut down trees.

"The number of people killed by terrorists are overwhelmingly Muslim, so it's hard to consider these people Muslims," said Raza Waraich, who since 2002 has worked as an engineer at Patuxent River Naval Air Station and at its satellite operations in St. Ingoes.

"There is no reason to hide that there is a strain in the Muslim community that has been radicalized and are just criminally insane," Matin said at the mosque in La Plata, where a group gathered to talk with a reporter.

"After 9/11, we saw the terrorists as something weird and foreign," he said. ISIS acts as though it is speaking for Muslims, he said. "This puts the onus on us because they want us to fear living in this country."

"I don't think we can be silent anymore," he said.

And so after terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut and San Bernardino, the La Plata Mosque placed a full-page ad in the Maryland Independent that said, "Those reprehensible acts, are by any moral standard, indefensible. These



Zubair Farooq, left, Assif Kasmani, Remash Guyah, Aji Sunjaya, Deddy Wahyudi, Eraj Fasih, Lt. Isam Almbrouk, Qaiser Waraich and Elsayed Arafat join in prayers with Omar Ali, right, on a Friday afternoon at the Islamic Center of Lexington Park.

criminals flaunt their perverse hatred in the guise of religion. That such crimes were ostensibly committed in the name of our faith, Islam, is anathema to our community."

Ali moved to St. Mary's County in September 2001. His first day on the job as a computer engineer at Patuxent River Naval Air Station was Sept. 11. "It was a terrible time for this country and a very challenging time for us Muslims," he said.

Dr. Zahir Yousaf and others trace the extremist strain of Islam to, among other things, the Russian invasion and occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. Rather than developing an army to fight the occupation, militias were armed that lacked discipline.

These militias have no other cause but to wage wars, Ali said. It's advertised as a holy cause, he said, "but it really doesn't have anything to do with religion. They look for people who are hopeless, and many of them don't have a religious background."

After 9/11, Americans became painfully aware of these groups with extreme views, Ali said, but eventually people were smart enough to separate them from other Muslims. "They were able to see 'my neighbor is Muslim,

my doctor is Muslim."

The difference now, Ali said, is that people with extreme anti-Islam views are more willing to say them out loud, and some people running for office are using those views as a tactic to win support. "Muslims can be used as a punching bag to gain points," he said. "Ultimately, I think there are a lot of educated people who will stand up and say 'enough is enough.'"

Ali and others emphasized that they don't face difficulty at work or in their daily lives because of their faith. Women who cover their heads have a tougher time in their day-to-day lives when encountering people they don't know, some of the Muslim men acknowledged.

Rabbia Hasan and Ayana McWillis, both Charles County residents, are students at the University of Maryland, College Park. Though they wear a hijab, they said they rarely face open hostility on campus, but they see it on social media, where they see Muslims being attacked, and look at the comments and see that most people agree.

McWillis said as an African-American and a Muslim, she has two things to balance, and she is never sure who is going to



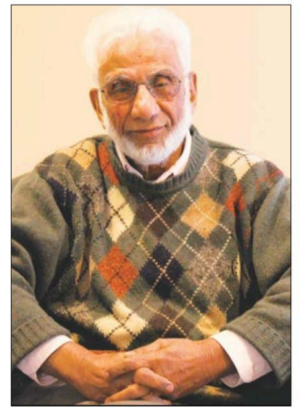
Aji Sunjaya talks after business hours in his barbershop about how his religion influences how he lives his life.

ask questions because she wears head coverings. Some people do ask questions about Islam. Even when the timing might be inconvenient, she said, the last thing she wants to do is give a testy response to people who have never talked to a Muslim before.

There are concerns that tensions and anti-Islamic rhetoric could alienate young Muslims, and make them susceptible to the Islamic State's social media recruiting tools. Munshi believes that these sites go beyond free speech guarantees and should be blocked or taken down.

"It is incumbent on us to be vigilant of these people who are dangerous and criminal," Matin said. Should anyone come to the mosque in La Plata talking of violence, he said he'll ask them to leave and call the police.

Ali emphasized that Muslim families have the same concerns about schools, finances and their children as all families do, and said worrying about young people being radicalized is similar to parents' fears that their children will fall prey to other bad influences. "That's why we have the



Muhammad Ameen, one of the founders of the La Plata Mosque, is involved with a fledgling interfaith group in Charles County.



Omar Ali speaks during a potluck dinner at the Islamic Center in Lexington Park.

mosque," he said, to teach mainstream Islamic values in addition to being a community center and a place of worship.

Muhammad Ameen of Waldorf also believes that the best way to stop ISIS from recruiting in the United States is to "look after our children and make sure they are not influenced by that evil entity." Teach young people the real meaning of their faith, he said, and keep them engaged.