

# AN IMAM AND A PRIEST WALK INTO A CONVERSATION...

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At first they were unlikely friends: an Episcopal priest serving a parish in Northern Virginia and a Muslim Imam. But a meeting to plan an interfaith Thanksgiving Service turned into something more, enriching the lives of the two men and opening up a conversation about shared values, theological differences, and the challenge of being faithful in a world that wants to divide and categorize rather than unite.

The Rev. Tim Heflin, rector of St. Andrew's, Burke, first met Imam Bilal Ankiya of the Institute for Islamic - Turkish Studies in Fairfax in 2012. "It was at a Friendly's diner, of all places," Tim recalled. "It was a local clergy meeting to plan the Burke/Springfield Community Thanksgiving service. The location now seems so obviously appropriate."

Other local clergy, including the Rev. Linda Wofford Hawkins of St. Barnabas, Annandale, and Rabbi Bruce Aft of Congregation Adayat Reyim, Springfield, were also part of the meeting.

The service was one that had been held annually for many years; the IITS was a relatively new participant. Bilal mentioned, "This is a great service organized, implemented and attended by different faith leaders and their members. Thanksgiving is a common notion among all traditions especially Abrahamic traditions." Bilal remembers that first meeting with Tim: "I remember Tim's shining and friendly face. Besides both of us being open to dialogue and building new friendships, being of similar ages played a crucial role in our friendship."

That first conversation soon led to others. Tim said, "I met Associate Imam Mehmet through Bilal. Early on, he introduced me to the Canadian Public Television comedy *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. This show centers on the

relationship of a mosque that meets in an Anglican church. Some months later, I was approached by leaders of a local mosque, Peace Islamic Center in Burke, inquiring if St. Andrew's had space and would be willing to allow a mosque to meet for Friday prayers and Ramadan. Our Vestry and I said yes. That casual first meeting with Bilal at a Friendly's did play a part in my congregation and me now welcoming neighbors."

The circle grew. No longer was this just a conversation between Tim and Bilal; now it was between two faith communities. "Sincerity and humility played an important role in advancing the relationship. Both of us were very open in sharing what we believe and how we need to communicate to each other," said Bilal. "I'm not sure which one of us invited the other first to our respective houses of worship, but each of us has been to the friend's worship place several times. Tim invited my associate and me to speak at his church for the members and I must admit that it was a wonderful event. We felt so at home and among friends.

"Tim and Alexis and some of their members joined us in [breaking the Ramadan fast]. We invited Tim to speak to our members at our mosque about his faith and tradition. That is where I get to learn what that white collar around his neck means. Now we are part of a group which meets every other Monday. We discuss various topics from our own tradition's perspective and plan to expand this to our members and lay people so this could set an example about how a friendship and learning environment can be."

Tim speaks of how their conversations are "unrelenting." "We keep at it until we understand how each of us interprets our scriptures. We are

not afraid to tackle difficult questions."

This has been an exercise in listening as much as talking. Tim says, "We have grown to know one another and about our families, where we have been raised and what shapes our worldview, and what led us to our call as clergy. We have these conversations across language, countries, background and cultures. We find a common language—not a language of complete agreement, but conversations in which we listen before talking, trying to understand before explaining our side, and hearing before lecturing. And we have been inviting other clergy to join this group to keep the group ever-expanding and fresh."

Where will this conversation between friends go next? They don't know, but they want to continue and they want the circle of conversation to continue growing. As Bilal notes, "We do realize our differences. Keeping those in mind and discussing them will help each of us understand our own tradition better. It will make us better believers and better human beings. This is not an effort to make everyone the same but to show we can live in peace, harmony and friendship."

Tim agrees. "We hope to meet with various congregations beginning this spring in a town hall format, for us to have conversation in front of others, so they can see our candid questions and answers, our agreement and disagreement, and to see that we leave as friends. The best part is that we are not too concerned about 'where this goes'; we are more concerned about being friends to each other."

It's a beautiful friendship, and an equally beautiful conversation. +