



Talking through walls in NYC

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Washington, DC - This year, on the ninth anniversary of the 11 September attacks, many Americans were scared that violence would ensue as a result of a planned Qur'an burning and the controversy over an Islamic cultural centre, Park51, in lower Manhattan. Thankfully, the day came and went with no major eruptions of hostility.

The day following 9/11, I helped organise the inaugural interfaith event at Park51. This intimate gathering brought together 100 faith-based student and community leaders from all over New York. The purpose of the event was to offer non-Muslims an opportunity to engage their Muslim neighbours in a dialogue that enabled all participants to explore some of the deeper issues around the Park51 controversy. A wide range of topics were discussed, ranging from the role of the media to extremism in Islam as well as other religions, to the limits of religious freedom.

Despite the media's often exaggerated reporting on Park51, continually referring to it as the "Ground Zero Mosque", many people often neglect to see that the core mission of the centre is to offer "world-class recreational and educational facilities" and that it aspires to provide "an accessible platform for conversation across identities."

Although it was a rainy night and there was heightened security from the protests, we gathered inside the dilapidated Park51 building for a three-hour dialogue. The event was kicked off by a film screening of *Talking Through Walls: How the Struggle to Build a Mosque United a Community*, an award-winning PBS documentary about a New York suburb that faced similar opposition to the building of an Islamic centre in 2005. The film offers a mirror to the Park51 debate, demonstrating how misinformation, distrust and suspicion towards Muslims can lead to a larger environment of xenophobia and prejudice.

The Muslim community featured in the film built an interfaith coalition composed of Buddhists, Roman Catholics and Jews who were motivated to support the Muslim community out of a commitment to values such as religious freedom and pluralism.

After talking with a few of the people there, it was clear that many people in the room supported the building of the Park51 centre, while others had doubts, and many others had a lot of questions: what kinds of programmes would Park51 offer to the community? Will Park51 decrease radicalism or help to promote it amongst Muslims? As a Time Magazine poll indicated in July 2010, nearly 70 per cent of Americans were in opposition to the building of Park51. Because emotions around the centre were so high, I didn't know whether to expect outbursts of anger, or a civilised debate.

To start deeper listening dialogues, we first conducted an icebreaker. Each person turned toward a stranger near them and shared who their personal hero is and the meaning of their name. This interaction was designed to humanise the other person and to build a sense of trust through the sharing of personal information.

Instead of discussing tough issues, we built a sense of familiarity first.

We then broke into several smaller groups of five people each to dialogue about the Talking Through Walls film, and offer a safe space for talk about issues of concern. This intimate, small-group approach helped lead up to issues revolving around such questions as, "What's your vision for an ideal Islamic community centre?" or "How would you want to be received by a community you were building a religious centre in?"

At the end of the small group discussions, each group shared what they talked about. Many expressed the idea that the challenges facing America - rising hate crimes against Muslims, mosques being opposed in dozens of cities, and non-Muslim Americans' lack of exposure to Islam - offer an opportunity. These challenges can provide a chance for Muslim Americans to finally share the true nature of their faith with their neighbours.

Some groups expressed a feeling of helplessness and stressed the need for interfaith cooperation to combat this wave of anti-Muslim prejudice. Others expressed the need for continued education about Islam and more opportunities for bridge-building events in New York. Still other groups had difficulty breaking the surface in the time allotted for dialogue.

What was most striking in the dialogue process was that debates about the centre seemed to dissipate as people got to know one another and trust was developed. In the course of a three-hour exchange with strangers from different backgrounds, we were able to plant a seed of interfaith cooperation right in the heart of America's controversy over Islam and Muslims.

While we may not have overcome the climate of tension and polarisation we find ourselves in as a nation, we did build a model for the kind of dialogue needed to overcome it.

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