

NATIONAL CATHOLIC REGISTER

783

SHARES

Email

Share

Tweet

Comment

Print



Lisa Tu, a senior at the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, talks with 9-year-old Ayan Musse at a Sept. 22 Christian-Muslim dialogue meeting at St. Joseph's Church in St. Joseph, Minnesota. (Dianne Towalski/St. Cloud Visitor)

SEP 28, 2016

In Minnesota, Christian-Muslim Dialogue Turns Strangers Into Neighbors

Catholic participants in the dialogue remain committed to building interreligious bridges, in the wake of the stabbing of nine people by a Somali-Muslim in a mall in St. Cloud.

Bridget Ryder

ST. CLOUD, Minn. — In the aftermath of the mall stabbing of nine people by a Somali-Muslim Sept. 17 in St. Cloud, Minnesota, Muslims called on their friends at the Greater St. Cloud Area Faith Leaders and others for support.

Leaders from various faiths came together to pray and strategize a sensible reaction to the violence. They emerged from their meeting ready to show a united front to a community whose racial-cultural stress points were under heavy pressure.

This wasn't just a crisis response, but the fruit of almost two years of ongoing Muslim-Christian dialogue.

"It has allowed us to build bridges in the past, and it seemed natural that we would have conversations and stand in solidarity when this happened," said Kathy Langer, director of social concerns for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of St. Cloud and a member of the Greater St. Cloud Area Faith Leaders group. "We're friends, so of course we could talk about next steps."

Since 2014, Catholics in St. Cloud have been sitting down with their Muslim neighbors to talk about their respective religions and get to know each other as human persons. The importance of this dialogue became evident when the rural community, where racial tensions still run high, braced itself for the repercussions of the most recent violence. In addition to the work of the Greater St. Cloud Area Faith Leaders, a local Christian-Muslim

We've updated our privacy policy. You can see the details [here](#).

[Close this notice](#) (we will save a setting in your browser to keep it from showing again).



0:59

US Supreme Court won't hear challenge to

GK Chestnut sainthood

Powered by

Trending

1. Judge Amy Barrett's Charismatic Affiliation: Who Are the People of Praise?



2. How Should Catholics Respond to the Pope's 'Paradigm Shift'?



3. Three Sisters, Three Weddings in Three Months



4. Will This Catholic Jurist Be the Newest Supreme Court Justice?



5. Steubenville Prof Sets the Record Straight on the Middle Ages



6. As Rhoda Wise Cause Prepares for Rome, a Look at Her Friendship With Mother Angelica



7. Vatican Withdraws Charges Against Former Auditor General



8. DC Judge Brett Kavanaugh Nominated to US Supreme Court



9. Missionaries of Charity Sister Arrested





The *St. Cloud Times* has reported harassment of Somali businesses and a city on edge. The once-homogenous college town is still adjusting to the influx of Somali immigrants and refugees that started approximately 10 years ago.

“St. Cloud used to be called ‘white cloud,’ and they were proud of that,” said Sister Helen Rolfson, of the Sisters of St. Francis in Rochester, Minnesota, and chairwoman of the St. Cloud Diocese’s Ecumenical and Interreligious Commission.

Now, among St. Cloud’s approximately 66,000 people, 9% of residents are Somali. But, according to Sister Helen, “some treat it as though it were 50%.” The Christian-Muslim dialogue is helping to ease the racial and cultural friction, and Catholics have taken a strong leadership role in the effort.

Bishop Kettler’s Leadership

Much of the impetus comes directly from the diocese’s shepherd, Bishop Donald Kettler. When he came to St. Cloud in 2013, he made interreligious dialogue a prominent part of his ministry.

“Interfaith and ecumenical dialogue is just a priority of his,” said Joe Towalski, director of communications for the diocese.

Bishop Kettler met informally with local Muslims and leaders of other churches early on, but when a mosque was vandalized in December 2014, it seemed like the right time to formalize the meetings into a recognizable group. Bishop Kettler hosted the first meeting of the Greater St. Cloud Area Faith Leaders in April 2015 at the diocesan chancery.

It has met monthly since then, and the bishop has attended many of the sessions. The organization also hosts an annual picnic.

At the most recent one in August, 250 people — Muslims and Christians — attended and shared a potluck meal. The human interaction is as important as the theological discussion, say members.

“Before this [mall stabbing] we learned to laugh with each other, to eat each other’s food that came out of our own kitchens. Because of this, we could move into this [new discussion due to the mall stabbing] with respect,” Langer said.

Both Langer and Sister Helen agree that having the foundation of mutual respect and friendship built by the ongoing dialogue is key to moving through the new community crisis.

“We have our mission cut out for us,” Sister Helen said.

In an interview with the *St. Cloud Times* on Sept. 22, Bishop Kettler called on the community to not back away from dialogue and interaction. In his column in the diocesan paper, the *St. Cloud Visitor*, he also wrote, “This is what I am asking you to do: Don’t be afraid.” He also quoted Pope Francis’ 2015 address to the U.S. Congress, reminding Catholics, “If you want security, give security.”

Dialogue Continues

It seems the flock is heeding the advice of its shepherd.

On Thursday, Sept. 22, almost 300 people filled the parish hall at St. Joseph’s Church in St. Joseph, Minnesota, a small town 10 miles outside of St. Cloud, for a Christian-Muslim dialogue that also welcomed nine Somali-Muslim families into the community. The event was organized locally by an ad hoc group with help from the Interfaith Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group, an organization that started 10 years ago in St. Cloud and has expanded regionally.

Planning started approximately four months ago, when the town’s historic homogeneity was broken by the new arrivals.

“In a town of 6,000, of which 3,000 are students at St. Benedict’s College, the impact was obvious and created some consternation in the community,” said Vince De Vargass, a resident of St. Joseph and organizer of the event.

According to De Vargass, many Somalis have come to Minnesota because the government asked the Lutheran Church to resettle Somali refugees, and there is a large Lutheran presence in Minnesota. Members of the Lutheran church also held a listening session in July to allow St. Joseph residents to express their reactions to the demographic change.

In the planning for the Sept. 22 event, De Vargass reached out personally to all of the Somali families in St. Joseph. Then he invited parishioners. The announcement started at the Saturday evening Mass on Sept. 17, before the attacks had taken place. On Sunday morning, he didn't hold back, reminding parishioners that the actions of one person do not speak for a whole community.

'These Are Our People'

The evening accomplished exactly what De Vargass had hoped it would.

"The reception was awesome," De Vargass said. "People found the Somalis jolly, cheerful and talkative. It was not expected in the minds of a lot of people, but they really enjoyed meeting their neighbors."

Almost all of the Somali families in St. Joseph attended, along with hundreds of Christians. The evening started with three speakers: Crosier Father Virgil Petermeier, a longtime missionary among Muslims; Ayan Omar, a language arts teacher at Technical High School in St. Cloud; and Jama Alimad, a Muslim elder in St. Cloud and executive director of Community Grassroots Solutions. Omar received a standing ovation after sharing her personal story of fleeing her home and starting life over in Minnesota.

After the panel, the Somalis went into sex-separated rooms for their evening prayer. Christians were able to observe. Then attendees were seated at mixed Christian-Muslim tables, and the panel took questions.

De Vargass said they are also working on bringing "English as a Second Language" classes and homework tutoring to their town, in order to continue to help their new neighbors integrate.

As De Vargass said, "This is our town, and these are our people."

Register correspondent Bridget Ryder writes from St. Paul, Minnesota.

This story has been updated since its first posting.

Dear Reader,

We hope you are encouraged and challenged by the content you are reading. **Our mission is to provide a perspective on the news of the day as seen through the eyes of the Catholic church.** We assist Catholics in engaging the culture with confidence in the saving and sanctifying Gospel of Jesus Christ.

After more than 90 years, the *National Catholic Register* continues to provide its readers with timely news from across the United States, the Vatican, and around the world.

The Register is read by tens of thousands of Catholics along with over 800 priests, 160 bishops, 40 archbishops and 30 Vatican officials.

It is important for you to know that the content you read on the *National Catholic Register* is completely free because of the generous support of our readers.

Would you consider making a donation to ensure that the *National Catholic Register* can continue to be America's most complete and faithful Catholic news source and remain as effective as possible?

If you rely on the *National Catholic Register* for relevant and timely news and information, please take a moment and give today.

Support the National Catholic Register

[View Comments](#)

We've updated our privacy policy. You can see the details [here](#).

[Close this notice](#) (we will save a setting in your browser to keep it from showing again).

