

**OPINION**

## Our View: What are you doing to mend the St. Cloud community?

Times Editorial Board    Published 9:54 a.m. CT July 12, 2019 | Updated 9:55 a.m. CT July 12, 2019



Abdi Daisane (center) talks with others over food at an iftar hosted by the Islamic Center of St. Cloud on Friday, May 24, 2019. (Photo: Austen Macalus, amacalus@stcloudtimes.com)

Later this week, St. Cloud will mark one month since The New York Times published its assessment of how our fast-growing community faces tension, bigotry and worse thanks to some people opposing the presence of immigrants and refugees, especially those with roots in Somalia and who practice Islam.

The report did a thorough job of presenting how a "loosely connected network of white, anti-immigration activists" — the report's description — can foment fear and mistrust.

What the New York Times report did not report thoroughly was how this community has worked hard on many fronts for years to counter that poison.

Yes, the report did mention #UniteCloud, which has been a leader recently in building a welcoming community and, more importantly, educating residents about Muslim practices.

It also shouted out the St. Cloud Times' [immigration fact check series \(https://www.sctimes.com/search/fact%20check/\)](https://www.sctimes.com/search/fact%20check/), which started in October 2015.

However, those are just two efforts created to educate and promote interaction and civility. Here are just a few others:

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Bishop Donald Kettler and members of the Greater St. Cloud Area Faith Leaders present a letter of support in 2017 at the Central Minnesota Islamic Center in St. Cloud. (Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

## United faith leaders

For at least five years, more than a dozen leaders of different churches and faiths in the St. Cloud area have been leading the charge to build relationships and encourage religious acceptance.

This group — commonly referred to as the [Greater St. Cloud Area Faith Leaders \(/story/news/local/immigration/2017/03/24/leaders-hope-make-welcome-place-all-people/99516190/\)](/story/news/local/immigration/2017/03/24/leaders-hope-make-welcome-place-all-people/99516190/) — has been especially supportive of the local Muslim community. Its members include the St. Cloud Diocese, First Presbyterian, Bethlehem Lutheran, Higher Ground to name just a few.

The support from these faith leaders, especially when local Muslims are faced with opponents bent on ignoring the First Amendment, is invaluable. [Buy Photo](#)



Audience members listen to guest speakers during the 2015 Create COMMUNITY Conversation on Race at the River's Edge Convention Center in St. Cloud. (Photo: Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com)

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With roots going back about 20 years, Create CommUNITY is essentially a joint public/private organization providing front-line leadership in protecting human rights and making this a welcome place to live, work and visit.

Similar to (and often in conjunction with) the faith leaders group, [Create CommUNITY \(/story/news/local/2014/12/25/community-priorities-create-common-vision/20881035/\)](#) brings together key leaders of private, nonprofit and public organizations to address racism and other forms of discrimination.

While its best known for its annual Conversation on Race event, its deep connections through all sectors of Central Minnesota make it a driving and expansive force for equality and acceptance.

## And then there's ...

While groups like those mentioned above stand out as organizations focused solely on these issues, there are countless other entities — private, nonprofit and public — systematically working to replace negative stereotypes with facts, figures and friendliness.

Witness [the Islamic Center of St. Cloud's iftars \(/story/news/2019/05/25/st-cloud-iftar-muslim-community-together-ramadan-questions/1236052001/\)](#) held earlier this year. It marked about the 10th year the center has invited the public to the evening meal when Muslims break fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

The whole point is to bring non-Muslims together with Muslims so people can learn about each other and how being different does not have to be divisive.

As for facts and figures, look no farther than the Stearns County Human Services department's April report "[Refugee Resettlement and Public Assistance.](#)" (<https://co.stearns.mn.us/Portals/0/docs/Department%20Files/HumanServices/Refugee%20Resettlement%202019%20Board%20Presentation.pdf?ver=2019-04-09-111039-997>)

For the fourth time in five years — and to silence continued (and debunked) rumors — the department provided a detailed report on primary refugees it helped, assistance programs available to refugees and ALL residents, and costs and funding sources for these.

Not to be overlooked, too, the report again noted that after three years on state assistance, more Somali (80.5%) than white (72.9%) and African-American (51%) residents were self-supportive.

Similar reports and fact sheets have come in recent years from the city of St. Cloud based on federal and state data along with the expertise of local economics experts.

And that is just scratching the surface.

## What are you doing?

Clearly, there are many other organizations — public, private and nonprofit — working across this area to promote acceptance and respect and educate people about cultures, traditions and religions with which they may not be familiar.

The Times Editorial Board invites you to share your actions — or those of your group or business — through the Times Opinion section. In 200 words or less, explain what you're doing or have done to show acceptance of refugees and immigrants new to this community.

Submissions must include your full name, city of residence and a daytime phone number.

Send them to [letters@stcloudtimes.com](mailto:letters@stcloudtimes.com) or mail them to SC Times Opinions, 24 Eighth Ave. S, St. Cloud MN 56301.

The Times will work to publish them online and in print as space allows.

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*This is the opinion of the Times Editorial Board, which consists of News Director Lisa Schwarz, Engagement Editor Randy Krebs and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.*

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