

## CHAPTER V

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# THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS: A CASE STUDY OF ROCHESTER'S EXPERIENCE

### *The Need for Dialogue*

FROM the historical perspective, Muslims have influenced Western culture and civilization for over a millennia. In contrast, for many centuries, Western culture had no particular influence on the Muslim world. Rather, it benefited tremendously from the “Islamic enlightenment” in all cultural and scientific fields. Dr. Hans Koechler, in his paper entitled “Muslim-Christian Ties in Europe: Past, Present and Future,” compares in detail Europe’s Christian civilization to Islamic civilization during those centuries. According to him, Islamic civilization was far more refined and enlightened. The Muslims that Christians encountered during the Crusades and afterwards awakened Europe from its “dogmatic sleep” and helped Europeans take a step toward creating an enlightened, rational, and non-dogmatic worldview. Whether it came through the “Great Library of Europe” in Toledo (Andalusia) or similar institutions, Islam had a great impact on the West. In 1130, Toledo’s school of translation attracted students and researchers from all over Europe. This school bore the stamp of Muslim influence.

Christian-Muslim relations worsened during the early modern period, for the Ottoman Empire and the Western powers were locked in mutual distrust. Not content with downplaying Islamic civilization’s positive influence upon and contribution to European civilization, Western Europe attempted to demonize the very character of Islam.

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With the advent of colonialism, Western Europe's relations with Muslims tended even further towards political domination and "cultural tutelage." The negative characterization of Islam continued with the academic discipline of "Orientalism" which has its roots in this apologetic Christian approach that made Christian doctrine superior to the supposed Islamic "heresy." Hollywood movies, as well as electronic and print media, played an increasing role in strengthening such distortions.

Today, Muslim communities in the West are frequently portrayed as a threat to the West's sociocultural cohesion. The existence of sizable Muslim communities in the region has led to increasingly hostile reactions on the part of Westerners. First, the electronic and print media have made these people aware that the number of Muslims is growing. "The churches are empty and the mosques are filled" is a catchy phrase that has often been used to sow fear and distrust. Then the tragic incident of 9/11 happened, followed by bombings in Madrid and London. All of these disasters strengthened the customary stereotyping of Islam and Muslims in popular cultural mind of the West. Furthermore, Muslim communities are suspected of being potential allies of the new "militant Islam," which is perceived as threatening the West's cultural identity.<sup>1</sup>

As religious and cultural minorities, Muslims in the West are experiencing hard times because of this continuous stereotyping and humiliation. Yet, in the face of these assaults, they have not been passive. Rather, they have made strong efforts and invested many of their resources into countering this demonization. Obviously, far more efforts and even greater investments are needed. This is where interfaith dialogue comes in, for this activity can play a powerful role by initiating community programs that benefit the common welfare and promote social justice and civil rights.

Thankfully, many churches oppose such anti-Muslim stereotyping. Instead, they seek to build good relations with Muslims. In their adult education classes, Christians read about Islam and other religions. Many church groups visit mosques as key parts of their study. They are fascinated and impressed when they see Muslims pray and often speak about how the Muslims' devotion to God stimulates them to be more

faithful in their own worship. Many churches include teaching about Islam and site visits to mosques within their curriculum for youth confirmation as well. Teenagers and young people display a real interest in interfaith understanding and seek to join with their Muslim counterparts in various social justice projects. At the highest organizational levels – that of church councils, Catholic and Episcopalian dioceses, and other church organizations – there is genuine interest in building bridges through dialogue with Muslims.

Yet despite these worthy efforts, opposition is also rising among some Christians. The Evangelical conservative right wing is very opposed to interfaith dialogue, especially with Muslims. According to some Evangelicals, Christians who engage in interfaith dialogue with “infidel” Muslims become “infidels” themselves. However, such fearful, judgmental tendencies occur in every faith group.

Regardless of current threats, participation in any interfaith dialogue that leads to understanding and respect for humanity is commanded by Allah. Thus once they settle down in a Christian country, Muslims have always approached their new neighbors amicably and with the intentions of living in peace and building strong interfaith relations with them. In such situations, Muslims must be ready to admit past wrongs done to Christians. They can do so, knowing that their Christian counterparts will often reciprocate.

Despite its difficulties and challenges, the period through which we are now living can be seen as an opportunity for building peaceful relationships. But we Muslims need to be careful to avail ourselves of the opportunity instead of trying to turn it into a competition. An example of misusing this opportunity occurred recently when, during a Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogue, a Muslim told the imam: “I want to convert all of them to Islam. Allow me to speak.” However, as indicated above, interfaith dialogue does not consist of preaching, debating, or converting, but of building relations for peaceful co-existence.

Meeting Muslims and including them in the family of races and religions with equal rights and obligations for all is a new experience for many members of the West's white Christian majority. As a result of such insecurity, and combined with the fear generated by 9/11,

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bigotry and xenophobia have increased. Despite this negative reaction, such religious groups as the Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations courageously demonstrate their readiness for dialogue and peaceful coexistence. They persist even at the cost of losing many members to right-wing Christian congregations.

Regardless of the difficulties, interfaith dialogue, as discussed in chapter II must be handled fairly, justly, and with respect for all. Thus, when Muslim representatives persuade their Christian counterparts to have joint public seminars and programs on understanding Islam, they must be careful not to give even the appearance of attempting to preach to their audiences. Such an impression will destroy the dialogue. These seminars should address both Christian and Muslims beliefs and provide a comparative view of each, without attempting to judge between the two. Two speakers well versed in dialogue, one from each faith, should be chosen. If possible, they should meet beforehand so they can get to know each other and decide on a coherent approach. If the Christian partner suggests a seminar on Islam only, then perhaps only the Muslim speaker will be needed. If Muslims attempt to initiate a seminar on Islam, some resistance might occur. In some cases, Christian partners have complained about what they see as the Muslims' overly assertive attitude. Some have even left the dialogue under that impression.

### *Jewish-Muslim Dialogue*

Muslims and Jews enjoyed a remarkable cultural renaissance in Andalusia from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. Hasdai ibn Shaprut served in the court of Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III of Cordova. With Hasdai's encouragement, Jewish poets and scholars flocked to Andalusia from all over the world and launched a new era that was to become known in Jewish history as the "Golden Age of Andalusia."

Jews under the Ottomans lived in peace and prosperity. For the past seven hundred years, since the conquest of Bursa in 1326 and warm welcome to the Sephardic Jews when they were expelled from Spain till today in modern Turkey, the Jewish community has lived along with Muslims in peace and security. When Istanbul came under the

rule of the Ottomans in 1453, Sultan Mehmet II appointed Moshe Kapsali as the chief Rabbi of Istanbul so the Jewish community could live in peace practicing their faith with dignity. During World War II, Turkey remained and served as a safe passage for Jews fleeing from the horrors of Nazism. In the Jewish Museum of Istanbul, there are documents and evidence of how the two communities have lived in peace since the Ottoman period.<sup>2</sup>

Yet today, there is a great gap of misunderstanding between Muslim and Jewish communities. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has created distrust and hard feelings, and dialogue has suffered as a result. However, many Reform and even Conservative rabbis are willing to dialogue with Muslims. Muslims must encourage this open-mindedness, especially in the wake of 9/11 for several reasons. First, by seeking to dialogue with the Jewish community, Muslims send a strong message that they do not hesitate to build relations even with those with whom they sharply differ. Second, building coalitions with Jewish community leaders may result in certain political benefits. However, this reason should not be perceived as opportunistic because, given existing realities in the West, it is both pragmatic and realistic. Third, since Jews are members of the Abrahamic religious community, Muslims have a religious duty to reach out to them. Fourth, the rich historical tradition of strong and fruitful Jewish-Muslim relations must not be forgotten. Both groups' closeness in beliefs about God and in many religious practices provides additional grounds for dialogue. Fifth, Muslims recognize the Biblical prophets as prophets of Islam. Understanding the similarities and differences between their portrayal in the Old Testament and the Qur'an could be a good topic for a successful dialogue, one that could well lead to a deeper understanding of Judaism and Islam. Sixth, Muslims and Jews share the experience of living as minorities in the West. Not so long ago, the Jews experienced catastrophic persecution at the hands of Europe's Christian majority. They have experienced fewer such evils in the United States, yet they still face discrimination. In the wake of 9/11, Muslims are going through increasing discrimination. The two communities could use dialogue to talk with each other about dealing with discrimination successfully.

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But beyond what they can gain even from such dialogues, Muslims and Jews have a role to play together in building a more peaceful world. A successful dialogue between the two communities and better relations could eventually contribute to the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such a vision is not as impossible as it might seem. Consider the late Rabbi Judea Miller of Rochester's Temple B'rith Kodesh. An active member of the city's Interfaith Forum, Rabbi Miller was very interested in building bridges and better relations between both communities. Accordingly, the Reform Jewish Community of Temple B'rith Kodesh and the Islamic Center joined hands to promote many activities, especially during the Bosnia crisis. One of these activities stands out: a joint fundraising dinner for Bosnian victims of war held at the synagogue in 1993. Many people attended, including state and federal government representatives. For the first time in a Rochester synagogue, the *adhan* (call for worship) was made and the Muslims prayed in congregation. This was indeed a historic occasion.

Rabbi Miller, a recognized leader of the Reform Jewish community, expended a great deal of time and effort to build good relations. He was also a humble, spontaneous man. Sometimes he would come to the Islamic Center without calling ahead if he had a new idea to share. On one occasion, he called Imam Shafiq's home from the airport to express sadness over the incident in which an American-born Jewish man had opened fire on Muslims during the congregational prayer in a Hebron mosque. He asked the imam to call a joint press conference for the next morning to condemn the incident. The center was packed with media personnel as well as community leaders on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the press conference, Rabbi Miller called the attacker an impostor, a betrayer of the Jewish faith. He asked Tel Aviv and the Jewish people to make amends for the betrayal.

### *Current Challenges Among Muslim Interfaith Participants*

Interfaith dialogue is a new experience for many Muslims. Some Muslims are knowledgeable about Islam but very rigid in their approach; others are very interested in dialogue but have little

knowledge of Islam. Thus, Muslim participants need extensive training before they can play an effective role in a dialogue designed to improve their overall image and increase the non-Muslim participants' understanding of Islam.

In general, any Muslim dialogue with Christians and Jews has several major challenges. The first challenge is one of numbers. The Muslim representatives are always fewer in number than the non-Muslims. There are several explanations for this: the organizers often find it difficult to get the Muslim Community involved, Muslims come from cultures in which such dialogue is unknown or discouraged, or in which opportunities for public participation in such events are limited. Indeed, many Muslims in the West are struggling for basic economic survival, and religious leaders in the community tend to prefer intra-community activities.

The second challenge relates to dialogue itself. Muslim participants often have an incomplete understanding of the relevant principles and guidelines. This might be explained by the fact that few, if any, formal Islamic educational systems offer a curriculum that includes the Islamic approach to interfaith dialogue. In part, socioeconomic necessity and a scarcity of resources account for this gap. In addition, most Islamic educational institutions emphasize the apologetic (defensive or offensive) approach in dealing with other religions. In both cases, the goal is to win the argument and prove Islam's superiority. The unfortunate result is that many Muslims know very little, if anything, about Islam's rich sources and history of interfaith dialogue. It should be noted, however, that this situation is not exclusive to Muslims and their educational systems. Christian and Jewish systems suffer from the same apologetic approach to knowing the "other." As a result, their followers also arrive at a dialogue ready not to learn, share, and build better relations, but to prove the superiority of their own religion.

The third challenge results from the unwillingness of the community's religious leadership to lead the way in dialogue. Imams and experts in Islam rarely participate in interfaith meetings. One of the first steps in encouraging them to do so is to overcome some of their internal challenges through intra-Muslim dialogue, better training for imams, and community outreach. As mentioned earlier, the participation of these people would better serve the cause of Islam.

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The fourth challenge arises from asymmetry. Most interfaith groups are initiated, designed, and funded by non-Muslim leaders and institutions. As a result, Muslim participation tends to become symbolic and the Muslim contingent finds itself unable to make any substantive contribution. In fact, in many cases Muslim representation is added after the entire program has been fully developed. Such token participation damages the potential effect that interfaith dialogue can have on the well-being of all the communities involved. A symmetric contribution and ownership of the dialogue process is required for a successful and effective program.

The fifth challenge stems from the fact that Muslim communities often lack professional trainers and facilitators for interfaith dialogue. Thus, the program leader or facilitator is often a non-Muslim who is not rooted in the Islamic tradition. This weakness reduces the program's coherence and appeal to Muslims. When a capable Muslim facilitator is available, the community will view the interfaith dialogue groups with more credibility.

The overemphasis on concrete results constitutes a sixth challenge. The lack of such results can discourage Muslim participation. Due to the difficult economic and political situations of many Muslims, they tend to be interested in concrete behavioral and structural changes in the system. Thus, some of them view an interfaith dialogue that focuses only on exploring beliefs as a waste of time. Accordingly, those who participate in such events should always emphasize specific agendas and concrete outcomes in order to overcome such suspicion and hesitation. In addition, they should always ask how their community would benefit from the proposed dialogue process.

### *The Abrahamic Faiths: Contemporary Examples of Interfaith Dialogue*

Once educated in the basic principles of interfaith dialogue, imams and other Muslim community leaders need to ensure successful interfaith meetings and intra-Muslim dialogue events by creating a dialogue group with a clear mission statement, establishing planning committees, and selecting and implementing appropriate program models.

## *The Abrahamic Faiths: A Case Study of Rochester's Experience*

Documents and mission statements: Many churches are eager to participate in interfaith dialogue. There could be two levels of dialogue: formal and institutional dialogue (namely, with such groups as the local Catholic or Episcopal diocese, the local council of churches, or similar organizations) and community dialogue with local churches. Muslims can begin the process by inviting the target group to lunch or dinner or perhaps visiting the target group at its place of worship or another setting of its own choosing. At the start of a formal dialogue, a statement of purpose and by-laws will need to be drawn up. This kind of dialogue must be conducted carefully and with due consideration for procedures, details, and goals.

Setting goals is very important. Rochester's successful interfaith efforts are due, in part, to its careful selection of goals. Most of its programs are limited to enhancing leadership. Accordingly, the Interfaith Forum rarely arranges public educational programs. On the other hand, the Islamic Center of Rochester seeks to establish educational programs so that Muslims and Christians can meet and learn from each other and exchange views. Responding to that need, Rev. Gordon Webster of the Presbyterian church, an active member of the Interfaith Forum, and some Muslim members decided in 1993 to create a Commission on Christian-Muslim Relations (CCMR). Since its inception, this commission has done a marvelous job of devising and hosting outreach programs for the entire Rochester community. Its seminars and other activities are attended by up to 250 people. (See Appendix II for the commission's mission statement and by-laws).

Creating a formal dialogue group with a mission statement requires a lot of work as well as dedicated partners willing to devote their time and energy. This group should have a mission statement that clearly explains the rules of engagement in order to attract new members. Attracting new volunteers is essential, for it is not realistic to expect volunteers to stay engaged for a long period. In addition, religious leaders' assignments change from time to time. And there may be other impediments. For example, for Muslims in America, many mosques do not have imams, and those that do may have imams who are not fluent in English or who are hesitant to participate. Formal dialogue derives its strength from institutions and builds on public support, thus

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both of these are essential if the dialogue is to reach its goals. Yet many in Muslim communities are reluctant to give institutional support to interfaith dialogue. Because this activity – in its present form – is still a relatively new concept, its value is often subject to doubt.

Resistance to the very idea of interfaith dialogue can arise even while drafting and preparing the mission statement. For example, at a Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogue in New York, a Catholic participant asserted that it was wrong to dialogue with Muslims since, according to him, Muslims believe that all non-Muslims will go to hell. While such misperceptions can be countered through ongoing meetings, they can chill any gathering upon first hearing.

Despite the fact that Christians and Muslims share a lot of common religious beliefs and history, they still encounter many obstacles when trying to create a successful dialogue. This is also true of Jews and Muslims. Today, Muslims and Jews are locked in misunderstandings and conflicts of interest. As mentioned earlier, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has created distrust and hard feelings, both of which make dialogue difficult. Fortunately, some Reform and Conservative rabbis as well as some imams are willing to dialogue; many Jews and Muslims realize the significance of dialogue between the two communities and understand its relevance to modern society. Muslims and Jews need one another in order to build better relations between their communities and help bring about peace in the Middle East and in the world at large. Nevertheless, it is still difficult for them to discuss the issue of Israel and Palestine openly.

Despite this reality, Rochester's Jews and Muslims have formed a commission to create a formal dialogue with institutional support. (See Appendix III for its mission statement and by-laws). For many years, the participants concentrated on Muslim-Jewish relations in the United States and avoided talking about Israel and Palestine. Recently, they have begun to address this sensitive topic in their leadership circle; however, they have been unable to hold a public seminar and open dialogue on it. Obviously, Jewish-Muslim dialogue becomes harder when there is renewed conflict in the Middle East. Many Muslims would hesitate to enter a synagogue, just as Jews would hesitate to enter a mosque, during such crises. In many cases, the members of the

city's dialogue group have overcome that hesitation. In a joint Jewish-Muslim event at the Islamic Center, so many people showed up that the main worship area was opened to provide enough space. It was a historic moment when the imam and the rabbi stood together in the minbar (the place from which the imam gives the Friday sermon) to speak on Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

Despite all such difficulties, the CCMR and the Commission on Jewish-Muslim Understanding (CJMU) have had a tremendous impact on community building and harmony in Rochester. Encouraged by the success of these efforts, the Catholic members of the CCMR sought to participate more directly by establishing close cooperation between the Catholic and Muslim communities. This relationship was already friendly, but after 9/11 it grew even warmer. Muslims were invited to give presentations on the basics of Islam ("Islam 101") at many Catholic churches. A booklet on "Islam 101" was printed jointly and distributed throughout the diocese. Finally, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rochester, responding openly and pastorally to a desire on both sides for a formalized bond of solidarity, joined with the imam of the Islamic Center of Rochester and various Muslim community leaders to sign a historic agreement during May 2003. (See Appendix IV for the text of this agreement).

The seeds sown in Rochester have begun to spring up elsewhere. Recently, the Muslim community of the Washington, DC, area approached the Catholic Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, through the efforts of Rochester's Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue (CISD). Initially, there was hesitation to enter into formal dialogue, but soon the two communities overcame their hesitations. The dialogue group is known as the Catholic-Muslim Dialogue (CMD) of Northern Virginia. (See Appendix V for its mission statement and by-laws).

Planning an interfaith program: In its initial phase, interfaith dialogue faces many challenges, among them; fears of mistreatment, disrespectful language, and intimidation. Even in the Rochester dialogue groups, fears still loom despite the many success stories. The interfaith leadership must face these challenges together. If the leadership becomes divided or uses disrespectful language, the dialogue

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collapses. In anticipation of these challenges, Rochester's interfaith leadership came up with a pledge to be signed by all of the participating religious leaders.

The pledge acknowledges that Rochester is a remarkable community for interfaith cooperation and that its people of faith were fervently praying for peace in the world and in their community during this time of increasing crisis. While some may feel helpless when it comes to changing the course of global events, they do not believe they are spiritually or politically powerless. Both of the religious traditions call its members to value each human life and stand up for human rights against injustice. They believe that each of them has an important role to play in peacemaking in their community, and that by doing so they will cause ripples that will extend far beyond Rochester. (For more details of the pledge's text, see Appendix VI).

### *Advice for Forming Interfaith Programs*

Forming an interfaith group and agreeing on a mission statement, even signing an agreement, may be difficult. But it is also an exciting and gratifying undertaking. The most difficult steps include not only planning and executing a program, but also ensuring that the all participants are behind the effort. To conduct a successful interfaith seminar, workshop, or other program, subcommittees and planning committees must be established to provide oversight. These subcommittees and planning committees should meet several times to organize the details of the event: the planning committee should determine the event's date, time, and place; the planning committee should prepare a flyer, handle publicity, and conduct an outreach campaign; and the planning committee has to decide on the coordinator, prepare an evaluation paper, and take care of security, hospitality, and all other essential items.

Both committees must make sure that none of the presenters engages in proselytization. Moreover, the responsibilities should be spread equally so that one participating group cannot dominate the others. In other words, each participant must be accorded full respect. The planning committee should manage the available time fairly and

make sure that everyone has enough time to ask and answer questions. No complaint or criticism should be brushed aside, and the evaluations collected after the program should be critically analyzed and, if appropriate, implemented in the next program. Finally, the committee's chairship must be rotated so that each group is treated equally and fairly. (For more details, see chapter II).

The Commission on Christian-Muslim Relations (CCMR), the Muslim-Catholic Alliance (MCA), and the Commission on Jewish-Muslim Understanding (CJMU) have sponsored many educational programs, seminars, and picnics to acquire a better understanding of each other's religion and for building bridges among the participating religious communities based on warm, human relationships.

Educating the public about Islam: Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the United States. When many Americans hear "Islam," they automatically think of terrorism, Arab Bedouins, or a religion of dark-skinned, uncivilized people. Some think that Allah is actually Satan. The media carry frightening stories and pictures reinforcing the Americans' fear on an almost daily basis. To counter such negative images and fears, the CCMR has offered many "Islam 101" programs: "Islam: The Message and the Messenger," "Muslim Life around the Clock," "Muslim Faith and Worship," "Women in Islam," "Jihad: Personal and Public," and others. These seminars have been received very favorably and have drawn more than 200 people each time. (For more details, see Appendix VII).

Yet misunderstandings have arisen. For example, at one point the Christian leadership received complaints that the Muslim leadership was preaching Islam and (unknowingly) criticizing Christianity. Although these complaints were found to be baseless, the misconception constituted a serious risk to continued dialogue. Some of the leaders were afraid that the misconception would damage the good relationship created between the two communities. Similar misconceptions hamper Muslims' understanding of Christianity and of Christians who speak about Christianity. Many Muslims look at Christianity from a Qur'anic worldview and explain it accordingly. They are usually familiar with the Biblical account of creation, Original Sin, Mary and Jesus, heaven and hell, and many other

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Christian concepts. Yet each Christian denomination has its own explanations or interpretations of these beliefs. So when Muslims say that “such and such is what Christians believe and this is what Islam says,” the Christian audience is in many cases surprised to hear some Muslim perceptions, which they never heard before, described as Christian beliefs. Muslims have a great deal to learn about the different ways that Christians “hear” stories that both religions have in common.

Rochester’s interfaith dialogue did two things to overcome this confusion: it asked Muslim speakers to limit themselves to Islam and began to train Muslim speakers in Christian sensitivity. In one evening, about twenty-five Muslim leaders got together and invited some Christian leaders to dinner in order to train Muslims in Christian sensitivity. The speakers, among them Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, addressed the following topics: creation, Original Sin, the Trinity, Jesus Christ (Who is He), and what unites Christians. (For more details, see Appendix VIII).

In addition, MCA offered a series of seminars on the comparative practices of Islam and Catholicism pertaining to the cycles of life, beliefs (including heaven and hell), and the worship that shapes those practices. These seminars helped both communities understand each other’s religion better and also reduced the level of misunderstanding between them. As a result, they found it easier to become friends. In the Jewish-Muslim series, the topic of “Our Journey to America: Obstacles and Challenges” was especially appreciated as a learning experience for both groups. Muslims learned how Jews, in the past, had lived in fear in the United States in a way that closely resembles how Muslims live here today. Muslims took courage from learning how Jews overcame prejudice and found respect in the country.

Most of the MCA and CJMU seminars were comparative in nature consisting of one speaker from each religious community, who talked only about his or her own religion. Although they were told to follow this rule, some people in the audience felt that the speakers tended to undermine each other. To deal with this difficulty, the Rochester interfaith leadership asked the speakers to meet and find common ground before appearing in public. Also most of these programs were properly evaluated and the evaluation was discussed in the regular

meeting and the suggestions were incorporated into future programs. (See Appendix IX for a sample of evaluation of a program).

Thus, many of these programs were conducted in Muslim community centers. The Rochester Islamic Center and the ADAMS Center are examples of Muslim community centers that have managed to hold their own in such interfaith encounters. Many other centers ought to be recognized and highlighted, too, for providing venues on a par with those offered by their non-Muslim dialogue partners.

### *Key Points of the Chapter*

- Interfaith dialogue between the followers of Abrahamic faiths in the United States has received top priority since 9/11. Imams and Islamic scholars must get more involved in order to provide proper direction and achieve better results.
- Muslim dialogue with mainline Christians is moving ahead smoothly. However, imams need to reach out to Evangelical Christians in order to build mutual understanding and respect.
- While Muslim dialogue with Jews is taking place in many cities, it is moving at a slow pace. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the main obstacle. It is advisable to focus exclusively on Jewish-Muslim relations in the United States, as the two communities have much to share and to experience since they are living together here.
- Muslim participants should not insist on “Islam 101” for public education unless other dialogue partners suggest it. Programs should deal equably with each dialogue partner’s concerns.
- Since Muslim leaders and imams tend to approach Judaism and Christianity from a Qur’anic perspective, they need sensitivity training so that they can acquire an accurate understanding of how Jews and Christians understand their religion. This will prevent many unintended offensive words and incidents.
- An important aspect of interfaith encounter is to work as an equal partner with the participating non-Muslim institutions or groups.
- The appendices at the end of this guide can be used to create an interfaith program.

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### *Discussion Questions*

1. Are you aware of any other mission statement of an interfaith group in which Muslims are actively involved? Who are the Muslim participants? From your perspective, what are their successes and failures?
2. If interfaith dialogue takes place in your area, what forms does it assume? What programs are offered? Can you judge whether each group's participation is equitable? Is literature about these programs available to you?
3. If you participate in interfaith dialogue, what mission statement guides you? What programs have you initiated? If you would like to participate, what would your ideal mission statement be? What programs would you like to initiate?
4. If you already participate in Jewish-Muslim dialogue or belong to a Muslim group participating in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, what are the areas of success and failure of such dialogue? What are its future prospects? How could it be improved?
5. Do you have a mission statement of a Jewish-Muslim dialogue or know of any group that has one?
6. If you were to participate in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, what type of mission statement would you propose? What type of programs would you initiate for a successful dialogue?