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Comforting Haiti through interfaith dialogue

Recent co-operation between Muslims and Mennonites on relief efforts grew out of regular meetings that started three years ago

BY MIRKO PETRICEVIC, RECORD STAFF

When a group of local Muslims dropped into the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Ontario's office to help make comforters for Haiti earthquake victims, it wasn't a spur-of-the-moment goodwill gesture.

The Kitchener-based relief agency and local Muslims have been getting together regularly for almost three years.

The interfaith "dialogue," as the regular contacts have been dubbed, started with breakfast get-togethers at the agency's Kitchener office, at churches, local mosques and Muslim community centres.

The meetings led to other events, including an information workshop on faith and finances. Another workshop, on raising faithful children in a secular world, is being planned for March.

And some congregations, of both faiths, are combining efforts to sponsor three Palestinian refugee families to Canada.

On the last Friday of the month, volunteers from both faith communities gather at MCC's office to pack relief kits and make comforters for people in countries devastated by disasters.

Last Friday more than 30 people sat around three colourful comforters stretched on wooden frames. As volunteers knotted the blankets — a process of attaching several layers of queen-sized fabric to each at numerous strategic points — they chatted non-stop.

Friendly laughter burst from different areas of the room.

Ghada Hammouda, the Muslim volunteer co-ordinator, said she had read about the Mennonites' relief work long ago. But dialogue started, she had never met a Mennonite.

"This meeting . . . just broke ice and built bridges," she said.

Conversation comes naturally as they work alongside each other. Sometimes they talk about what their kids are doing in school. Sometimes Mennonites ask Hammouda why she wears a head scarf. It gives her a chance to educate others about her faith.

"People may think I'm distancing myself," said Hammouda, a tiny woman with a bubbly personality. "I'm not."

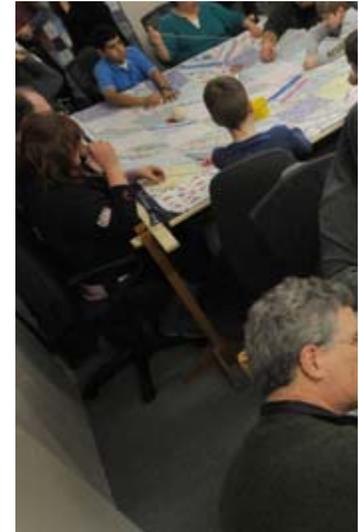
Janet Howitt, co-ordinator of the Mennonite-Muslim interfaith dialogue, said she tries to schedule a specific time during the meeting for someone to share information about their faith.

"I like to make a more intentional time of learning," she said.

For example, late last year one of the Christians made a short presentation about the meaning of Advent and Christmas.

Muslims spoke about the significance of the Hajj and Eid-ul-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice), which took place in late November. Zainab Ramahi spoke about her experiences as a Muslim student attending Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener.

Fauzia Mazhar, a Waterloo woman and one of the local Muslim communities' driving forces for interfaith dialogue, said she has worked with MCC Ontario staff members since 2003 when she helped organize a peace rally in the run-up to the war in Iraq.



Mirko Petricevic, Record staff member, and other Muslims and Mennonites get together to make comforters for victims. David Johnson, bottom left, and Minna Ella of Waterloo (fully covered in head scarf).

During the years that followed, she occasionally spoke on Muslim issues at Mennonite gatherings.

After the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Mazhar said she read a report about Muslims living in England. They had spent energy building mosques, Islamic centres and schools. But they had to start, almost from scratch, building relationships.

"That's really something that touched my heart," Mazhar said. "You're living in a community and you're not engaged with it. I think it's not fair, it's not good."

"Muslims have to be out building bridges, getting engaged in the community," she said. "It's not other peoples' responsibility. We have to be out there and work with other communities as a Muslim community and try to learn about them. It's our responsibility to be out there and work with other communities as a community."

While a number of organized events have sprung from the initial breakfast meetings, Mazhar said formal events are not the only ones. Her or many fellow Muslims involved in the early stages of the dialogue.

"A lot of people said 'we just want to know each other and then things will happen more organically,'" Mazhar said.

Margaret Nally, chair of the MCC Ontario board of directors, said Mennonite organizers also wanted to focus on talking about social issues rather than just theological issues.

"We learn how to be neighbours to each other," Nally said. "It's all our work for peace."

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HOW TO HELP HAITI

Canadian Red Cross online at www.redcross.ca or call toll free at 1-800-418-1111.

Kitchener-Waterloo Red Cross branch, 519-742-2785

Cambridge Red Cross branch, 519-621-1840

UNICEF, at www.unicef.ca or 1-416-482-4444

Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders) Canada, www.msf.ca, or 1-800-982-7903.

Mennonite Central Committee, online at mcc.org or call 1-800-313-6226. Kitchener office, 519-745-8458 or mail to MCC Kitchener, Ont. N2G 3R1

Salvation Army, 1-800-SAL-ARMY (725-2769) or www.SalvationArmy.ca

World Vision Canada, 1-800-268-5528, www.worldvision.ca

Foundation for International Development Assistance, www.fida-pch.org, 519-886-9520, 155 Frobisher Dr., Waterloo, Ont.

Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, 1-800-730-3490, CRWRC-Canada, 3475 Mainway, P.O. Box 5070, Stn LCD 1, Kitchener, Ont. N3Y 3Y8

Canadian Lutheran World Relief, 1-800-661-2597, www.clwr.org/donate, 302-393 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Man. R3B 3H4

Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, 1-888-664-3387, www.devpc.org, 1425 René-Lévesque Blvd. West, Montreal, Que. H3G 1T7.

United Church of Canada, www.united-church.ca

Presbyterian World Service and Development Fund, www.presbyterian.ca/pwsd

Anglican Church of Canada, www.anglican.ca

Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada, www.emcc.ca, 130 Fergus Ave., Kitchener, Ont. N2A 2H2

Kids Alive International Canada, www.kidsalive.ca, 519-624-9406, 55 Fleming Dr. Unit 2, Cambridge, Ont. N1T 2A9

HCBG Global Canada, www.hcjbglobal.ca, 519-650-5444, 3-44 Saltzman Dr., Cambridge, Ont. N3H 4R7

Donations made by individual Canadians to eligible Canadian charitable organizations from Jan. 12 to Feb. 12 will be matched by the federal government through the CIDA-managed Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund.

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