

On common ground

Neighboring mosque, synagogue reach out to close cultural gap

By Missy Ryan, Globe Correspondent | January 22, 2006

A mosque and a synagogue that stand just a few hundred feet apart on a wooded Wayland road might seem like unusual -- and potentially uneasy -- neighbors.

But worshippers at the Islamic Center of Boston mosque and Temple Shir Tikva on Boston Post Road have grasped the opportunity to reach out and learn more about each other.

Some meet regularly to share meals, discussing a wide range of topics from religion and current affairs to their jobs and children.

Members of each congregation have visited the neighboring place of worship for lectures or special events. And over the years, friendships have formed, despite the continuing turmoil in the Middle East.

"You have to recognize that there's a conflict going on, but what can you do about it?" said Malik Khan, president of the mosque's board. "You can make it worse by not talking to each other, or you can try to do the best that you can by keeping the lines of communication open . . . and hope that the grass-roots-level activity can somehow percolate up."

Both the mosque and the temple opened their doors in the 1980s, the Islamic Center at 126 Boston Post Road and Shir Tikva about 600 feet along the street at 141 Boston Post Road. Ties between some members of the two congregations stretch back for years.

But the dialogue deepened shortly after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Chris Gordon, a psychiatrist who is a Shir Tikva trustee, was looking for a place to pray on a day when President Bush had urged Americans to visit their houses of worship.

With no service at the temple that Friday afternoon, Gordon wandered over to the mosque, where regular prayers were being held. He joined in.

"They treated me with the utmost graciousness, and especially in the aftermath of 9/11, it was a fantastic experience to be there praying with these Muslim people," said Gordon. "I was also really struck by the similarities between their services and ours."

Since then, Gordon has helped organize the gatherings every few months where as many as 18 people from the two congregations meet at someone's home to break bread and talk.

In the group's first meeting, they broke the ice by asking everyone to explain the origin of their names. The exercise was a good way to kick-start discussion of differences in culture, he said.

Gordon said the smaller, informal meetings have worked better than larger, more formal meetings that were tried a few years ago, where he felt uncomfortable after some people plunged headlong into

serious theological discussions.

In the more casual atmosphere, "we really did get to know each other -- where we were from, how many kids we had," Gordon said. "Gradually, we would introduce more into conversation -- more substantive things."

Rabbi Neal Gold, who took over as Shir Tikva's religious leader last summer, said he was surprised to see a mosque across the street when he visited the temple for an interview.

"I said, 'My God! What a gift that is . . . to have all those opportunities for dialogue and sharing right in our laps,'" recalled Gold, who moved to Wayland from a congregation in New Jersey.

Gold said having a dialogue between Jews and Muslims in Wayland, and indeed a broader interfaith cooperation between all local religious groups, is "crucial in the America we live in today."

According to Akbar Ahmed, chairman of Islamic studies at American University's School of International Service in Washington, D.C., there has been a positive "transformation" of Jewish-Muslim relations in the United States since 9/11 -- not only among national religious leaders but on a community level.

Ahmed said 9/11 was a catalyst that underlined the need for better relations.

"Previously, Muslims and Jews were living primarily within their own communities, and very often they saw each other through the prism of the Middle East," he said.

Now, he said, "bridges are being created" among many Jews and Muslims in this country.

Asif Razvi, the Islamic Center's imam, or spiritual leader, was at Shir Tikva last month to see Gold's formal induction as rabbi.

An active member of local and regional interfaith groups, Razvi had a close, longstanding relationship with Gold's predecessor, Herman Blumberg, now rabbi emeritus.

"It's important for me, because it makes for much better understanding and much better relationships," said Razvi, who is head of vascular surgery at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center.

He said bridging religious gaps was important for him in his youth as a minority Muslim in his native India, where most people are Hindu. "I wanted to continue to do the same thing here," he said.

Standing at the door of the mosque's newly renovated prayer area, where columns and arched windows cast graceful shadows on the room's bare walls and floors, board president Khan said the discussions have highlighted similarities between the two religions.

For example, Judaism and Islam revere some of the same historical figures, like Abraham.

"We like to understand how Judaism approaches issues, and how Christianity does, how Islam does, because these three religions come from the [same] basic tree," Khan said. "What is it that they share and what are the differences?"

Khan said support from Shir Tikva's members -- and from Christians and others -- has been a boon for local Muslims in a sometimes suspicious post-9/11 environment.

"We found it's helped a lot," said Khan, an electrical engineer who came to this country 30 years ago from Pakistan.

Barbara Holtz, a member of Shir Tikva and one of the leaders of the Weston Wayland Interfaith Action Group, says Jewish-Muslim relations in Wayland have been not only cordial but have led to friendships.

Earlier this month, for example, she called a friend from the Islamic Center and invited him to a talk at Shir Tikva about the afterlife.

"To me, this is the ultimate of cool, that now we're beginning to call and invite each other to things," she said.

Gordon said his wife, on another occasion, helped a Muslim friend sell textiles to benefit victims of last fall's earthquake in Pakistan.

The Weston Wayland group, which includes members of Shir Tikva, the Islamic Center, and local Christians, holds about five public events a year. The topics of the talks have included trends in Israel, Muslim thought, and a personal view of the Muslim pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca.

They also have discussed theological books -- such as Bruce Feiler's "Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths" -- and drawn up guidelines for decorum to help visitors attending different religious services.

The group also helps organize a one-week camp for Jewish, Muslim, and Christian children.

"It's sharing of customs and life cycles, and how we live as a Jew, how we live as a Muslim, how we live as a Christian," said Rabbi Gold, who is looking forward to expanding interfaith activity.

Professor Ahmed is cautious, saying that the encouraging trends nationally in the past few years are just a beginning, and are vulnerable to being soured.

"These are tiny steps," he said. "This can all change very quickly. We need to persist."

Razvi wants to see further dialogue in Wayland, and has suggested discussion groups on such hot-button issues as the future of Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories.

Holtz said progress in building bridges was slowed by the Islamic Center's extensive renovation and by the temple's search process for a new rabbi.

Now that those milestones are past, Holtz said, she hopes relations will flourish even more between the two congregations.