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UK / PEACE & DEMOCRACY

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Annie Makoff



Members of York Mosque talk with the EDL earlier this year Photo ©Andy D'Agome

The brutal killing of drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich in May sparked racially motivated mosque attacks across the UK by far right groups. Research published in June from Teesside University, in collaboration with the Tell MAMA Project, which monitors anti-muslim attacks, revealed that not only have half of UK mosques been subjected to attacks since 9/11, but that these incidents increased ten-fold following the Woolwich murder.

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Yet for every new report of a racially motivated incident, other stories are emerging of how mosques are engaging with local people to counteract religious hatred and strengthen their communities.

Birmingham bore the brunt of several attacks following the Woolwich murder, as did parts of London and much of the north. But far from giving in to the climate of fear, some mosques, such as those within the London-based Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI) are determined to use the opportunity to unite in a peaceful cause.

"It's become more important than ever to unite against racism and religious intolerance," says Tamsila Tauqir, IMI founder. "Mosques are now realising that in order to counteract this racist backlash, the work they do must not just be internal but it must engage with the wider British community."

In fact, the IMI part-rents a church in Waterloo, where the church reverend sometimes joins members for prayer and discussion. Running since November 2012 as a space that is "neither sectarian nor ethnically-specific," the IMI welcomes people from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and is run almost exclusively by women. There are even plans to open the UK's first ever women- and gay-friendly mosque there.

"It's our hope that our work is going to make an impact on the wider community," Tauqir explains. "We are about being proactive and inclusive – that's so important in this current climate."

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In particular, their latest meeting had a female attendance rate of 99%. "What mosque can say that?" Tauqir asks. "We address all kinds of issues, too. It's not just about the hijab [veil]. Research has shown that there are really poor facilities for women in most mosques and disabled access is atrocious, so it's these kind of things, that when addressed, are going to make the difference to people's attitudes towards Islam."

"Islam is about protecting family and neighbours irrespective of their faith"

Councillor Waseem Zaffar of the Lozells and East Handsworth Ward in Birmingham agrees. For Zaffar, inclusiveness is about social cohesion and bringing together different faiths. In response to the killing of Lee Rigby, Zaffar and the Lozells Central Mosque hosted a conference, Islam: a Religion of Peace – Condemning the Woolwich Murder, and 100 members of the local community attended a peace walk involving

representatives of the Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Christian faiths.

"Islam is about protecting family and neighbours irrespective of their faith," explains Zaffar. "We wanted the conference to address this while condemning the recent atrocities which have no place in our society."

But perhaps one of the most inspiring stories to have come out of the fray is the tea party hosted by the Bull Lane Mosque in York in response to a planned EDL demonstration.

Mohamed El-Gomati, mosque elder and professor at the University of York, describes the decision to host the party as a "spontaneous reaction" borne out of a desire to be a "decent human" who wanted to protect the local community.

"It's a residential area and we didn't want anyone subjected to violence and abuse," he explains. "None of us understood why there was so much hatred towards us. We are in York, miles away from the atrocities, miles away from that awful killing which has brought many of us close to tears. So we thought we'd open up a dialogue with the EDL, like a peace offering."

It worked. Following a tense start in which the demonstrators stated their grievances against Islam and all Muslims, El-Gomati and his colleagues were able to address the issues head on, and some of the female mosque members even managed to persuade some of the female demonstrators into the mosque grounds for tea and biscuits.

"They were abusive at first, but then some of them started listening, albeit with some surprise, when we told them that we absolutely condemned the Woolwich murder and did not agree with Islamic extremism or the Taliban, who we view as absolute nutters. Many of them started to soften. Some even started laughing and joking with us and complimented us on our tea-making abilities," he recalls.

Since the event, the mosque says it has received hundreds of phone calls and emails from people all over the UK, from all backgrounds and faiths, congratulating them on how they responded.

"It just shows that what we did that day was a simple, human act that resonates with decent people everywhere," says El-Gomati. "A few days later, I saw one of the EDL demonstrators wave cheerily to the Imam of the mosque. I will never forget that, it brought tears to my eyes. So even if we have changed the attitude of just one person, that is the winning fruit. I don't want to claim any responsibility for it, I just want to give people a reason to hope, not hate."

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