

News

Connecticut group discusses bias against Islam

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HARTFORD (AP) — More than 150 Muslims and people of other faiths gathered Friday at the Connecticut Capitol said they are concerned about what they called "Islamophobia" across the country and for their safety during the holy month of Ramadan.

State religious delegates denounced the protest of a Bridgeport mosque by members of a Texas-based fundamentalist Christian group and called for religious tolerance.

Some supporters held signs, including one that read: "Love God. Love your neighbor. Period."

"Today we are in a place and time when, unlike any time before, Muslims and Islam are being marginalized, vilified and made to feel unwelcome in their own country and in their own homes by their own countrymen," said Rabia Chaudry, vice president of the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut.

Last week, about a dozen members of Operation Save America confronted worshippers outside of Bridgeport's Masjid An-Noor mosque, an encounter that mosque members say included hate-filled, anti-Muslim speech.

The protest led Muslim leaders to ask police and state officials for assurances they can worship without being harassed.

Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, began Wednesday.

"How can 'love thy neighbor' be translated as 'Jesus hates Muslims' or calling children murderers," said Reza Mansoor, president of the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut. "I cannot believe that the Jesus we are asked to revere and respect would ever be proud of people who do that in his name."

Mongi Dhaouadi, executive director of the Connecticut chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said he met with Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch before Friday's news conference. He said the mayor apologized for Operation Save America's actions.

"Save America? From what? I think that rhetoric should be directed at them," Dhaouadi said of the group. "We have an obligation as people of faith to save America from the extreme groups from all sides."

Marilyn Carroll, spokeswoman for Operation Save America, said the group's appearance at the mosque was a "gospel outreach" in which members handed out pamphlets and Bibles in English and Arabic.

She said the group has been active in Bridgeport for 20 years but last week was the first time it brought its message to a mosque in Connecticut.

The Rev. Flip Benham, national director of Operation Save America, said the group has been going to mosques since 2001 and has showed up at other places of Muslim worship in North Carolina, Texas, Colorado and elsewhere.

"Jesus loves Muslims and we love Muslims," Carroll said. "We are just reaching out to them to tell them the truth about the gospel."

Carroll said the group held a separate news conference Friday to explain that the group was not promoting messages of hate or religious intolerance. She denied allegations that members of Operation Save America were confrontational or shouted at worshippers.

"What good is it to call someone a murderer when you are trying to reach out to them?" she said. "Why would we do that, we don't even know who they are."

Dhaouadi, who said he was at the Bridgeport mosque when a smaller number of Operation Save America members showed up again Thursday, said that although he respects freedom of speech, some demonstrations can be taken too far.

"When you stick signs in front of kids who are walking out of an Islamic center after their prayers and all of a sudden they are surprised with a big sign calling them murderers, that is a borderline hate incident," he said.

Benham said the group plans make more trips to the Bridgeport mosque as well as to the site of a planned mosque near ground zero.

"We're not going to give up our First Amendment rights because people demand and want to change laws so that we are not allowed to freely speak."

Eric Silver, a rabbi from Cheshire, urged those at the Capitol to be respectful of all people, regardless of religion.

"Our task is to facilitate the full integration of the Muslim community into the mainstream of American life," he said. "They seek no less, they deserve no less."

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