

Pilgrim People

A most remarkable thing happened the other day. After a five-year walk in the suburban wilderness of Chicago, our Muslim friends from Northbrook, Ill. finally found a place to worship and practice their faith. They bought an old Lutheran church in Franklin Park, Ill. The few remaining members of this church threw their arms around their new Muslim friends and welcomed them to the neighborhood. These two faith communities are now serving the homeless and poor together in their neighborhood. The Lutherans asked if they could remain in the building awhile longer before completely handing it over to our Muslim friends. "Of course,," the Muslims replied. "By all means, we are very accustomed to doing God's work with Christians." After a few days of doing joint humanitarian projects together in Franklin Park, a most curious interchange took place. The Lutherans feeling so close and warm with our friends asked a strange question. They asked if they were Muslim. And our friends replied, "No, not entirely."

Let me explain.

Five years ago, Imam Senad Agic, the leader of our Muslim friends in Northbrook, was forced out as the leader of his mosque. He had done nothing wrong, morally or ethically. The ruling elder board simply did not like Senad's insistence that everyone in the mosque practice more Sufi prayers and practices. They also resisted his urging that the members of the mosque engage in more interfaith dialogue with their Christian neighbors, especially with the Village Presbyterian Church of Northbrook. His congregation's elders thought Senad was becoming too liberal and popular with their members. Therefore, they put him on trial in front of the congregation and voted him out. However, the elders were shocked when 80 percent of the mosque's members stood up and walked out with Imam Senad. From that moment on, Senad and his followers became a pilgrim people in search of a new home. They also drew closer to us as friends from the Village Church.

It has not been an easy road for Senad and his people. We have been meeting regularly with him for these past five years - studying our holy books together and engaging in joint community service projects. They first tried to buy an old warehouse building in Des Plaines, Ill. Initially, the local zoning board approved their proposal, but the city council and mayor refused to approve the final agreement -- with no particular explanation or objection. Other leaders from my church and I stood before the mayor and city council, vouching for the characters of our Muslim friends, urging the city of Des Plaines to remember that our own federal government had liberated these mostly Bosnian people from certain slaughter by the Serbian army in the 1990s. But, sadly, the city council of Des Plaines rejected the proposal for a new mosque. Eventually, the United States government sued Des Plaines for violating federal law dealing with religious freedom in our country. Because these legal matters became so lengthy and expensive, Senad and his

people moved on to another nearby community, Rolling Meadows, where the exact same thing happened again. They were denied their simple request to buy a particular building and worship freely in their town. Apparently, similar occurrences are happening every day now throughout our country. I have read that the federal government is currently engaged in nearly 50 similar law suits against local communities.

While all this was happening, Imam Senad stood during one of our Christmas dinners with our Muslim friends and gave an impassioned speech, profusely thanking us Christians for standing in solidarity with them as they struggled against the fear and prejudice of the city council of Des Plaines. Senad said they saw the love of God shining through us and that he had witnessed a side of Christianity he had never seen before. He knew we were risking our reputations and friendships by siding with them. He went on even further to say that the Quran talks about the "true believers" in God, people who transcend even being called Muslim or Christian. He believed that by being his friends, we were "true believers" who had miraculously come into their lives. And I think it was for this reason Senad said to his new Lutheran friends in Franklin Park that he and his members were not entirely Muslim.

Jesus never asked anyone to become a "Christian." The term "Christian" emerged later after his death, identifying those who chose to follow Jesus and his teachings. Jesus talked instead about following him into the kingdom of God. He asked his followers to become reconciled to God by believing that he was the Messiah, the son of the living God. He said that faith was a narrow gate, and that many people would avoid it or even miss it. He asked his followers to trust and follow him as sheep trust and follow their shepherd. He especially wanted his followers to trust him when facing their own deaths and passing from this life to the next. At his last supper on this earth, Jesus told his nervous disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6,7) It was for this reason that the early followers of Jesus were called people of the Way. Jesus is the way home for all who choose to follow him.



Last Supper by Valentin de Boulogne

My Christian friends and I thank the Lord that Senad and his people have finally found a home -- inside a church building. We are very curious as to whether they will eventually self-identify as Muslims, true believers in God, people of the Way, or perhaps even followers of Jesus. Only the Holy Spirit knows. But, the story is not yet over. Imam Senad and his flock are clearly on a path that leads towards Jesus, being obedient to so many of his teachings. After all, we must humbly admit that it

is a faith process for anyone to move from being simply curious or even being moved by Jesus to making him our Lord and Savior. It often takes time; and it usually involves a community of friends surrounding and loving us.

I ask your prayers for an upcoming event. On Saturday morning, Oct. 15, at the Village Presbyterian Church of Northbrook, Imam Senad and his friends, plus those of us involved in Muslim outreach in our church, will be offering a workshop on how a church and mosque can develop a redemptive, bridge-building relationship. We will be telling the story of our eight-year relationship that we hope will be an inspiration to other churches and mosques in the Chicagoland area. In today's politically charged environment, with the recent rash of terrorist acts worldwide and turmoil continuing to escalate in the Middle East, a vision of learning to share the love of Christ with our neighbors is desperately needed.

Through the love of Jesus, all hostility, suspicion and even hatred among people can be quelled and reconciled. That is the promise of the Gospel. What was once true between Jews and Gentiles in the First Century can be applied today to Christians and Muslims, blacks and whites, rich and poor, and whoever might be at odds with one another. The Apostle Paul said it perfectly when he wrote the following; "For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death." (Ephesians 2:14-16) May it ever be so again today.

