

We're Branching Out!

Welcome to the first issue of AAi's newsletter *Oliva*, bearing the fruit of peace for the glory of God.

Oliva aims to reveal the bountiful harvest of charity and righteousness (Hebrew צדקה *tzedakah*, Arabic صدقة *sadaqah*) produced by a growing movement of Jews, Christians and Muslims uniting to build peace, serve communities, and save lives.



Did You Know?



Abrahamic Alliance International Founder and Executive Director Rod Cardoza has been nominated for the 2012

Coexist Prize. Founded in 2006, the organization promotes better understanding between Jews, Christians and Muslims via education, dialogue and research. The \$100,000 prize (\$10,000 for two runners-up), goes to someone who has “made an exceptional contribution to building bridges between people of different faiths, who has shown courage and imagination beyond their day to day responsibilities and effected change that will leave a lasting impact in their society and beyond,” says coexistfoundation.net. In a letter to AAi Board member and former president of the South Valley Islamic Center, Sohail Akhter, Michael Wakelin of The Cambridge Coexist Programme in London said those viewing Cardoza's nomination were “impressed and inspired” by the work Mr. Cardoza and AAi are doing, which has gained international attention. ●

9/11 A Decade Later: An Act of Peace

by Loureen Murphy

Phoenix, Ariz., a place where hard feelings can simmer in the desert sun, proved an unlikely, yet perfect theater for a class act on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Before the curtain went up, a leader of Muslim women readied the final details, a Christian from Kansas covered her head, an imam rehearsed answers to tough questions, a Muslim couple anticipated befriending Christians, and a Mennonite pastor opened his heart to them all. Then in a spirit of joy and friendship, Abrahamic Alliance International brought together this group of strangers to perform a real-life act of charity—serving a meal to the needy.

Muslim and Christian leaders prepare to unite their faith communities to serve 180 meals to homeless residents of Watkins Emergency Shelter in Phoenix, Ariz., on the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

The troupe of players and directors assembled at Tempe Islamic Center to get acquainted. Imam Basir of Phoenix Metro Islamic School and Pastor Hal Shrader of Trinity Mennonite Church of Glendale took center stage, asking ice-breaker questions of the twenty-three others gathered with them. Then, walls came down and bonds formed as they dispersed, two-on-two, into Muslim-Christian buddy groups. Conversation and laughter continued

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About AAI

Abrahamic Alliance International is a faith-based, non-profit organization uniting Jews, Christians and Muslims for active peacebuilding and relief of extreme poverty. AAI builds peace by uniting Jews, Christians and Muslims to serve the poor, suffering and marginalized together in a context of compassion.

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Understanding Muslims

The Wide Open Door to Loving Muslim Neighbors

Attending AAI's *Loving Muslim Neighbors* seminar at Golden Hills Community Church "was natural" for Jennifer Stanley, a Christian from Brentwood, Calif. Her world intersected with Muslims years ago when her husband's sister married a Muslim in Kuwait. Jennifer's children loved spending the summer months with their Kuwaiti cousins when they came to visit the U.S. each year. Finally, with her husband and children, Jennifer made the trek overseas for the month of Ramadan. The time of close contact in Kuwait gave Jennifer's whole family an understanding that Muslims are "people just like you and me."

Still, over the intervening years, Jennifer hungered for greater understanding of the Muslim community, partly because family visits didn't allow much time for one-on-one sharing. She took some classes taught by non-Muslims, but felt they brushed Islam with a "really broad stroke." AAI's *Loving Muslim Neighbors* seminar addressed more of her questions. "That was extremely helpful to me," she says.

Jennifer now hopes to have more interaction with Muslims in Brentwood. She also has a dream: "I would love to see fear of Muslims replaced with love. We have a new mosque in Brentwood. At any mention of that mosque to my Christian friends, you see fear on their faces. I would love to see that fear replaced with love and understanding."

How would that happen? "I think there just has to be more of these types of opportunities, more of these seminars for the Christian community," Jennifer explains. The church she attends sees a need to educate the entire congregation to deal with this fear. Hosting the AAI seminar was an important step in this direction. When Christians understand Muslim faith and culture, fear and suspicion can be replaced with appreciation and friendship. Ironically, Jennifer found that unlike many Americans, "Muslims love to talk about spiritual things." In post-9/11 America, many Christians have difficulty imagining friendships with Muslims. But according to Jennifer, "We have a wide open door." ●



Jennifer Stanley (far left) chats with her buddy group members Serife, Ruby, and Neslihan at the a Common Word Community Service hosted by Pacifica Institute in Sunnyvale, Calif., November 2011 (see "A Hearty Helping of Love and Charity," page 4.).



Meet a Member: Maheen Akhter

by Loureen Murphy

When I first spotted Maheen in a photo on the Abrahamic Alliance (AAi) website wearing an Archbishop Mitty High School sweatshirt, I wondered whether this was a random wardrobe choice for the Muslim teen, or whether she was somehow a living embodiment of Abrahamic Alliance ideals. So I asked.

Loureen: I couldn't help but notice that sweatshirt. Do you attend Mitty?

Maheen: Yes, I do.

LM: How is life for you on campus as a Muslim?

MA: It's not that hard for me because I've been raised with an open mind to all religions. My parents chose private Catholic schools for us because they give excellent educations. My older brother was already attending when I started. I think Catholic school is better than a non-religious school because it instills values.

LM: How does it instill values? Do you have to attend Mass? If so, what is that like for you?

MA: Yes, I attend Mass, but my school does a good job at gearing their liturgies for all faiths. They usually try to give a universal message. The required religion classes are about morality and philosophy. I was very open to them because I thought they would develop me more as a person.

LM: In this climate, do you find your classmates interested in discussing spiritual things?

MA: If they come up in conversation, yes. Everybody at Mitty is super accepting of who I am as a Muslim.

Maheen at a Glance

Home: Gilroy, California

Faith Community: Muslim

Favorite Sport: Tennis

School: Senior, Archbishop Mitty High School, San Jose, California

Latest Adventure: Service Mission to the Tamarindo in El Salvador

"AAi is a great way to open your mind and open your heart to everyone around you."

—Maheen

Like when I fast during Ramadan, my friends skip lunch with me.

LM: What will make a difference for peace in the world?

MA: I think the main problem is discrimination. It's the little things that count. So to make a difference, when you see discrimination, take a stand against it. Let people know that we should not treat people differently because of their religion. Schools and families need to teach diversity in religion and culture, and also appreciation and knowledge about other religions.

LM: How else are you living out your values?

MA: I've gotten to know a lot of people of other faiths ... I've learned that we're not all that different. So it's not unusual for us to learn something about each other and say, "We do that at home too." Those discoveries are really cool. I think the stories others have to tell and the experiences they share open my mind to their perspectives. It lets me know that we're not all that different.

For example, in school during Lent we have this program called Operation Rice Bowl, where we cut down on what we would buy for ourselves and donate the change instead. Our donations go to Catholic Relief Services for feeding the needy. The Lenten period of fasting and concentrating on being with God is like Ramadan.

LM: Tell me about your connection with AAi.

MA: My family has been associated with AAi for a long time and has been doing community service with them. AAi is a great way to open your mind and open your heart to everyone around you. It's the key to a successful community and improving your character.

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A Hearty Helping of Love and Charity

What do you get when you mix mounds of salad greens and vegetables, multiple pounds of rice and meat, and then stir in the conversation and laughter of 32 Christians and Muslims? The joyful feeding of the needy at CityTeam Ministries Men's Recovery Center in San Jose, Calif. This recipe serves hundreds.

On Sunday, Nov. 20, 2011 an eager group of children, teens and adults gathered at the Pacifica Institute in Sunnyvale, first to get acquainted with one another. Mehmet Sen of the Pacifica Institute, a Turkish-American spiritual and cultural organization, and San Jose Pastor Robbie Ernst led volunteer orientation. Both leaders came in with high hopes for building bridges.

"... it's our understanding that Abrahamic religions [Islam, Judaism, Christianity] have more commonalities than differences," says Sen. "This service brings us together for a

common goal."

"We are here to love our neighbors together as Muslims and as Christians," said Ernst. "We can serve together for the common good."

“This service will bring us together for a common goal.”

Then, each participant met his match—or hers, when paired in buddy groups for the day. Women sat in twos and threes and talked about fond childhood memories and favorite holidays. Men stood face to face, animated, their enjoyment in the discussion obvious. Using questions provided, they all interacted about faith heroes, family backgrounds and even scriptures that taught them to care about those less fortunate than themselves.

The friendships begun, buddies then surrounded long tables to

prepare a complete meal. Though this group had never worked together before, what could have been bumbling and chaotic quickly became an efficient, cheerful assembly line of grating, chopping and shredding. Tub after tub of fresh green salad stacked up, followed by rice, meat and colorful fruit salad. Teens managed the dessert, *revani*, a delicious Turkish cake topped with sweet syrup.

Volunteers packed dozens of aluminum trays into vans and then drove to the CityTeam facility, which houses men breaking free from addictions and daily feeds homeless guests of all ages and backgrounds. After everyone assembled in the kitchen, CityTeam Chef Reynolds Stewart gave instructions and helped the group organize at different stations. Some dish up the hot meal, some hand out take-away food, such as pre-packed fruit and milk, and others pass out cups of water. Still more volunteers wash trays and start preparing the next day's meal. The purpose was to bless those in need as much as possible.



As people passed the servers, smiles and thanks came with as much good will as the food did. Eyes

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“A Hearty Helping” continued...

sparkled as hungry folks smelled the savory meat prepared at Pacifica Institute. Soon after, remarks like “Yes sir. It’s good!” peppered the queue as men returned for seconds and even homeless walk-in guests, who included families with young children, proved equally enthused about the service and the meal. A CityTeam staffer mentioned that this was the largest crowd they had served all year, about 150 walk-ins, plus the 50 residents.

How did the group of volunteers fare? “Helping people is so enjoyable,” remarked Suneyra, who arrived from Turkey just four months ago. “I feel I can do something for humanity.”

After all the guests had eaten, volunteers sat down to dine together, some talking, some eating. Connections grew as some found they lived or worked near one another. One pair of women exchanged contact information so they could meet later for coffee and take walks together during the day. Vince Stanley enjoyed talking with his buddy Rinat Ibrayev, impressed to learn he’d left Kazakhstan and obtained a bachelors, masters and a Ph.D. in the U.S. “He has lived in more places in the U.S. than I have,” he observed.

Overall, the afternoon proved delightful for every person involved. Mehmet Sen said, “The event was unique in the sense that it helped on two valuable purposes. One, it brought people together from different genders, ages, locations, and faith communities. Second, we worked together to serve the needy, care for our neighbors, and care for those less fortunate than ourselves. People united in a very short time, and left each other with warm feelings.” In short, the day was even “more than we expected.” ●



Loving Muslim Neighbors

Hearts and minds opened at this seminar held at Lincoln Glen Church in San Jose, CA in April 2012

In the News

Sojourners author credits AAi founder with ground-breaking peacebuilding

Ar on D. Taylor in his October 2011 article in *Sojourners* magazine, “Across the Great Divide: Muslims and Christians in the Post 9/11 World,” observes, “While most attempts at dialogue and bridge-building tend to gloss over the theological differences between Christians and Muslims, Cardoza tackles them head-on and dares to suggest that many of these differences can actually be reconciled by a careful reading of the Bible and the Quran.”

Taylor is referring above to a paper entitled “New Paths in Muslim-Christian Dialog: Understanding Islam from the Light of Earliest Jewish Christianity,” presented by Cardoza in Washington, DC at the Annual Conference on Muslim Peace, Justice and Interfaith Dialogue (sponsored by Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, and Islamic Society of North America), and was recently accepted for publication in *The Muslim World*, a journal focused on Islam and Muslim-Christian relations.

Anatomy of a Service Event

- Faith leaders welcome participants and kick off orientation with an icebreaker.
- Buddy groups of like gender and age pair up and get to know each other.
- Volunteers prepare food in buddy groups.
- Food is packed and volunteers carpool to the service site.
- Volunteers serve the meal together and clean up.
- Buddy groups dine together and deepen connections.

About Rabbi Green



Rabbi Simcha A. Green is a modern orthodox rabbi who received his ordination from Yeshiva University. He has served in the rabbinate for more than 40 years and directed several religious Hebrew schools in East Coast U.S. communities. Active with all age groups, he directed adult education at the Jewish Community Center in Philadelphia, and served in youth programming and outreach to intermarried Jewish families. He moved from Maine to California in 2006 to lead Ahabat Torah, San Jose's only Sephardic Orthodox synagogue. He is a contributor to Beit HaMidrash of the Bay Area and a great believer in the power of dialogue. Rabbi Green has organized numerous Torah study sessions over the years for rabbis in all streams of Jewish thought. He also developed similar Torah studies for use in discussion with Christian leaders. His interest in dialogue has more recently resulted in several meetings with Bay Area Muslim leaders and educators, building bridges of understanding and respect.



A Rabbi & Imam Study Scripture Together

by Rabbi Simcha Aaron Green



Some time ago, I was privileged to spend one and a half hours with Imam Tahir Anwar, discussing ways I study the text of the Bible and learning from him the methods used by Muslims to study the text of the Qur'an. For me, this was a most meaningful time spent learning from one another—both inspirational as well as deeply moving.

Muslims call Jews “people of the book,” indicating the reverence we show to the depth of our study of the written word. Jews do not read the Bible; we study it. Each and every word is significant as we seek to fully grasp the true and complete meaning.

Our study session begins by reading together the Genesis story of the “command” to Abraham to take his son to the mountain to fulfill the “explicit direction of God.” In the text of the Jewish Bible, the name of Isaac is noted as the son concerning whom this command is directed. Abraham implies he has two sons and loves them both, but he's finally told he must sacrifice Isaac. Tradition tells us the other two males who accompanied Abraham were Eliezer and Yishmael (i.e., Ishmael). We discuss for a while why God would even make such a request of Abraham, and that discussion is

most meaningful.

I then point out how significant it is to Jews that Isaac is the son designated to continue the tradition begun by Abraham, becoming as it were, the second patriarch. His willingness to be the human sacrifice if so demanded is critical to our understanding of our tradition. I ask Imam Tahir why Muslims believe Isaac was not the son designated, but rather Yishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar. It seems to Jews that the Bible is most clear in naming Isaac definitely and specifically. To me, this fundamental difference had to be addressed as we sought to study together. I am most impressed by the imam's response. In candor, he says

“The issue remained unresolved, but the process of our studying together remained most important to me.”

that the Muslim tradition clearly states it was Ishmael, and that this is supported by the Qur'an. Why that is so then became the basis of our continued conversation.

The issue remained unresolved, but the process of our studying together remained most important to me.

I mention Hagar is later referred to in the Bible as Keturah and explain that the translation of Hagar in Hebrew is “the convert,” indicating that Hagar, in becoming a member of the household of Abraham, adopted his teaching of the One God.

I look forward to continuing such studies together. I seek to explain the ways we read the Bible text carefully and hope to better understand the words of the traditions of the Qur'an. I was most grateful to the imam for the time he spent with me. ●

as volunteers rolled up their sleeves to cut fruit, veggies and chicken to serve 160 dinners to residents at Watkins Emergency Shelter. Once at the shelter, the volunteers served side-by-side before closing off their day by feasting on their own cooking and fellowship.

This harmony owed to the goodwill of those who came. Of all the ways he could have spent September 11, Imam Abdul Basir wanted to give himself to this task. "Number one, that day is all about all mankind.... We need to understand more and more about each other." Others attending echoed similar sentiments. Aliya Ghani, who helped orchestrate the effort from start to finish, spoke of replacing memories of a horrible tragedy with peace and healing. Participant Verla Dick of Kansas loves to get to know people of other cultures and followed her heart to Arizona, taking part in AAI's "Loving Muslim Neighbors Seminar" before the service activity. Zeb Mirza and her husband get great satisfaction from serving those in need and wanted to learn more about Christians. Pastor Hal Shrader takes every chance he can to make peace with Muslims.

Both groups embraced one another right off. Verla Dick says that the Muslims received the Christians "with such hospitality" and the Christians in turn enjoyed "getting a firsthand experience in a world we seldom get to see." Aliya Ghani recalls how much she and her peers wanted to be good hosts and not offend. She found the Christians very respectful as well as inquisitive. "I was really impressed with everyone, how they were open and wanted to experience everything."

Each came away gratified by a different highlight. Imam Basir notes, "Then, when we were preparing the food, I looked at everyone, and they had smiles on their faces and were



happy, and had a good understanding of each other. With the love that we had together, we started to make something really beautiful. That moment... was a very interesting moment in my life." Verla Dick concurs. "Working together created connections beyond words."

“ Working together
created connections
beyond words. ”

For Pastor Hal, the "coolest thing" occurred after the food service. "At the end, we sat down and got to eat together. You wouldn't know that people had not known each other all their lives. There was laughter. It was beautiful." Both congregational leaders also encountered surprises. The imam had braced for an onslaught of tough and perhaps accusatory questions, but found his Christian counterparts eager to learn about Islam and Muslim culture. Hal Shrader, who had long heard that Muslim women were oppressed, interacted with "strong, intelligent, confident women" who have careers.

In a memorable ongoing dialog throughout the day, Verla and Zeb

clicked. Zeb says, "... we discussed the similarities between our religions.... My buddy Verla was fabulous, so personable and friendly. It surprised me that we were having such a good time that the time just flew." Verla herself had "no sense of awkwardness getting to know Zeb, ... and she was such a warm person we easily got into conversation."

The curtain didn't go down on this "act" once everyone went home. In early 2012, Zeb and Verla reunited, going out to dinner along with their husbands. Zeb says once again, with such pleasant company, the time flew. Imam Abdul Basir says he determined "to share whatever I saw with my Muslim community. So as a leader, I told them it would be a good thing... in the future to have more events." Pastor Hal notes that while this effort had a symbolic aspect, his desire and plan is to do more than just plant a flag, but to make regular moves toward peacebuilding with Muslims. So he recently scheduled two more service events with the Muslim community, and looks forward to visiting an Arab cafe with Imam Basir to continue building their friendship over some tasty Turkish coffee. ●

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Help us unite Jews, Christians and Muslims to build peace, serve communities, and save lives.

“Meet A Member” continued from page 3...

LM: What has been the highlight for you with AAi?

MA: Feeding the hungry at St. Joseph’s Family Center in Gilroy. A friend serving with me noticed that one of the guests for the meal was a girl who went to school with her. In that moment, I learned that everybody in the community needs help now and then. You never know how close to you it might be. I just never thought it would be that close to us. It’s all for the common good.

LM: Is this kind of service ever fun?

MA: Yeah. Usually there aren’t a lot of kids around, but Rod’s kids are really fun, especially Abram. He’s only three, but he talks so much. It’s really funny. ●



Maheen holds a child in El Salvador during a charitable mission in summer, 2011.

Interested in attending or hosting a

Loving Neighbors Seminar?

Contact AAi at info@abrahamicalliance.org or call +1(408)728-8943



Something I Learned about Muslims...

“There’s more understanding than fear for me now.”

— Eric Lo, Intern, Regeneration Church, Oakland, California after attending a Loving Muslim Neighbors Seminar