

Evangelical Christian and Muslim clergy seek common ground

by [Harry Bruinius](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Bob Roberts is a barbeque-loving Texan and head of a large conservative congregation outside Dallas with a mission to plant new churches around the world.

He's the first to say that it's sort of odd that his 30-year journey as an evangelical minister would lead him to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the most prominent Muslim clerics in the world. He prays with them in their mosques, "breaks bread" with them at his home, and has become one of the leading Christian ministers of any persuasion in what he calls the fight against Islamophobia.

"I never dreamed I'd ever do anything like that—I had no desire to," said Roberts, head of the 3,000-member NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas. On Monday (July 27), he traveled to the White House with other religious leaders to be briefed on the situation of Christians in Iran and the recent nuclear deal. "Right now the biggest challenge in fighting Islamophobia is my tribe—the evangelicals."

While many Americans view the nation's Muslim communities with wariness and even outright hostility, no group is cooler toward Muslims than white evangelical Protestants, a Pew survey this year found.

But this doesn't tell the whole story, many leaders say. Across the country, a number of influential evangelical congregations have been engaging their Muslim neighbors in new ways, and some local mosques, too, have been trying to help Christians and others during their times of need.

This month, a coalition of three Muslim charities raised more than \$100,000 in a "Respond with Love" crowdfunding campaign that sought to help at least eight predominantly black congregations rebuild after a series of fires throughout the south destroyed their churches. Some of these were ruled acts of arson in the ten-day aftermath of the shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

And in Sacramento, California, First Covenant Church, with around 1,000 members, joined with the local SALAM Center mosque earlier this month to celebrate the Eid al-Fitr, or celebration of the breaking of the fast of Ramadan. Church members provided the food for the celebration of one of the most important religious holidays on the Muslim calendar.

“After we broke fast with dates and milk, we then went up to their prayer room,” says Patricia Mason, a resident of Elk Grove, California, and long-time member of First Covenant, which received a community service award from SALAM during the event. “Obviously, I’m not going to pray as they are praying, so I just prayed to Jesus as we were there. But we do respect their customs, we do cover our heads, and wear conservative clothing, and we share a beautiful meal with them.”

She got to know a number of Muslim immigrants from Iraq the past few years, as part of her church’s efforts to help new arrivals from the Middle East. Many have come to the U.S. for political asylum. Mason has been helping families adjust to their new lives—getting them settled in their new apartments, helping them negotiate public services, and enrolling their children in public schools.

“I realized, I have a heart for these people,” said Mason, a widowed bookkeeper. “They come with nothing, they’ve given up everything, and I just know that my job is to love them to Jesus. Not hit them over the head, but love them to Jesus.”

As both evangelical Christians and Muslims are quick to point out, the theological and cultural issues dividing them remain profound. Both often have an understanding of the truths of their faiths and sacred texts as exclusive, both emphasize proselytizing, and are each well aware of the sometimes violent histories that have built centuries of enmity and mutual distrust.

“But I think that is slowly changing, to be honest,” says Nadia Hassan, government relations and program coordinator at the Washington, D.C.-based Islamic Society of North America. “I understand that fear plays a big role here, and when you don’t know something, you fear it, so I think with these exchanges, and just getting to know one another, I think a lot of that fear is being alleviated.”

Hassan, who wears a hijab, admits that her interactions with evangelicals have often been less than positive, but she looks to a sura, or verse, in the Qur'an on human diversity.

“I don’t see differences as a reason for us to remain separated—to not like or love one another,” Hassan said. “I think it’s a beautiful thing. God says, I have created you all different so that you can know one another and befriend one another and not despise one another.”

Mark Shetler, pastor of First Covenant, has a similar understanding of his own faith.

“As a church, we just really felt that we are trying to answer the call of Jesus to first love God and secondly to love our neighbors as ourselves,” he said. “And Jesus does not seem to differentiate what type of neighbor that is, so in trying to be obedient, we just wanted to engage our Muslim neighbors in conversation and build relationships.”

Both Roberts and Shetler, who do not work together, talk about the unlikely, “organic” way their conservative congregations have evolved. Neither knew much about Muslims, but after their ministries brought them in contact with local communities, they began to change their approach to the faith while trying to maintain the integrity of their beliefs.

“I’ve moved from a concept of head, heart, hands, to a concept of hands, heart, head,” said Roberts, who has helped plant around 200 churches in the U.S. Now, he often mentors young pastors on how to work with Muslims and other religions, holding training sessions in mosques and synagogues, so they won’t be so isolationist in their views, he said.

“And then they would see me disagree with imams and rabbis, but in a respectful way,” Roberts said.

Last week, Roberts joined Hassan’s organization and other Muslim advocacy groups to speak out against the response by Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, to the shooting at a military reserve center in Chattanooga. Franklin Graham wrote on his Facebook page: “We are under attack by Muslims at home and abroad. We should stop all immigration of Muslims to the U.S. until this threat with Islam has been settled.”

At a press conference on July 23, Roberts expressed “disappointment” with Graham’s words, saying that religious freedom should be a value Americans fight for both locally and globally.

“Standing up for the rights for Muslims to worship impacts the rights of Christian to worship around the world, as well,” he said.

And Roberts had another reason to speak out. Three weeks ago, he traveled to Doha, Qatar, after helping to organize a meeting between Christian pastors and Muslim clerics. At the meeting, five American imams and five American pastors joined together with local Muslim clerics and seven Pakistani Christian ministers. They discussed the enmity that often exists between their faiths, and what they could do.

At the end of the meeting, the clergy made a pact. “We agreed that we would watch out for the Muslim minority here and deal with Islamophobia, and they said they would watch out for the Christian minority there,” Roberts said.

For Roberts, one reason the words of Graham were so destructive is because it only feeds into the ideas now being spread by self-described Islamic State in its a campaign to cleanse the Middle East of all religions except its version of Islam.

“ISIS is promoting the narrative that the West represents Christianity and Judaism, and is fighting Islam,” said Salam Al Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Washington, D.C. “And if we can counter that by demonstrating how Christians—not just on the liberal and progressive side, but also on the conservative side—and Muslims . . . are working together and doing the work of the Lord, this is in itself is peacemaking.”

Indeed, Roberts's unlikely pastoral journey sprung out of his deep concern for Christians in the Middle East. In the years after 9/11, he traveled to Afghanistan and Iraq, helping to set up clinics, orphanages, and schools. During the course of these mission trips, he encountered and befriended a number of local Muslim clerics, and began to work them. His work helping Muslims got noticed by leaders such as Prince Turki Al Faisal, the former Saudi ambassador to the United States.

“Prince Turki said to me one day, ‘It’s great what you do with Muslims around the world, Bob, but what about Dallas?’” Roberts said. “I told him, that would be like starting a Baptist Church in Mecca. That would be a really hard thing to do.”

But when he returned to Texas, he tried. His congregation invited members of local mosques to join them in events, community projects, and even barbeques with halal beef ribs. He got to know Dallas-area imams well, and eventually he and Mohamed

Magid, head of All Dulles Area Muslim Society in northern Virginia, came up with idea to bring imams and pastors together “just to hang out.”

Indeed, the prototype for the meeting three weeks ago in Doha, Qatar, was an event they had organized in Texas. They brought 12 imams and 12 pastors to a dude ranch outside Dallas, where for three days they hunted, fished, and of course feasted on Texas barbequed halal beef ribs.

“What’s interesting is that, when we talk about conservative Muslims and Christians, they have the same social values,” said Al Marayati, a policy expert who also organizes interfaith outreach efforts. “It’s mainly a theological difference that separates them. But the idea of having a traditional family, a very God-centered life, attending houses of worship on a regular basis— they’re almost identical.”

He notes that like evangelicals, many Muslims are very concerned with the issue of religious freedom, as well as some of the cultural issues surrounding same-sex marriage and abortion.

Both Shetler and Roberts say their congregations have experienced controversy and push back due to their friendly engagement with Muslims and participation in each other’s traditions. NorthWood lost hundreds of its members, Roberts said. And some evangelicals have called him a closet Muslim who is betraying his faith.

Shetler said, “We just want to say that, hey, we might disagree with Muslims on theology, but we can still respect one another, love one another, work together on creating an environment in which people can actually feel comfortable getting to know somebody that is different from what their own background is.”

For its part, the SALAM Center has donated toys to First Covenant for their Easter drive. Some of its Muslim members have attended the church’s men’s retreat and a few couples have attended the congregation’s pre-marriage seminars.

“Conflict will not pay off—‘my way or no way’ will not work,” said Metwalli Amer, founder and director of the mosque. “And the only way to work with each other, to make our society safer to live in, is to cooperate with other.”

“This is really the principle of SALAM, and I believe of First Covenant, too,” he continues, “and that, really—it’s very rewarding.”