

Baptist, other religious leaders challenge anti-Muslim rhetoric

by [Robert Marus ABP](#)

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Against a background of mounting anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence, Baptist and other religious leaders spoke out Aug. 30 against Islamophobia and urged federal officials to take a more proactive role in safeguarding Muslims' civil rights.

A group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders held a press conference at a Washington church denouncing the rhetoric and attacks – including [a suspicious Aug. 28 fire](#) at the construction site of a mosque that has stirred significant controversy in Murfreesboro, Tenn.; the Aug. 24 attempted murder of a Muslim taxi driver in New York; and a conservative Florida church's plans to burn copies of the Quran on Sept. 11 as an anti-Islamic protest.

"We're shifting from fear to fear-mongering, from misunderstanding to misinformation, from legitimate speech to hate speech to hate violence," said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations, in the conference at Washington's [Western Presbyterian Church](#).

The church was chosen as the setting for the briefing partially because its sanctuary hosts Friday prayer services for Muslim students at the adjacent George Washington University campus.

The anti-Muslim violence comes amid [a raging national controversy](#) over a planned Islamic community center a few blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center in New York. Polls show about two-thirds of Americans opposed to the center's construction, viewing an Islamic institution near the site of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic

extremists as inappropriate. The same polls also show significant minorities of Americans questioning whether the Constitution's religious-freedom provisions apply to Muslims.

While many of the opponents of the Park51 community center project in New York claim they do not question the right of Muslims to build the center but rather question its appropriateness, more blatant anti-Muslim protests have surfaced around mosque construction projects in other parts of the country. In particular, many opponents of the Tennessee mosque have openly asserted their opposition to any sort of Islamic facility in their community.

Jeffrey Haggray, pastor of Washington's [First Baptist Church](#), called the upswing in anti-Muslim rhetoric "truly unacceptable" and said Christian and other religious leaders have a special responsibility to speak out against it.

"While we all celebrate freedom of speech in our nation, we would be engaging in denial if we did not acknowledge forthrightly that the acts of violence that are now surfacing against Muslims, mosques and other Islamic symbols are directly linked to the vitriolic and incendiary rhetoric and actions we have seen in recent weeks," he said. "We are duty-bound to publicly condemn these actions both as Americans and as people of faith."

The same afternoon, Baptist and other religious-liberty leaders met with Department of Justice officials to urge them to act quickly, according to a press advisory about the meeting, "to protect and preserve religious freedoms and the rights of all Americans, including millions of Muslims, to live and practice their faith freely, without fear of violence or intimidation."

The leaders -- including Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister who serves as president of the Interfaith Alliance -- are asking Attorney General Eric Holder to lead a coordinated response to the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment. Their requests include:

- Asking Holder's Justice Department to lead other federal agencies in offering assistance to Muslim individuals and communities around the country threatened by violence.
- Asking the federal government to offer assistance to state and local law-enforcement officials to investigate anti-Muslim hate crimes according to the terms of the Shepard-Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama last year. Among the law's provisions are additional federal support for investigating and prosecuting crimes motivated by the victim's faith, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or disability.
- Asking the Justice Department to create a centralized hotline for reporting hate crimes to federal officials, overhauling a reporting system the leaders currently view as too cumbersome.

At the same time, some organizations that monitor persecution of Christians around the globe are warning that the heated debates over Islam in the United States could have deadly repercussions for Christians living in majority-Muslim countries.

"Obviously, Muslims around the world are paying attention to the Ground Zero mosque situation and the planned burning of the Quran," said Carl Moeller, president of the Christian group [Open Doors USA](#), in an Aug. 30 press release. "What happens in the U.S. could impact Christians in those Muslim countries in which they are already vulnerable.

"The burning of Qurans will only confirm what many Muslims believe -- that Christians hate Muslims. That is exactly the opposite message we as Christians want to send. We want to reach out in love to them."--Associated Baptist Press