

At the mosque: 'We came here to live in peace'

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

Next to the minaret of Milwaukee's Islamic Society a new sign appeared after the horrific events of September 11: "Our Hearts and Prayers Are with the Victims and Their Families." That message was emphasized at the mosque's prayer service on September 14, the national day of remembrance for all those who have suffered as a result of September 11's terrorist attacks. The mosque, located on a busy intersection in Milwaukee's working-class south side, was guarded by two police cars throughout the day, in part to ensure the safety of the 400 children who attend elementary school there.

Men, women and children crowded the two prayer halls, many wearing red, white and blue ribbons on their clothing.

The message given by the mosque's Imam, Amin Fatah Amer, made clear the great similarity between Christian and Islamic ethics. Amer stressed that "no cause whatsoever, religious or political, could ever justify what happened on Tuesday." He reminded his community that "it is a crime in Islam to kill civilians, to kill innocent and helpless people," and based his message on the passage of the Qur'an that condemns murdering even one person as tantamount to murdering all of humanity. "If someone kills innocent people, he does not belong to Islam anymore," Amer declared. Those who planned these and other acts of terrorism and those who commit them must be found and brought to justice.

Responding to the threats, harassment and sometimes outright attacks that Arab-Americans have had to endure in recent days, Amer also stressed a message familiar in Christian churches: "Return good for evil. Do good to those who mistreat you." The best way to respond to those who have not "behaved to you in a God-fearing manner is to treat them in a God-fearing manner."

Both Amer and several other speakers stressed their appreciation for the phone calls, visits and letters of support the Islamic Society has received from the

Milwaukee community, especially from its religious leaders. As Amer put it, “We must keep our trust in God, because we know our religion and because we are receiving the support of many, many non-Muslims.”

The Islamic Society’s spokesman, Milwaukee attorney Othman M. Atta, stressed that along with sorrow and fear, the present situation also gives Muslims “a great opportunity to tell people about our religion, about the truth of Islam and of what it means to be a Muslim.” For American Muslims that opportunity includes stressing that they are indeed Americans, completely committed to this country and its welfare. Intisar Atta, whose family emigrated to the U.S. from Palestine many years ago, summed up the feelings of many. “We want the U.S. to stay strong,” she said. “Of the governments of all the countries of the world today, the U.S. Constitution comes closest to expressing the values of the Qur’an. I want my tax dollars to support America, not any other country, not even Arab countries. We came here to live in peace.”

In informal discussions before and after the prayer service, women spoke about what they had been experiencing during the past week. “I’ve been especially upset about the pain the kids are going through at school,” Rafat Arain said, “and it’s hard to have my neighbors, who’ve been my friends, suddenly look at me with suspicion.”

Comilita Salah, a fifth-generation American, said, “We’ve lost as much and are suffering as much as anyone. Even in this neighborhood, where people are used to seeing Muslims, people look at you differently, they yell things out of the car at you. People need someone to strike out at.”

As the president of the mosque went up to a group of non-Muslim visitors after the service to thank them for coming, he was interrupted by a man asking him to come quickly because a girl of the congregation had been set upon and beaten at her local grade school for being a Muslim.

Like most Muslim communities across the country, the Milwaukee Islamic Society has been collecting money to send to aid the search effort and the families of victims of the terrorist attacks. They are urging Muslims to donate blood and are hoping to have a blood drive at the society. At the same time, they are reminding the country to be careful in assigning blame. “It’s important that we find and punish those responsible,” Atta said. “But it’s also very important that we don’t have a knee-jerk reaction or overreact. We must be careful not to target those who are not responsible for the terrorism, and not to target those in other countries who are

legitimately fighting for their freedom.” Injustice, he reminds us, feeds extremism.