

Faith & Spirit

Area Muslims come together to share their bond of faith

Shiite and Sunni leaders promote harmony and friendship.

By Jim Jones
Special to the Star-Telegram

While deploring the deadly battles between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Iraq and other parts of the world, a group of North Texas Muslims — both Sunnis and Shiites — prayed, shared smiles and handshakes and broke the fast of Ramadan together on a recent evening.

"We are all Muslims, whether we are Shiite, Sunni or whatever," Dr. Basheer Ahmed told the group of about 40 men and women Muslims. "We should be friends and not enemies."

Ahmed, a Sunni Muslim and Fort Worth Islamic leader, said the event was a major step in a long-range plan of action to promote harmony and friendships between Sunnis and Shiites in North Texas.

The goal is to counter the bad feelings caused by the bombing of mosques and other acts of violence Sunnis and Shiites are inflicting on each other elsewhere.

"We are living in America in peace," Ahmed said. "We don't want this anger, hatred and genocide going on elsewhere to affect us."

Conflicts in Iraq, Syria and other locations are about power and politics although they look like religious wars, Ahmed said.

"For the leaders, religion is an easy way to capture the attention of people who are not knowledgeable," he said. "They say, 'Look, they are destroying our religion, so kill them.'"

About 85 percent of the billion Muslims in the world are Sunni and 10 to 15 percent Shiite, and that roughly reflects the Muslim population in North Texas, where there are about 100,000 Muslims and 40 mosques and Islamic centers, including two Shiite mosques in Dallas, Ahmed said.

Moujahed Bakhach, the retired imam of the Islamic Association of Tarrant County mosque in west Fort Worth, could not attend the gathering but has been a part of the unity endeavor since its beginning more than a year ago.

"It's a very important effort," Bakhach said in an interview. "Bombings of mosques and churches and killing of the innocent have no part in Islam. Our children must be educated to respect others and to love others. If they don't love, they hate."

Imam Zia ul-Haque Sheikh of the Islamic Society of Irving and author of *Islam: Silencing the Critics*, echoed those feelings.

"The things we see going on in the Muslim world nowadays makes us upset. It makes us stay awake at night," Zia told the group. "It makes us worry that if



Muslims living in North Texas gather recently to pray together and promote unity. Courtesy photo

Sunnis and Shiites

Population: The world's approximately 1 billion Muslims are estimated at 85 percent Sunni and 10 to 15 percent Shiites. Sunnis are the majority in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Shiites are a majority in Iraq, Iran, Bahrain and Azerbaijan and have sizable minorities in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.

Origins: The differences between Sunnis and Shiites began with the issue of who should be the successor to Muhammad, the Islamic prophet, who died in 632. A group of Muslims, later known as Shiites, believed that Muhammad designated Ali bin Abu Talib, the Islamic prophet's cousin and son-in-law, as his successor. A larger group, later known as Sunnis, pointed to the close ties Muhammad had with Abu Bakr, and elected him as Muhammad's successor, fueling the split that has continued for centuries.

Shared beliefs: Both Shiites and Sunnis follow the Quran and the five pillars of Islam: praying five times a day, giving to the poor, saying the religion's creed, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet," fasting during daytime hours during the month of Ramadan; and making at least one pilgrimage to Mecca if it can be afforded.

Different beliefs: Sunnis and Shiites have differences in theology, rituals and holy days based on their different histories. Shiites, for example, don't accept some of the teachings of the earliest successors of Muhammad. Sunnis do not, like Shiites, believe all of their imams are divinely descended from the line of the Muhammad. Both groups believe in Islamic laws but Shiites say their governing principles are based on the teachings of Ali and the descendants of Muhammad. In general, Shiites, such as those in Iran, give more governing authority to their imams and other religious leaders. Sunnis say they are following the teachings of Muhammad but are more open to accepting traditional state governing principles.

Source: Star-Telegram research

we don't do anything about it, things will get worse."

What happens in the United States, Zia said, "always goes and stretches to other places whether it's the latest fashion, the latest technology, the movies, music, whatever. We are hoping to have this initiative locally, then move nationally and then spread to other countries."

This is humanity

Several speakers, including Hasnain Zaidi of Plano, a Shiite Muslim, said the group also needs to speak out against violence against Christians, Jews and those of other faiths.

"We have some differences, but this is humanity; we are all human beings," Zaidi said.

Badshah Shirazi, a Shiite Muslim from Murphy, said he was appalled at how groups of Muslims with their own agendas are inflicting violence against fellow Muslims in many

parts of the world. "We are all brothers. We need to stop killing one another," he said. "We believe in one prophet, one Quran. One God."

Ahmed began contacting Shiites and Sunni Muslims in June of last year to see if they were open to find ways to draw closer together. At several meetings at his Fort Worth home and other locations most agreed to the effort. A few were skeptical. Some Islamic leaders just said no.

"They did not disagree with the concept but didn't think it was possible," Ahmed said. "They argued that the problem has been going on for 1,600 years. My answer was, 'That doesn't mean we can't speak up and do something about it.'"

The Irving gathering to promote friendships was the first of many future meetings and activities, Ahmed said.

"We don't expect



"We are all Muslims," Dr. Basheer Ahmed says. Star-Telegram archives



Imam Moujahed Bakhach is a leader of the unity effort. Star-Telegram archives

everyone to be buddy-buddy after the first meeting," said Ahmed, "but we will become friends when we have five or six of these."

The next major project will be to organize large groups of Sunnis and Shiites to go to each others' mosques to pray and worship.

Living in harmony

Mike Ghouse of Grand Prairie, who promotes unity among all faiths, urged Muslims to join his practice of attending both Shiite and Sunni prayer services in this area.

"We are seeing people praying together with the same devotion although their rituals are different," he said. "While Muslims are broken apart in some places, we can stand together in America."

Imam Kabirul Shaheed, leader of the Dallas Masjid of Al Islam, said his mosque is an example of how Shiites and Sunnis can live in harmony.

"We are a Sunni mosque but we welcome everybody," he said. "We have a Shia brother who is on our board and is our treasurer. We have women on our board. A lot of disturbing things are going on in our so-called Muslim world that we don't share. Women are marginalized. We don't have labels. It's not what you call each other that matters. It's your heart."

Bashir Haider of Dallas, a Shiite, said the violence abroad among the two major branches of Islam results in bad feelings that are spreading into the minds of many American Muslims. "When I was a child growing up I was always open to reading the Quran and going to mosques with my friends and there was never a question of being Shia or Sunni," he said. "We liked them because we liked the person, not because they were Shia or Sunni."

Now, he said, many Shiites and Sunnis in this country are gradually drifting apart.

"We are all being impacted and that's why we are here," Haider said.