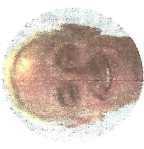


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Responding to Islamophobia and anti-Semitism: Do what's right

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One consequence of the current political environment is that the increasing polarization has led to increased hate talk as well as hate actions.

Fear of those perceived as different or the "other" often leads to actions against people just because they look different or worship in a different manner. Increased incidents of hate have been reported against Mexicans and African-Americans as well as against immigrants.

We have also seen violence against houses of worship and religious institutions. Much of the recent increase has been against Muslim communities, but when hate is released it affects all minority communities. In particular there has been an increase in anti-Semitic activity and threats against Jewish institutions.

In the past month, there have been over 50 bomb threats against Jewish community centers as well as synagogues and temples. In the early hours of Feb. 4 (the Shabbat day), the Chicago Loop Synagogue was attacked by a masked assailant who stuck swastikas on the front door and smashed the large

front glass window before driving away.

The outpouring of support from the community that follows the attack is often understated. A few days following this violent act, over 1,000 people gathered at the Chicago synagogue to give their support to the Jewish community.

With the theme "Love Thy Neighbor: An Interfaith Gathering Against Hate" the community came together in solidarity.

The president of the Chicago Loop Synagogue, Lee Zoldan, recalled the 1 a.m. phone call she received regarding the vandalism and how, standing in that winter night looking at the damage, she said, "We felt very alone." But she went on to affirm that she and her community were not alone. Her job from that day on has consisted mostly of saying "thank you" to hundreds of cards, calls, and donations. "One single act of hate led to hundreds of acts of love," she said.

Ahmed Rehab, executive director of the Chicago branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, condemned the vandalism.

"Chicago's Muslim community stands in full solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters as they deal with the trauma of this vile act of hate," Rehab said. "No American should have to feel vulnerable and at risk

simply due to their religious affiliation."

Also speaking at the event was a staff member of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core staff member, Jenan Mohajir. She told the story of her Muslim immigrant parents and of how she is raising her children with positive messages as she was raised. One of her children asked about the synagogue vandalism and asked, "Will he break our window, too?" Mohajir responded by having her children write messages of support, which they brought, along with flowers, to the synagogue the next day.

"We have to be both vulnerable and vigilant," she said. "My Islam is filled with love and hope. We leave no room for despair."

On that same Saturday evening, there was another incident on a New York City subway. As reported in The New York Times, Jared Nield was returning home from his job as a chef when he entered the subway car to see the windows and posters covered with anti-Semitic graffiti. Swastikas and messages such as "Jews belong in the oven" and "Heil Hitler" were written throughout the train car with black markers. His first reaction was shock, especially at realizing how many such instances there were. Wanting to do something, he asked his fellow passengers for hand sanitizer.

Before long, many people were reaching into their bags and pockets looking for tissues and sanitizer, and within about two minutes the Nazi symbols had all been erased.

Reflecting on the experience, Nield added, "It was a very New York moment in that we all came together, we all teamed up, and then we settled back down. I don't think any of those people really spoke, truth be told. Everyone kind of just did their jobs of being decent human beings."

Back in Chicago at the "Love Thy Neighbor" interfaith gathering, Pastor Chris Harris recalled the Civil Rights movement, and urged the group to "say nothing about violence and hatred until we do something about them."

He recounted the news story about New Yorkers using hand sanitizer to scrub swastikas off the subway, responding, "What we need is heart sanitizer, to wipe away hatred and bigotry."

Our response to the increasing fear and hatred need not be despair and defeat. We can live more deeply our faith convictions, love our neighbors, take action, and just do our "jobs of being decent human beings."

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