



Larycia Hawkins, shown in an image from the documentary "Same God." A former Wheaton College professor, Hawkins left the school after a controversial Facebook post expressing solidarity with Muslims generated backlash. Submitted by Linda Midgette

#### INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Religious solidarity with the 'other' can carry a price

**Kyle Kooyers**

Program Manager, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

For many in the Christian community, the season of Advent, which leads up to Christmas, is a time of waiting, of longing, and of expectation for the birth of Jesus. Many will mark the season with candle-lit Advent wreaths, calendars filled with treats that count down until Christmas, and, of course, loads of frantic decorating and gift-wrapping.

For some, it is a time to acknowledge the darkness in our world, to see the need for light and love, and to prayerfully invest themselves in caring for the lives of people around them — just as, according to the Christian faith, God was embodied in the person of Jesus who entirely invested himself for the sake of the world.

Amid the Advent season of 2015, as Islamophobic rhetoric was on the rise, Dr. Larycia Hawkins made such a decision to invest herself in solidarity with the Muslim community out of a commitment to her Christian faith. At the time, Hawkins was teaching political science as the first tenured female African-American professor at Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school near Chicago. Desiring to show support for Muslim women, Hawkins posted a photo of herself wearing a hijab (head covering) on Facebook.

"I love my Muslim neighbor because s/he deserves love by virtue of his/her human dignity," her post read. "I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God."

For her, words alone were not enough. Tangible actions must accompany those thoughts and prayers on a deep level of personal investment. In other words, beliefs and statements do not amount to much unless we are willing to stake something on them.

"As I tell my students, theoretical solidarity is not solidarity at all. Thus, beginning tonight my solidarity has become embodied solidarity," she wrote. "As a part of my Advent Worship, I will wear the hijab to work at Wheaton College, to play in Chi-town, in the airport and on the airplane to my home state that initiated one of the first anti-Sharia laws (read: unconstitutional and Islamophobic), and at church."

With the advice and blessing of her friends and colleagues at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Hawkins put herself into visible solidarity with many Muslim women in the U.S. This investment proved quite costly. The post garnered fierce opposition and backlash, generating many fiercely divisive arguments within the wider Christian community. Within a



**Kyle Kooyers**, program manager for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute

few days of the Facebook post, the provost of Wheaton suspended her and proceeded to push for termination of her tenure. She and the school parted ways by means of a joint statement later in February.

In her new documentary, "Same God," producer and director Linda Midgette — herself a Wheaton alumna — tells the story of Hawkins' journey, and how her fellow alumni and the broader evangelical community were so polarized and divided around this statement and act of solidarity.

"Some, like me, couldn't understand the uproar. Others really wanted her gone," Midgette said in her interview with me. "It became very clear that there was a major split taking place within evangelicalism that somehow this story was capturing. That split is what I wanted to explore."

The documentary, which has received a tremendous reception from Muslim, Jewish and interfaith communities, explores issues of systemic racism and fear of "the other" which often become conflated with theological purity and practice. It provides both a challenge and inspiration that we can and must do better in the work of loving our neighbor.

"I want people to understand that at the end of the day, love is more important than theology," Midgette said. "The film explores the theological issues associated with the idea that 'Christians and Muslims worship the same God,' and that's a great question, one worthy of exploration. However, the answer to that question is not as important as how we treat those with whom we disagree. We can have amazing theology but, without love of the other, it is worthless. That is a central point of the film, and the one I hope people are left with."

The tag line of the film, "Embodied solidarity comes at a price," speaks to the risk that comes at the crossroads of theology and love.

#### IF YOU GO

#### 'Same God' documentary screening

When: 6 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Celebration! Cinema North, 2121 Celebration Drive NE

Cost: \$6; purchase tickets at [interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org)

Care for a neighbor does not negate the importance of stated beliefs and convictions, though the arc of history shows that it has influenced the way people understand them. Rather, stated beliefs ought to result in care for a neighbor in ways that are disruptive to tribalism, to closed spheres and echo chambers, to compartmentalized identity groups and even the labels of partisan politics.

"It's basically the heart of the Christian Gospel. If you believe that Jesus was God, then you believe that God himself came in 'embodied solidarity' through Jesus, and paid the ultimate price for it," Midgette said. "I can't claim to follow Christ if I am not willing to sacrifice my own body, my own power, and my own 'rights' for the other."

"That's a tough message, but one that I have come to believe is the only way out of this polarized, angry, violent mess of a world in which we are living right now... When you see someone like Dr. Hawkins, who is living that out in her life, you see how healing and inspiring it is to the entire world. We need more of that right now."

At 6 p.m. Wednesday, there will be a screening of "Same God" at Celebration! Cinema North, followed by a panel discussion featuring Hawkins and Midgette. Specially priced tickets are \$5 and must be purchased in advance at [interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org).

Let us continue to explore what embodied solidarity might look like across our West Michigan community as we seek healing and peace together.

[interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)

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