

JOINT STATEMENT BY THE MINNEAPOLIS DOWNTOWN CLERGY

The controversy over a plan to build an Islamic Center near Ground Zero in New York City has turned into a national debate. In places as far-flung as Tennessee, California, and Wisconsin, similar projects are being opposed, and a wave of Islamophobia appears to be sweeping the nation. Muslim individuals have been attacked. Mosques have been defaced or damaged. And in Gainesville, Florida, a misguided Christian minister plans to burn copies of the Holy Qur'an on September 11. We, Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian/Universalist leaders in Minneapolis deplore the fear that is driving these actions, and we call on all responsible religious and political leaders to stand with our Muslim brothers and sisters in this difficult time. Further, we reassert a shared and central value of our various faiths, a value that is also essential to American democracy: the free exercise and expression of all religious traditions and opinions.

When two planes flew into the World Trade Center and another into the Pentagon, our group of religious leaders in Minneapolis, with the rest of the country, stood in shock and horror. As ministers, priests, rabbis, and imams our first response was to create an Interfaith service so that our communities could find, in one another's presence, some comfort and consolation. We have spoken at countless schools, houses of worship, and community gatherings. We have always attempted to be honest with one another and to model mutual respect and the commitment to stay in conversation, especially when it gets difficult. Our relationships have been tested. Many of us journeyed together to the Middle East. The conflicts in that region put obstacles in our way and challenged our communication. Statements by various of our national denominations and organizations have also created tension in our group. The daily headlines do more to pull us apart than they do to create bridges of understanding. But we have persisted in believing that Interfaith relationships are the antidote to fear, hatred and fanaticism. Together with members of our congregations, we continue to resist religious polarization that threatens our nation. Citizens of Minneapolis may be justly proud that among both clergy and laity a rich and warm Interfaith conversation has been going on in our city for years. (An Interfaith discussion about the Ground Zero Islamic Center and related issues will take place on Thursday, October 21 at Temple Israel, beginning at 7pm, and the public is welcome. Four subsequent discussions will take place on the following Thursdays at various locations.)

If there is a force to be feared in our world, it is not one particular religious tradition but that strain in all traditions that is militant, closed-minded, authoritarian, and resistant to Interfaith dialogue and amity. As Americans we are fortunate that the First Amendment creates a foundation on which all traditions may come together in mutual support, affection, and respect. No religious manifesto, no political statement, no military action could so profoundly refute the radicalism of the 9/11 attackers than the demonstration that American democracy and American religious pluralism actually work.

In this spirit, we write to assure our Muslim colleagues here in Minneapolis that we will encourage, support, and pray for them as they nurture and build their communities in our midst. We firmly reassert our solidarity with them and with one another in the holy enterprise of

Interfaith dialogue. We believe that the practice and understanding of our own traditions is enhanced – not threatened – by the presence of a vibrant, growing Islamic family that is fully integrated into our city’s life. We share the understanding that the best worship – in *all* of our religious families – is realized in serving the common good. So, to our Muslim brothers and sisters – especially in this, their holy season of Ramadan – we invoke the ancient blessing: shalom, salaam . . . peace.

The Rev. Arthur Agnew, Bethesda Baptist Church
Father John Bauer, The Basilica of Saint Mary (Roman Catholic)
The Rev. Bob Brite, First Christian Church
The Rev. James Gertmenian, Plymouth Congregational Church
The Rev. Kendyl Gibbons, First Unitarian Society
The Rev. Tim Hart-Andersen, Westminster Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Aron Kramer, Gethsemane Episcopal Church
The Rev. Rick Nelson, Central Lutheran Church
Father Michael O’Connell, Church of the Ascension (Roman Catholic)
The Rev. Bruce Robbins, Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church
The Rev. Justin Schroeder, First Universalist Church
The Rev. Dwight Seawood, Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church
The Very Rev. Spenser Simrill, St. Mark’s Cathedral (Episcopal)
The Rev. Michelene Verlautz, Augustana Lutheran Church
Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman, Temple Israel