

**Michael Vander Weele, Resident of Palos Heights and
Participant in the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group**

On June 6, 2000, Michael Vander Weele spent the afternoon on the ball fields of Palos Heights, coaching his son's Little League team. The tall, soft-spoken English professor at Trinity Christian College enjoyed the "neighborliness" of the Palos Baseball Association. That night, he hoped to get over to City Hall after the game; he had been following the dispute about the mosque and knew this topic was on the agenda. The game went late, so Vander Weele went home and immediately turned on the television to watch the City Council meeting on local-access cable. On the screen was someone he had known and respected for years, speaking about a petition against the mosque. He thought, "No, that's not right." Vander Weele drove directly over to City Hall and made his way through the crowded hallway into the chambers, so he could listen to the discussion first-hand. "I thought, well, I'm going to have to say something here."

Still wearing his coaching clothes and covered in the dust from the baseball fields, Vander Weele approached the microphone and said, "I have a simple question for us all, and this is where was the energy, where was the eloquence, where were we before we learned that that church might be turned into a mosque?"¹ What he said was brief, but it was picked up by a number of local newspapers; Vander Weele sounded a clear note of dissent amidst a vocal majority advocating for the city to purchase the church property. He remembers, "I was nervous; my heart was pounding, but was I scared? No, I wasn't scared. I knew that was wrong and I knew I could at least say that it was wrong." He recalls, "I knew, both from my Trinity education and from reading [Stephen] Carter that this was a business between the church and the mosque, and the government had no business being there."

Vander Weele's ties to Palos Heights, and to local Trinity Christian College, are strong: his father came to Trinity in 1968; Vander Weele himself spent four years at the college as an undergraduate; he later returned to Palos Heights, where he has lived and taught for more than ten years. He and his late wife Albertena were happy to move to Palos Heights: with no sidewalks, and kids biking on the streets, he notes that it feels more like a "small town." He recalls that when a near neighbor developed brain cancer, the local Catholic Church, St. Al's, had a benefit for the family: "I think half the town was out. There were people doing the dinner, bringing the food." Dutch Reformed and Lutheran people came to the Catholic Church for the benefit: "It was the best kind of neighborliness."

Yet, he recalls, this civility and neighborliness were rarely in evidence at the City Council meetings. For almost a decade before the mosque dispute, Vander Weele describes a city council that had been "plagued by fractious, sometimes toxic politics." This environment complicated concerns about the mosque, and as the conflict unfolded, he believes, "there are some basically good people that got pulled along." The comments made at the City Council meetings shocked Vander Weele: "I was surprised, saddened, deeply saddened by what I heard." He notes, "I think the most telling thing that I can say about this controversy was that I was at a City Council meeting, and someone got up and said, 'Look, I don't think I'm prejudiced, I'm just worried about the property value of my house.' I said, 'Aah, the one prejudice that we're allowed to talk about openly, is economic.'"

He thinks it is incorrect to think of the dispute in purely religious terms: “I’m not sure that the primary thing is religion. A lot of the Dutch Reformed people were part of White Flight.” He continued, “A lot of people who ended up in Palos Heights are scared, it turned out in 2000, about property values all over again. And what I didn’t know is that there is an equal number or higher number of Irish Catholics, who had the same thing, coming from the South Side of the city.” The fear at play in Palos Heights, he explains, was not necessarily of the religious unknown, but of the economic unknown. “I think there is a certain kind of economic racism that reared its ugly head.” Vander Weele notes, “In Palos Heights, people understood there were Arab American doctors, and quite a few of them; a lot of people didn’t understand that they lived in homes, in these communities.”

Before the controversy, Vander Weele knew little about Islam or Muslims: “I had not a single Muslim friend before the problems in Palos Heights. So the friendships that I now have come out of that conflict.” Vander Weele has been among the core participants in the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group, but his involvement in the group was largely by chance: he was conducting research in the Trinity library, and saw Koldenhoven and others he recognized meeting together. He asked if he could join, and was invited to come to the next meeting. Vander Weele remembers, “I mostly sort of listened early on, and I was nervous about the retired Bible teacher, who was also Christian Reformed, as am I, and I would just think ‘Oh he’s not hearing how this must sound.’ So we had, in fact, some difficulties to overcome there.” Yet Vander Weele felt it was critical to discuss religion: “I knew early on that it was the right thing to dismiss the ‘One America’ materials, which came from the Department of Justice. Because their whole purpose was to bracket religion; and both Islam and Christianity are whole life religions – so we thought, ‘How does that work? We don’t want to work at this in that way.’ And so it really was a wonderful learning experience.”

The Muslims who participated in the Dialogue Group had more experience describing their beliefs to people of other faiths, he recalls, while the Christians had to navigate how to speak with a different audience: “The Christians had to decide amongst themselves that this is not a place for missionary-type discourse; so, what other kind of discourse do we bring to this? Do we try to describe our beliefs in more or less neutral fashion? Well, there are some problems with that too; how does that work?” In the Dialogue Group, each of the communities had an opportunity to present their beliefs: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims. They did not include other religious communities: “It was what was here. We would have had to recruit Jewish people from probably about 20 miles away, and since the issue was so much a mosque-church issue, we always held that open as a possibility for the future.” They didn’t see themselves simply as an interfaith group, Vander Weele notes, “Ours was more a citizen group concerned about what they had seen in their own neighborhood.”

In January of 2001, Vander Weele taught a two-week interim course at Trinity Christian College which studied the mosque controversy. The syllabus for “A Mosque in Palos Heights?” describes the course content: “This interim will include presentations by local clergy and politicians, Muslims and Christians, viewing of videotapes of key city council meetings, and a visit to a local mosque.” The fourteen students who enrolled in the course also met Kenith Bergeron from the Department of Justice and observed a meeting of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Group. Vander Weele describes his primary motivation for offering the course: in Palos Heights city council meetings, he heard calls to separate politics and religion. “Exactly wrong, I thought. Any religion that doesn’t have political implications is a dead religion.” He goes on to explain this in a piece he wrote about the course for *Sightings*:

“My own church's Reformed tradition now seems to me to reveal the danger of too pure a separation of pulpit and politics. Those local Protestant and Catholic clergy who worked together to sort out what was required of them agreed that this seemingly political issue had deep religious roots. Those roots required them to offer a different, more immediate kind of social and political instruction than they had thought their vocations required. Often this education was different from what their parishioners desired -- not only in content but also in kind. Often it involved creating new lay groups or new activities for youth or middle-school ministries. But just those efforts were what most impressed my students in this community's response to last summer's controversy. The local government could not be expected to handle these religious activities, which are so essential to the city's political life.

As for the lives of my students, they clearly benefited from and valued the diversity of voices and faces that had been placed before them. I was proud to see three of them introduce speakers to the college community at later convocations, explaining why from a Christian perspective it was important to hear a Muslim lawyer speak about his different faith and fellow citizenship. In the end, I think we all learned that an adversarial model for government has severe limitations, not least of all in nurturing religious pluralism.”²

Trinity College was supportive of the interim course, and has hosted the Dialogue Group and a range of speakers at the campus. Vander Weele recalls when Omar Najib came to speak at Chapel. “We renamed it,” he notes, “I think maybe we called it a ‘convocation.’ It was interesting that we had a Muslim speak in our chapel before we had a Catholic person, because Father Cronin then came in a little bit later.” Vander Weele explains that having Father Cronin on campus was important, as about 10% of the student body at Trinity is Catholic. He continued, “It always happens that things get much messier but much better when you’re not talking about Catholicism but you’re talking with and about Catholics.”

Vander Weele remembers, “I was always tired going in, and felt like I hadn’t prepared enough, and ‘Oh my goodness how can you do this only once a month?’” Yet, he notes, “I have never left one of these meetings without feeling that somehow we had been blessed by the Spirit of God, in the meeting. It’s just an amazing thing.” Over the years, he has been tempted to pull out of the group, given his wife’s long-term battle with cancer and many other demands. “There have been times I’ve just sort of hauled my tired body in there that I’ve left saying ... ‘You could not have been in a better place.’” Vander Weele was inspired by the group: “people who could talk together, and about the most important things in life, and they could fight, but they could come out of this still being friends. And they could bring the education of each other out to a larger community that surrounds us, and that was really important to do. That there was something here that was truly bigger than any of us in the room, and we could lose some of ourselves to that.”

He remembers one particularly meaningful meeting, early on, at St. Al’s, “which was maybe the church that was most divided on this issue.” The Dialogue Group came together with their church council, and shared a meal. Children were invited. “And the weather was such that we could have it outdoors, and move around from one picnic table to another. Then we moved indoors and had a couple of very short presentations. That was just beautiful.” He recalls, “the tone of that was

better than, I would say, anything else that we have done.” Vander Weele has enjoyed the friendships that have grown out of the group: they have visited each other’s homes, had barbeques, and met each other’s families. “I don’t think we tried to be friends so that we could dialogue; I think we tried to dialogue and we became friends doing that. Going over rough patches was as important as going over smooth patches there, in terms of being able to trust each other. So that was truly wonderful.” Vander Weele adds that the retired Bible teacher, whose words were a cause for concern early on, emerged as one of the most respected members of the group.

The Dialogue Group established a solid foundation of education and friendship, and then built outreach efforts to educate the wider community. Vander Weele notes, “We all think it was wonderful and maybe even God’s planning that we had to deal with this before 9/11. So that we could be somewhat helpful.” Since becoming involved in the Dialogue Group, Vander Weele has led some forty adult Sunday school sessions about Islam and Christian-Muslim dialogue; about half of those have been joint presentations with a Muslim friend from the group. Sometimes these involve a series of presentations; in one case, after six sessions, the whole Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group came: “We sort of enacted dialogue for them, and then they’d ask us questions.”

In some cases, Vander Weele makes his first visit to a church alone; the second visit includes a Muslim friend from the group, often Omar. There was one instance where the church welcomed him to bring Omar, but scheduled it for a Monday because they weren’t comfortable having a Muslim in church on a Sunday. “Now that’s the minority; there are eight or nine churches, where that was no problem, including my home church which is within the same denomination.” He continues, “I left them with a challenge, that the next time I was going to return with a Muslim friend, and he could speak for Islam, being a Muslim American.” Vander Weele notes, “I am glad that I can go in there with a Muslim friend of mine and they have a chance to hear him. Because that is maybe the most important thing, is not to think about these things as an abstraction but as neighbors. That is to me the key point.”

The group has traveled as far as a church on the Illinois/Indiana border, and has also led a panel at a regional conference in Milwaukee for Christian school teachers from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin. Vander Weele’s involvement with the Dialogue Group has also prompted him to serve as editor for a theme issue on “Muslim-Christian Dialogue” for *Christian Scholar’s Review*. In the introduction, Vander Weele wrote:

“The two religions are often pitted against each other. In fact, they have significant differences that must not be overlooked. At the same time, both Christianity and Islam are religions whose comprehensive claims do not fit easily with modern secular states. This is just one area where we can seek to make common cause: in working out the public implications of religious faith. At an even more basic level, particular biblical commands require us to learn more about Islam and Muslims: the command to recognize the image of God in all people, the command to exercise hospitality, the command to give a situation-specific account of our religious beliefs, the command to put loyalty to God over loyalty to state.”³

From the very first meeting of the Dialogue Group, Vander Weele recalls feeling that “in some ways, Muslims and Christians are brothers and sisters opposed to American secularism.” Yet Vander Weele -- who identifies himself as a conservative Christian, doctrinally -- emphasizes that

“it is important that people realize that a kind of universalism, religious universalism, is not the one and only path to interfaith dialogue.” He believes that, for Muslims and Christians to engage in dialogue, “They have to absolutely imagine that they are all created in the image of God.” However, “I don’t think that people need to imagine that Muslims and Christians -- this gets tricky -- but that they serve the same God, in order to be able to dialogue together.” He explains, “I imagine Muslim friends in heaven, but I don’t know what it means to say that we worship the same God, and to take Jesus out of that. I cannot, at this time, do that.”

Years after the conflict over the mosque in Palos Heights, Vander Weele notes, “Have we gotten any better? Hard to say. We’ve learned something. We’ve sometimes had Muslims in churches. We’ve had a few Christians at the mosque.” The last meeting of the Dialogue Group was held in late 2005 and the future of the group is uncertain as members of the group have struggled with serious illness and the passing of loved ones. Vander Weele remains hopeful that the group may come together in the future, perhaps around a new common cause such as the environment.

Vander Weele understands the importance of the Palos Heights case, and the Dialogue Group, as an example for other communities in the United States. In November of 2001, Vander Weele wrote a letter to respond to criticism over a student article that was printed in *Trinity Magazine*. In “Getting Rid of My Stereotypes,” the student expressed his belief that “the God of Christianity is the same God of Islam.” While Vander Weele didn’t share the student’s theological view, he praised his effort to build bridges, writing:

“How we build bridges and articulate differences could be important for the country. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that in another 5-10 years there will be a higher concentration of Arab-Americans (not all of them Muslims) in the southwest side of Chicago than anyplace else in the U.S. So the rest of the country will likely learn, either negatively or positively, from our response to the fears and challenges that go along with assimilation. It will be challenging to live a life that can be a testimony to our Arab-American neighbors. Two whom I know, one a Protestant and one a Muslim, have received dire threats since September 11, one of them an anonymous death threat, the other a threat from a neighbor three doors down. In such a situation, I think hospitality is the first order of business. Both the New Testament and the Old Testament are clear about this. Our response will require face-to-face meetings. It will require a sacrificial civility. It will also require confidence that we can articulate, when appropriate, our radically different, as well as our shared, beliefs.”⁴

Endnotes

¹ Neumann, Janice. “Council Pursues Purchase of Church: Mosque on Hold in Palos Heights.” *Chicago Tribune*. June 7, 2000: 2.

² Michael Vander Weele, “Lessons from the Palos Heights Controversy,” *Sightings*, March 29, 2001, http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2001/sightings-032901.shtml, accessed June 2005.

³ Michael Vander Weele, “Introduction to the Theme Issue,” *Christian Scholars Review* 34:4 (Summer 2005): 407.

⁴ Michael Vander Weele to “AJ,” letter regarding student article, November 18, 2001, from Michael Vander Weele.

Sightings

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Lessons from the Palos Heights Controversy

-- Michael Vander Weele

You may remember the controversy in Palos Heights, Illinois, over the Al Salaam Mosque Foundation's attempt to purchase -- and eventually worship in -- a local Reformed church. (See *Sightings* 8/26/00 for more details.) The city council intervened to prevent the purchase of the church. Opponents to the sale circulated petitions encouraging the city council's move, and both sides filled the council chambers, local newspapers, and radio talk-shows with their views. The matter, which drew national attention, is still unresolved.

As a professor at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, I decided to take advantage of our location at ground-zero and spend our two-week January interim studying the controversy with fourteen students. There was a substantial archive of written materials for students to work through, but we were also rich in human resources. The students had lengthy meetings with local clergy, lay leaders of the Muslim community, and Kenith Bergeron, the Department of Justice representative assigned to facilitate discussion within the village. They were able to observe a monthly meeting of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Group convened and facilitated by Bergeron. Students were also invited by the imam from the Bridgeview Mosque to observe noon prayers and ask questions afterwards.

The students -- from the immediate area and as far away as Minnesota and Canada -- took various, and sometimes differing, lessons from our study. As their professor, I also learned several important lessons from the experience.

First, whenever possible we need to put a face on an issue. Though our class also read newspaper reports and Stephen Carter's book *Civility*, nothing was more important to my students than their face-to-face meetings with many of the local players. Similar meetings likely would have been just as helpful for my fellow citizens in Palos Heights.

Second, this kind of work takes time and patience. In addition to individual work done outside of class, in two weeks we were able to put in thirty class hours. Time was essential just for reading, hearing, and considering the various sides of the debate in order to reach informed judgments about it. But we could have used more time -- for example, to archive and compare newspaper reports, to interview neighbors, or to study other government interventions in religious affairs.

Third, we need to remember that, at least in politics, manners are linked to morality. The subtitle to *Civility* is *Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. Carter argues that a "sacrificial civility" is at the heart of a healthy democracy's public life. This

is a lesson that he learned from his Christian faith, Carter tells us, but he also insists that it is a principle that can be affirmed by other viewpoints as well.

Fourth, politics and religion are often more closely intertwined than many white churches realize. A primary reason for offering this interim course was the comment I heard more than once in city council meetings that we need to separate politics and religion. Exactly wrong, I thought. Any religion that doesn't have political implications is a dead religion. (I'm reminded of a University of Chicago conference a few years ago entitled "Black Theology, Public Theology," which made exactly that point.)

My own church's Reformed tradition now seems to me to reveal the danger of too pure a separation of pulpit and politics. Those local Protestant and Catholic clergy who worked together to sort out what was required of them agreed that this seemingly political issue had deep religious roots. Those roots required them to offer a different, more immediate kind of social and political instruction than they had thought their vocations required. Often this education was different from what their parishioners desired -- not only in content but also in kind. Often it involved creating new lay groups or new activities for youth or middle-school ministries. But just those efforts were what most impressed my students in this community's response to last summer's controversy. The local government could not be expected to handle these religious activities, which are so essential to the city's political life.

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Michael Vander Weele is a professor of English at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois, and a participant in that community's Muslim-Christian Dialogue Group.

http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2001/sightings-032901.shtml