

**Sandy Broadbent, Resident of Palos Heights
and Participant in the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group**

Sandy Broadbent is an educator by profession and by temperament: understated but intense, she has a love for learning and a dedication to accuracy. For nearly a decade, she served as the advisor to the Muslim Students Association at the local Moraine Valley Community College where she teaches. Broadbent, an Episcopalian, accepted this role because “no one else wanted to”; it provided an opportunity for her to learn something new. With the help of her students and a series of seminars on Islam, she developed a deepening knowledge and an abiding respect for the faith: “In the *Qur’an* God said, ‘I could’ve made you all alike but I chose to make you different so you could learn from one another.’ I love that.”

In Broadbent’s community of Palos Heights, one encounters little religious diversity: it is a city with many churches, but no synagogues or other houses of worship. She notes, “The more people are entrenched in one type of religion, the stronger they get in that, and the less open I think they are.” Before the conflict over the mosque, Broadbent had worked within her own Episcopal Church in Palos Park to educate fellow parishioners about Islam, developing a PowerPoint presentation for the Adult Sunday School. In the spring of 2000, she heard about the dispute over the mosque: petitions were being distributed; City Council meetings were overflowing with concerned citizens. Broadbent recalls, “I had this feeling that I was probably the *only* person in Palos Heights who would have anything positive to say about the Muslims.”

Although Broadbent had lived in Palos Heights for thirty years, she had never been to a City Council meeting: “What people do around here is that they watch it on cable and if there is something significant that has to do with their neighbor’s fence or something, then they run up there.” On a warm May evening, Broadbent walked over to City Hall, ready to comment on the mosque dispute. She remembers, “I was afraid. I was really afraid.” But Broadbent didn’t speak that evening, because the discussion at City Hall wasn’t about the mosque, or the fears she’d heard mumbled around town. “They were only talking about the fact that we needed a recreational facility. And I didn’t say a word because I was so blown away by their lack of dealing with the truth. Afterwards, I was ashamed of my cowardice.”

Shortly after the meeting, she attended a Memorial Day service outside Palos Heights City Hall, and while listening to the patriotic songs and speeches, she became resolute. She wrote a letter to the editor, which was published in the local newspapers, as well as the June 18, 2000 edition of the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

“In front of a series of Norman Rockwell prints depicting the four freedoms, and with a photo of the veterans memorial ‘dedicated to those Americans who died in the quest for freedom,’ Palos Heights residents urged the city council to purchase the Reformed Church of America for use as a recreation center rather than see the

property sold to Al Salam Mosque Foundation. The Mosque Foundation has a \$2.1 million contract to buy the property.

Apparently this southwest suburban community of 12,000 which boasts [11] churches does not have room for worship of their God when He is called Allah. Whether this is a religious issue or a racial issue is difficult to distinguish. It would be interesting to know if blond-haired, blue-eyed Muslims would be acceptable as worshippers. Can Christian Arabs worship in Palos Heights? What is the real issue?

More frightening than the hypocrisy is the fact that residents truly seem to have convinced themselves that they suddenly and urgently need a recreational facility. For nearly two years the Reformed Church attempted to sell the church before putting it on open market. It was only when the Mosque Foundation contracted to buy it that community residents found themselves in dire need of park district expansion. Residents seem to have completely disassociated themselves from any issues of racial or religious bias. And disassociation from the truth is a terrifying reality.

There is a larger issue here than the issue of a mosque in Palos Heights. Democratic principles are at stake as well as the future of the world we want our children to inherit. While we cannot always be responsible for our thoughts, I believe that we ought to be responsible for how we behave and we ought to behave in accordance with ethical principles. If we lose our vigilance regarding freedom of expression we just may lose our freedoms.”¹

When Sandy Broadbent came to the next City Council meeting, she wore her “I love Palos Heights” t-shirt and brought a prepared speech. The meeting was held at the Palos Heights Recreation Center on June 20th; she remembers that the gymnasium was crowded, and the mood was tense. As she waited for the meeting to begin, a man seated next to her said, in heavily-accented speech: “They ought to go back to where they came from.” She was surprised that this man, himself an immigrant, would think this way; she was amazed that the man assumed she would agree with him. When Broadbent took the microphone, she asked the crowd to be honest about the issues at hand: “Name the problem and then deal with it.”

In her speech, Broadbent explained: “The community is being ripped down the middle. And this is exactly the result of being ‘one kind of people.’ The turmoil that we are experiencing is exactly what comes from living in a homogeneous community. We need diversity.” She explained, “Diversity makes us strong. Diversity is what makes the United States of America, hands down, the best country in the world.” She noted, “I think that the people of Palos Heights are afraid. And this fear is based on faulty perception.” She challenged the citizens of Palos Heights to “Get rid of some of your fear by replacing it with facts. And finally, deal with the truth – no matter what the issue.”

She concluded, "I don't know what the solution is for the recreation department needs. I do know that I'd rather raise my kids in a community with no recreational facilities than in a community that obscures the truth and disallows the right to freedom of religious expression. What about you?"

Broadbent describes Palos Heights as "a wonderful community"; she moved to the small city in the early 1970s, as a young widow with two small sons. When she heard that people were referring to the city as "Palos Hates," she recalls, "That was so hurtful to me." While she doesn't believe it is a particularly hateful city, Broadbent notes, "that sure came out, in some people. But then it's the hateful people who can make the most noise."

In September of 2000, she joined the discussions that would later become the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group: "I knew something was going to be formed and wanted to be sure I was part of it. Because I really felt that I had something to contribute." The group brought together many of those who were speaking out but didn't know one another: "We were all doing our individual things that we believed in." The group built solid relationships: "We were complete strangers who came together, and we did have a common bond, but got to know each other through our own dialogue, because we always tried to learn about each other as well as be out in the community."

She enjoys the educational, people-to-people level of interfaith relations: "I just see myself as being a bridging person in lots of ways." After 9/11, when the Dialogue Group began receiving numerous requests to speak about Islam, Sandy was sent as an 'Ambassador.' She notes, "Actually, I think it is a tremendous advantage for a Christian to represent another group. Because so often, it is my experience that people advocate only for themselves; and if the whole world continues to advocate for themselves, we aren't going to make any progress at all." She notes, "I care about the truth, and so do the Muslims, they very much want the truth represented."

The mission of the Dialogue Group is "to promote religious and cultural education and understanding between Christians and Muslims, to provide a forum for discussion in which we exchange ideas and develop an appreciation for the unique attributes that distinguish our respective beliefs, and to support and encourage others interested in the same experience." Yet they were clear that this group would not simply engage in easy affirmations: "Every time we got together there was something more that we learned. And there are still things we don't agree on. I will say 'the same God,' and Michael (Vander Weele) will say 'a similar God.' Even though Michael (Vander Weele) is very much a member of the group, he won't say that Allah is God because of the whole concept of the Trinity." These disagreements were never troubling, she recalls, as they took place within a context of respect.

The group has brought this context of respect to a wider audience, hosting public educational events including two conferences on the topic: "Who is my Neighbor: Different Faiths, One Community." The group created a "Who is My Neighbor?" brochure, offering an imagined conversation between "Ahmed" and "Chris," which takes place on a local soccer field. The brochure also provides guidelines for dialogue:

“1. The purpose of interreligious dialogue is to promote understanding and build relationships through the process of sharing information. A dialogue is not a debate nor an opportunity to convert. 2. The underlying foundation for dialogue is respect. All human beings are created in God’s image, and as such possess an innate dignity deserving of respect. 3. Participants in dialogue are not expected to compromise their own convictions regarding their faith and beliefs. 4. Effective dialogue takes time! Nothing replaces the commitment to meet regularly and to discuss a variety of topics.”

The Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group was seen by many as one of the few positive outgrowths of the dispute over the mosque in Palos Heights. Kenith Bergeron, the representative from the Department of Justice who facilitated the early discussions, nominated the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group for a Paul Carus Award for outstanding work in interreligious understanding. He praised their work as “vital” in the post-9/11 context, noting that, “They help prevent hate crimes, discrimination, ethnic and racial violence and bring harmony to communities in crisis.” He continues, “In my work as a federal mediator, the CMDG has become a resource and an example that continues to help me address religious intolerance and tension in a four-state area. I have seen the effectiveness of their educational outreach in their workshops in churches, schools, and colleges. They continue to work to [defuse] prejudice and bring together individuals from different faiths.”

By 2005, requests for presentations on Islam and interfaith relations were diminishing; members of the group faced a range of health and family concerns, and no longer held monthly meetings. Broadbent would like to think of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group as an “ad hoc” group, emphasizing that if there was a crisis, “We’d be together in a minute. For sure.” While the future of the group is unclear, Broadbent explains that the group will continue, “in our hearts, forever.”

Broadbent doesn’t believe that Palos Heights changed because of the dispute: “I really think it’s over, it’s done; we don’t *have* to do anything any differently.” She believes that Palos Heights will be remembered for the mosque dispute, but, “I also think we helped pave the way for other communities.” As she looks back at the efforts of the Dialogue Group, she quotes Hans Küng: “No world peace without peace among religions. No peace among religions without dialogue between the religions. And no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another.” She explains, “My part is to provide the correct information if I can.”

Endnotes

¹ Sandra Broadbent, “Palos issues clouded,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 18, 2000, via Lexis-Nexis, accessed June 2005.