

**Omar Najib, Resident of Palos Park and
Member of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group**

When the Al Salam Mosque Foundation accepted the \$200,000 offer from the City of Palos Heights, Omar Najib decided it was time to speak out: “I said, ‘Enough is enough!’” Najib and his wife Barbara have lived in neighboring Palos Park, Illinois since 1980; their house is less than a mile from the Palos Heights City Hall. While they closely followed the dispute as it unfolded, he recalls, “Initially we thought it was a private contract between two parties, and there should be no need for anybody else to become involved; really, it’s between the church and this Muslim group.” Yet Najib believed the buyout offer was both an insult and a bribe. He felt he had to become involved, both as a local citizen and as the chair of the Chicago Chapter of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee. At the City Council meeting on July 18, Najib stated his position clearly, and simply: “Muslims are not for sale.”

Al Salam’s acceptance of the offer, Najib says, was not a good ethical or legal decision. “This is not the Islam I believe in.” He adds, “To my mind, none of those people from Al Salam Mosque, or their attorneys, live within the Palos area. We are the ones who have been living here for more than a generation, and are going to face our neighbors. They are going to laugh in our face: that really you were never sincere about purchasing that church ... because the bribe was accepted. What kind of religion is that? What kind of people are you? And this made me feel very badly.” As a lawyer, he adds, “If you wanted to accept their bribe, just wait. Until you have an offer in hand: that was an invitation to an offer, legally.” He continues, “But they were so greedy, and so hungry to take that money and run, that they accepted it without thinking about it.”

He feels that Al Salam should never have pursued legal action against the City: “My position was clear from day number one: ‘Do the honorable thing.’” By that point, Najib feels, “The issue became money now; it had nothing to do with religion or anything else. It should have not come into it; it should have always stayed above ground. It’s a religious issue: people should be free to worship wherever they want, without being prevented from doing it. When you bring money into the equation, you lose ground. It should have never gone to court.” He believes that if the Al Salam Mosque Foundation was sincere, they would have pursued the purchase of the church rather than the lawsuit. Like many Muslims living in the Palos area, Najib notes that he would’ve liked to have a mosque closer to home.

When he first heard about Al Salam’s plan to purchase the church, Najib was concerned: “We are a very small, despised group in the US.” He explains, “Therefore [our] people have to be very careful of how we act, of what we do. To purchase a church would be in very bad taste to the general public here.” He notes that while zoning may be easier, it can be prohibitively expensive to convert a church structure for the purposes of a mosque. Further, with a vacant lot, “the emotions are much less.” The early opposition to the mosque in Palos Heights was no surprise to Najib: “People did not like the idea of a

mosque being in their midst. Which is the normal practice anywhere that Muslims go: 'There's going to be too much traffic; Friday; people don't act American' or, the things that you hear anywhere." He adds, "It is not anything new. We should be used to it."

Some critics of the mosque said they didn't want Palos Heights to become "another Bridgeview" a nearby town with a large and active mosque. Najib responds: "I think they should envy Bridgeview. Bridgeview is a very progressive village." He describes a city with economic growth, an active Mayor, the neighborhood around the mosque transformed: once light industrial, today it is surrounded by \$500,000 homes with manicured lawns; crime rates are down. He adds, "By the way, with or without the mosque, the Arabs are coming. They are everywhere. They are in Palos Heights, and the number of Arab families has probably doubled since the year 2000."

Like many observers, Najib believes that fear played a major role in the Palos Heights mosque dispute: "I think they were just fearful of having the Muslims being next-door neighbors." He feels that similar opposition may well have come up if a Sikh Gurdwara or Hindu Temple tried to purchase the church, "because people just aren't aware." Of all of the hurtful things said during the dispute, what stands out most was the statement that Islam was "a false religion." Najib says sternly, "That I take exception to."

He recalls a meeting being called by some of the Aldermen on the day after the funeral of Koldenhoven's son: "That tells you how passionate this group was: the civility was missing, in essence." At the City Council meetings in Palos Heights, "I was concerned that violence would take place. Emotions were so high from every side." Najib feels that the involvement of Christian leaders had a "calming" effect. He recalls, "They were very honorable, from the beginning. ... They came out with the message: 'Christ said "Love thy neighbor." He did not say, "Check on his identity, check on his faith: love him unequivocally." And we have to display some of that Christian love towards your neighbor. He might not share the same belief as you do, but that should not be a ground for hating.' Their message was loud and clear." He notes, "And the message resonated quite well. People started questioning their own actions -- that this is not a Christian way of behavior, for many people."

Najib sees fundamentalism and extremism at the root of the problem: "The fundamentalists, this is a problem that we encounter in all religions. When you have the fundamentalists in control, watch out. This is what happened, I think, in Palos Heights ... that the Christian fundamentalists, the Evangelical fundamentalists, oppose any kind of Muslim presence." He emphasizes, "Those who are the loudest, the extremists, you hear about them, they are the loudest yet they don't represent the vast majority of the people."

For years, Najib has been an outspoken critic within the local Muslim community. After many years within the leadership of the Bridgeview Mosque, he grew concerned with what he describes as the "plague" of rising extremism and fundamentalism. Najib recalls that the funding for the Bridgeview Mosque came, in part, from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during the oil boom: "It was natural for people to seek funds from overseas. What they didn't know, what we didn't know here, was that there were strings attached. And we

were too dumb to realize that at the time; I was too dumb to realize it.” For his part, he has submitted a five-page document to the leadership at Bridgeview asking for greater transparency, entitled “Democratic Reform of the Mosque Foundation.” He has not received a response.

Najib goes to the Bridgeview mosque every Friday, and notes that, “The most tragic-- is that I believe the moderates are the vast majority.” He explains that many members of the Bridgeview community, who have lived under dictatorships in their countries of origin, don’t feel empowered to speak out. Najib recognizes that some feel under siege and are becoming increasingly insular. He believes that what the Muslim community needs, moving forward, is greater engagement in American civic life. “We are Americans by choice, and we should be involved in the American way of life. And if you have done well in your life, we should give something back; and not necessarily to Muslims.” He serves on the board of the local Chamber of Commerce and is increasingly active in the Rotary Club: “We do not partake in politics or religion. It’s a non-religious, non-political service organization. We should belong to some of those fine organizations that are mainstream American organizations.”

In September of 2000, Najib became involved in the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group, “as a result of this debacle in Palos Heights.” He recalls the earliest meetings of the group: “Some of them were hard.” He explains, “People didn’t know anything about each other. People didn’t know anything about the Islamic faith. There is a great deal of misinformation and disinformation about Islam in America. And I think much of it is political. So we realized that we are all part of the Abrahamic tradition, we are all monotheistic, and we believe in the same stuff: we believe in God, we believe in life after death, we believe in the angels, we believe in the holy books, and we believe in all the Prophets.”

The dialogue group has since made forty visits to local churches: “We do a very simple presentation, and we answer a lot of questions. And we have become very good friends; you see there is an affinity despite the different beliefs.” At one meeting at a church in Orland Park, the group modeled dialogue, engaging in a typical exchange. At his presentations, he receives a wide range of questions, from types of dress to concerns about terrorism. The most important aspect of their work, Najib feels, is communication: “You may have slightly different beliefs, but when people know who you are, they are less inclined to be prejudiced against you. So I think you basically dispel the misinformation and disinformation, and try to go directly to the people, and let them judge. I think the key is definitely communication.” In the midst of conflict and contention, and for five years afterwards, Najib says the Dialogue Group offered “a voice of reason.” They enjoy credibility with local religious and educational institutions: “we are basically moderate people from both sides.”

While the group is not currently active, Najib says, “I think it doesn’t matter whether there is an official group or not. People are still going to continue to communicate, are still going to continue to have dialogue, will continue to have interaction with each other.” He continues, “What form of continuation it will be is subject to discussion. But

there is a need for that. There is always an issue that comes up, where really, we have to be part of this.” If the group becomes active again, Najib would like to expand it to include other faiths. “Basically, we are the melting pot of the whole world here, and we should attempt to understand each other. Otherwise, we’ll be like the former Yugoslavia.”

Whether in the City Hall of Palos Heights or the Mosque in Bridgeview, Najib is not intimidated about speaking out. He feels, however, that the moderates need more support: “We’ve got to have a little more help; we need more help to get organized, to stand up to this extremism, and to voice our views.” He continues, “Because we don’t want to lose what we’ve got, as a society. We cannot allow the extremists to rule us, and run our lives, whether politically or religiously.” Najib explains, “I would like to look at the U.S. as the shining city. Because we still have that tolerance, pluralism, and I hope and pray that, September 11 notwithstanding, we didn’t lose that. Either through the Patriot Act, or through the control of the extreme Right, because I think all society is going to suffer if that is going to be our fate here.”

As for dialogue, Najib states simply: “There is no alternative.” He continues, “We live under the umbrella of the greatest Constitution in the world, and we are neighbors. And unless we know something about each other, unless we accept each other, how are we going to have peace and harmony in the US? How are we going to be a model to the rest of the world?” Najib, unlike many of the other key players in the dispute, believes that if a mosque were coming to Palos Heights today it would face less opposition. He notes, “The thing is, there is hardly any mosque that is being built here without some kind of opposition. But it has become now, a fact of life. Muslims are here, they are not going anywhere ... most people who come here will stay here, live here, and die here. People have to get used to the idea that Muslims are around, and they have to have places of worship. I think the opposition, as time progresses, will be less and less.”

For additional information on the Bridgeview Mosque dispute, see: “Hard-liners won battle for Bridgeview mosque,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 2004.

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