

An Invitation to a Tri-Faith Neighborhood (A)

Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, senior rabbi at Temple Israel, left the meeting at the Roman Catholic Archdiocese feeling disappointed but not discouraged. He walked with his friend Bob Freeman, a member of Temple Israel, and as they left the Archbishop's Office and Chancery, they stopped outdoors on the wide sidewalk to discuss the meeting with Archbishop Eldon Curtiss. Curtiss had politely, but firmly, declined their invitation. They understood it was a unique invitation—they had asked him if the Catholic community in Omaha, Nebraska would like to join them in building a tri-faith campus on which a Jewish synagogue, a Christian church and a Muslim mosque would co-locate as neighbors. Their vision was for all three of the religions that traced their roots to Abraham to participate in this “tri-faith” project, and a Muslim group was already committed.

The Catholics were the largest Christian group in the city, but they would not be joining. The Archbishop explained that when he came to Omaha to be the head of the archdiocese, there was a deficit of nearly 8 million dollars, and he had made a promise not to leave the diocese with any deficit. This was not the right time to take on more debt; the Archbishop was nearing the mandatory retirement age of 75. Standing out on the sidewalk, Azriel and Freeman chatted: Who should they approach next? They discussed a number of possible denominations. Azriel wondered: Was there a Christian denomination in Omaha that would be willing to build an intentional Abrahamic neighborhood with them?

The Beginning of Tri-Faith

The idea of a Tri-Faith neighborhood on one campus began with a parking lot. Temple Israel, Omaha's only Reform Jewish synagogue, had outgrown its building and badly needed a complete renovation or a new building. The congregation of 750 families was worshipping in a space designed for 350 families. For years, Temple's board had worked on cost projections and the search for a new building site. One Saturday morning, as the rabbi pulled into the parking lot behind the synagogue, he saw Bob Freeman walking from his nearby home with a yellow legal tablet in his hand. Freeman had an idea: What if they were to find a partner to build along with them, so they could share parking lots, providing significant cost savings for both groups? His idea reflected their current arrangement with the Community Playhouse to the east and First United Methodist Church across the street, with which they had shared parking lots for many years. The schedules of the three facilities were complementary, so each was able to offer extra parking for the others' use. Rabbi Azriel liked the idea of finding another congregation with a complementary schedule to build “next door,” and he knew who he wanted to invite to be their neighbors: his Muslim colleagues.

Born in Israel, Azriel had come of age in the midst of war. He grieved the loss of friends in Israel's Six Day War when he was a teenager, and again in the Yom Kippur War six years later. As a rabbi, he was a passionate advocate for social justice and for a peaceful solution to Muslim-Jewish conflict. When he arrived in Omaha in 1988, Azriel discovered “a kind of purity and naïveté”¹ in this city surrounded by cornfields and prairie. Azriel explained, “There's something still pristine...the crust of this land of Nebraska has not yet been corrupted.” Azriel thought: “It could be a place where deep interfaith relationships could be cultivated.”

From its location in the geographical center of the country, Omaha was a popular test market for manufacturers in the 1960s and 70s. Although it is a hub of corn-fed conservatism, Omaha has the reputation of being a tolerant city, with a spirit of cooperation and acceptance that precludes one from speaking against an idea

before giving it a fair hearing. The majority of Omaha's 400,000 residents are "home-grown Nebraskans"; only 8% of its residents were born outside of the U.S.² Omaha's strong Catholic presence dates back to early Jesuit settlers who put their stamp of morality on the city, fostering concern for the poor and for community betterment. They founded Boys Town, Creighton University, and St. Joseph's Hospital: St. Joseph's treated poor people for free long before hospitals were required to do so.³ On the broad, tree-lined streets of Omaha, one finds a variety of mainstream Protestant and evangelical churches, as well as an immense new Mormon temple, a stunning new Hindu temple, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jewish temples, three Islamic centers, and numerous small communities that identify with Buddhist, Unitarian, Native American, or other religions.

Omaha has not escaped racism and xenophobia. In the days immediately following the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001, the Islamic Center of Omaha was threatened with arson. Azriel explains: "I heard about what some hotheads, extreme people are planning to do, which is to maybe torch the place or throw stones and do all kind of damage. I took members of the congregation and we went to the mosque." The Jewish presence that day, inside and outside the mosque, marked the beginning of a deeper relationship between Temple Israel and local Muslims. Now, Rabbi Azriel saw an opportunity to form an intentional neighborhood with Muslim colleagues, if they were willing.

Searching for a Muslim Partner

Azriel contacted a Muslim colleague who directed him to a small group of progressive Muslims interested in building a new Islamic center. One of their leaders was Dr. Syed Mohiuddin, a soft-spoken, highly respected cardiologist and Chair of the Department of Medicine at Creighton University School of Medicine. A Sunni Muslim who is originally from India, Mohiuddin came to Creighton as a young doctor in 1963 and spent his entire medical career in the Catholic hospital system. Since 9/11, Mohiuddin had watched Islam become the subject of stereotyping and misunderstanding. Along with other Muslim professionals, he hoped to build an Islamic center that would be more than a place for prayer. It would be a community center, hosting educational, cultural and social events for all ages. He dreamed of a place where the scholarly study of Islam—particularly its rich history and its tremendous cultural diversity—would promote a better understanding of Islam among non-Muslims and Muslims as well.

Mohiuddin explained: "We not only want to study our history but our culture. We think it is important for us to know why the Islam in India is different from the Islam in Saudi Arabia, for example, or Indonesia. They all seem to be very much influenced by the local culture, language, customs."⁴ The doctor believed that because the U.S. attracts Muslims from all over the world, it would be the ideal place to study why Muslims differ so much from each other, which could lead to increased understanding between American Muslims. Mohiuddin and his colleagues also envisioned that the future Muslim community center could serve the Muslim youth of Omaha. One board member dreamed of a soccer field.

Mohiuddin and Azriel met for the first time on a Saturday afternoon in mid-January 2006 at a local public library, along with a small group from each of their faith communities. The Muslim group entered through one door, carrying a platter of food; the Jewish group entered through another door, also carrying food. The two groups spotted each other and smiled, recognizing the shared value of hospitality. After nearly two hours of excited conversation about the possibilities, they agreed to pursue the idea of co-locating. They also decided they would look for a member from the third Abrahamic religion—Christianity—to join their intentional neighborhood. They planned to call it "The Tri-Faith Initiative." Together they envisioned three houses of

worship—a synagogue, a church and a mosque—built on an interfaith campus. They also talked about creating interfaith space that they would all share, though they couldn't yet imagine what form it would take: Could it be more than parking lots and green space? Possibly a fourth interfaith building? They decided that even if the interfaith space was only a picnic table around which they gathered, they were committed to building relationships with each other in this place.

Within months, Mohiuddin and his colleagues formally incorporated as The American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture (AIISC). Its core mission: to promote a better understanding of Islam in the Western world, with the mandate to work toward establishing a Tri-Faith organization with the other Abrahamic religions.⁵ They decided the AIISC board would include women and men; more uniquely, two seats on the board were reserved for non-Muslims, one for a Christian member and one for a Jewish member. A founding principle of the AIISC was the absolute equality of women. Mohiuddin said, "We will not accept women being behind the curtain, somewhere else hidden. But they will be equal partners, working together for the betterment of the Muslim community. They have every right to any position they wish to aspire [to]." A second founding principle was the commitment to be non-denominational, which they hoped would promote a sense of unity among all Muslims of Omaha, overriding cultural, linguistic and geographic differences among them.

Searching for a Christian Partner

While Azriel, Freeman, and Mohiuddin were thrilled by their new partnership, they still lacked a partner in the Christian community. After the Roman Catholic Archbishop declined their invitation, they decided to approach the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska. Bob Freeman sent a letter of inquiry to the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese, The Rt. Rev. Joe Burnett, early in the summer. The bishop asked his assistant, Canon to the Ordinary Rev. Tim Anderson, to meet with Freeman and find out more detail about what they had in mind. The diocese had already identified the need to start another church in western Omaha, and Anderson's task was to check out the concept proposed by Freeman. Anderson tried calling, but Freeman was in Scotland on a golf vacation. When they finally connected, Anderson was starting his own golf vacation, so they decided to meet on the golf course. Anderson said, "It didn't matter whether we were Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, whatever. We were golfers!"⁶ The golf game took place in late August 2006.

Anderson recalled that it was a perfect day for golf, a gorgeous summer afternoon. An energetic, personable and engaging pastor who spent his entire career in Nebraska, Anderson was relaxed and happy to be starting his vacation. Freeman, an intense lawyer and partner with the prominent law firm of Fraser Stryker, was focused on presenting his case for bringing three religions to one campus, the first of its kind in the country. As they rode the hilly course together in the golf cart, they shared a bit about themselves. Anderson discovered that Freeman's wife was Episcopalian and that he knew the attorney for the Episcopal Diocese. They were evenly matched as golfers, and both were playing well as Freeman outlined the vision of a campus shared by Jews, Muslims and Christians. Anderson said, "I realized soon that the golf game was very much secondary." He listened intently as Freeman told him about the talks that had already begun between members of Temple and the AIISC and shared some details of their vision. By the time they finished the game, Freeman had clearly extended an invitation:

Would the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska like to become the Christian partner in building the first tri-faith campus in the U.S.?

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from Rabbi Aryeh Azriel: Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, interviews by author, Omaha, NE, March 13, 2011.

² U.S. Census Bureau, "Omaha (city) QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau," U.S. Census Bureau website, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/31/3137000.html>, accessed January 2012.

³ All quotes from Nancy Kirk: Nancy Kirk, phone interviews by author, July 14 and April 11, 2011.

⁴ All quotes from Syed Mohiuddin: Syed Mohiuddin, interviews by author, Omaha, NE, May 18 & July 17, 2011.

⁵ The American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture (AIISC), "Mission," AIISC website, <http://aiisc.org/mission.html>, accessed August 2011.

⁶ All quotes from Tim Anderson: Tim Anderson, phone interview by author, March 28, 2011 & Omaha NE, July 18, 2011.

Note: This case study is adapted from a chapter of Rev. Marcia Moret Sietstra's doctoral project for Andover-Newton Theological School.