

Vigil shows "strength in diversity"



By Brock Weir

Amid the prayers on Saturday afternoon was a story.

Offered by Peter Ginsberg of Newmarket's Or Hadash, it involved two people walking along the street about to pass a Mosque. One, he said, was a "socially isolated" and not-very sophisticated person, and the other, a person very involved in their community.

The second person greets his Muslim brothers and sisters, knowing them as the Imam who sat next to them at an Iftar dinner, a woman who volunteered with them at a homeless shelter a while back, or someone they knew from business.

The first person, however, is key.

"They don't know anybody in the Muslim community; all they know about Muslims is what they read on the internet and what they see on Fox News," said Ginsberg. "They get all nervous, they get scared, they are dressed differently and the person crosses the street to avoid them. That individual is lost and wandering around in the dark. We need to find those people, we need to bring them out, we need to talk to them and engage them, because they are people who do things like what happened in Quebec."

It was standing-room-only at the Aurora Cultural Centre's Brevik Hall on February 4, as Aurora's faith groups welcomed the public to a Community Vigil in Support of Our Muslim Neighbours in the wake of a Quebec City-area Mosque which left six men dead on Sunday, January 29.

Over 200 individuals were well removed from the dark as the names of the victims "Azzedine Soufiane, 57, Khaled Belkacemi, 60, Aboubaker Thabti, 44, Abdelkrim Hassane, 41, Mamadou Tanou Barry, 43, and Ibrahima Barry, 39" were read out by Mae Khamissa, a member of Aurora's Alabrar Muslim Association, followed by prayers from Aurora United Church, Trinity Anglican Church, Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, the Newmarket Islamic Centre, representatives of local Jewish and Hindu communities, and messages from all levels of government.

The reflective crowd was led in a call to prayer by nine-year-old Omar Mohamed who, along with his brother, Bilal, helped their father, Imam Rafaat Mohamed of Alabrar Muslim Association share passages from the Qur'an, all standing beside an altar of six candles, six white roses, and two Canadian flags, representing those who lost their lives.

"We have seen how Canada is a good example for the rest of the world," said Rafaat. "All the world is moving us and seeing this beautiful reaction of Canadians getting together against any aggression, against any attack, any ignorance, any bigotry [shows] they all stand together. People like yourselves, beautiful people of this country of Canada, come together united and putting their hands together, side by side, and that is what this is all about.

"We pray that we all work together, side by side, hand on hand, to remove ignorance and to always stand united as Canadians. I pray for our country to be a country of strength, a country of peace, and a country of tranquility."

These were sentiments shared across the spectrum of faiths, denominations, and simple humanity represented in the room on Saturday afternoon.

Sharing the parable of the Good Samaritan, representatives from Trinity said the concept of "neighbour" crosses all boundaries. "Neighbour is the other person, every single other person," said Rev. Dawn Davis. "Sometimes it is a very different other person who travels on the same road and sometimes falters and falls, is unjustly tricked, or even cruelly beaten down. Being in God's

company is to know, and even show love and mercy. From our neighbours to your neighbours, our deepest condolences.?
Filling the role as emcee for the community vigil, Rev. Paul Kang of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church said their hearts go out to all the victims ?in the wake of this tragic act of hate.?

?Having the freedom to worship in our country without fear or prejudice is a sacred trust that was broken last Sunday in Quebec,? said Kang. ?As people of faith, we hope to help begin the long process of repairing the trust that was broken by standing with you, Muslim sisters and brothers, in condemning this act perpetrated against a particular people, simply because of their faith.

?The Canada I know and the communities I have grown up in have always been secure and strong enough to both accommodate and honour differences: differences of opinions, beliefs, expressions and thoughts because, at our core, I believe what we share in common ? our hopes, our dreams, and especially our vulnerabilities ? can be used for a greater purpose and that is to bring us and bind us together in a spirit not of competition but of compassion.?

Sandra Fortini, Lay Pastoral Assistant at Our Lady of Grace, represented Fathers Francis McDevitt and Joshua Roldan at the vigil. In her message, she expressed her ?shock and dismay? over last month's attack.

?We stand with our brothers and sisters of faiths in denouncing these senseless acts of violence and pray that our Muslim brothers and sisters continue to feel secure and safe to practice their faith in their sacred spaces,? she said. ?We need to give thanks to god for the safety and security we enjoy in this country and for the freedom to live lives of faith. But, we appreciate what a violation this event has been to that sense of safety and security and pray for the Muslim community that it can, in time, be restored.

?A hatred for diversity simply doesn't reflect a love for the one who created it. We should celebrate the differences we have because of their beauty but firstly because they are the work of God.?