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At Mosques, Inviting Non-Muslims Inside to Ease Hostility Toward Islam

By **KIRK SEMPLE**

Brother Abdullah was working the sidewalk outside the Omar Ben Abdel-Aziz Mosque in Jamaica, Queens, on Friday, looking for the curious, fearful, idle and confused.

It was an hour into a two-hour open house intended to dispel ignorance and promote neighborliness and interfaith harmony. But only four guests, all Muslim, had showed up at the mosque, and all the passers-by he had stopped had said they had somewhere else to go.

“I want you to write that we tried,” said Brother Abdullah, a member of the mosque’s congregation who declined to give his last name, as he watched another pedestrian hurry away down the block. “Efforts were made to the public, and there’s nothing for them to avoid or shun. Islam is a good way of life.”

This week, hundreds of mosques and Islamic organizations across the country have been encouraging their members to invite non-Muslims to attend prayers, discussions and tours of Islamic centers as a way to defuse hostility toward the Muslim population.

In New York, about 20 mosques are participating in the event, which began last weekend and ends on Sunday. And organizers said that it had been a success — the experience of the Omar Ben Abdel-Aziz Mosque notwithstanding — with hundreds of visitors attending lectures, tours and question-and-answer sessions at Islamic centers in all five boroughs of New York City and on Long Island.

The idea for the program, “A Week of Dialogue,” emerged from a summit of Islamic leaders last month in New York and was, in part, a response to the furor surrounding a plan to open a Muslim community center and [mosque near ground zero](#).

“In terms of rectifying this Islamophobia and bigotry, we should focus on our relationship with our neighbors,” said Zaheer Uddin, executive director of the Islamic Leadership Council of Metropolitan New York, an umbrella group of mosques and Islamic groups in the city. “If our neighbors are happy, they can’t make some propaganda

stuff.”

A New York Times poll in August found that 75 percent of New Yorkers had never visited a mosque, and that those who had, or who had a close Muslim friend, were more likely to support the Muslim center planned in Lower Manhattan.

That same poll also found widespread anxiety among New Yorkers about Muslims. One-fifth of New Yorkers acknowledged animosity toward Muslims, and nearly 60 percent said people they knew had negative feelings toward Muslims because of 9/11.

Juan Williams gave voice to such concerns this week when he said on the Fox News Channel, where he is a political analyst, that he got “nervous” when he saw people in “Muslim garb” on an airplane. [National Public Radio](#), where Mr. Williams had also worked, terminated his contract on Wednesday; Fox gave him a new contract on Thursday.

While some Islamic leaders publicly supported the decision to fire Mr. Williams, the organizers of the weeklong dialogue said the open houses were intended to help dispel just the sort of concerns that Mr. Williams expressed.

Though mosques are always open to the public, the organizers said they felt that a special open-house program was necessary to bring non-Muslims through the door.

On most days this week, at least two mosques somewhere in the city have held programs to accommodate visitors. Before Friday, attendance at the programs ranged from about a dozen visitors — at the [Islamic Cultural Center of New York](#) in Manhattan — to more than 100 at the [Muslim Center of Long Island](#), or Masjid Darul Quran, in Bay Shore, according to organizers.

Organizers said the interactions had been peaceful and engaging, for the congregations and the visitors alike.

“So far so good,” Mr. Uddin said. “Very friendly, very pleasant, very educational.”

For many visitors, it is the first time they have been to a mosque, organizers said. They brought questions about prayer rituals, Muslim holidays and the similarities and differences between Islam and other religions.

In recent months, Islamic leaders in the United States have been wrestling with the question of how to improve their faith’s image in the public eye.

In Jamaica on Friday, Aiyub Abdul Baqi, an imam who was visiting from another mosque, addressed the small gathering, which also included about a 10 members of the

Omar Ben Abdel-Aziz congregation. He spoke about the main tenets of Islam and talked about the early history of Islam in the United States.

“This is not a gathering to convert anyone,” he said. “This is an attempt to clear up some of the lies and misconceptions that some people have tried to perpetuate.”

His audience, already converted, nodded in assent.