

Islamic Center of Hawthorne's Open Mosque Day seeks to ease tension, build community

Islamic Center of Hawthorne will join dozens around Southland in welcoming visitors Sunday

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Like many local Islamic schools and mosques, the Islamic Center of Hawthorne upgraded security after it was vandalized and threatened following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino.

Mosque officials worked overtime [to reassure a public](#) stewing in heightened anti-Muslim sentiment that they opposed terrorism as much as the rest of the country. On Sunday, the Hawthorne center will join 30 mosques all over Southern

California, and more around the country, that will welcome community members to Open Mosque Day led by the Shura Council of Southern California, a Garden Grove-based umbrella organization for the region's mosques.

The theme at the Islamic Center of Hawthorne's open house is "United We Stand." It begins with a tour at 2:30 p.m. and a program follows at 3 p.m. At 4:30 p.m., free dinner will be served at the center, located at 12209 Hawthorne Way.

"As a community with different faiths, we can overcome any phobias, misconceptions and misunderstandings," said Abdullah Ali, community outreach manager for the Islamic Center of Hawthorne.

"One of the main things that has come about (this year) is more interactions among the different faiths. Even though our mosque is always open to the community, this gives another opportunity to come into our space and observe for yourself who we are."

Firebombing led to conversations

In December 2015, two [Hawthorne mosques were vandalized](#) with anti-Islamic graffiti. Someone yelled threats at Islamic schoolchildren and teachers, and a fake grenade was thrown into a mosque.

Coachella Valley Mosque was set ablaze that same week when a man threw a Molotov cocktail inside during Friday afternoon prayers. Last month, the 1,800-square-foot mosque reopened after extensive repair.

Reymundo Nour, imam at the Coachella Valley Mosque, said the firebombing has opened the hearts of his congregants more than ever to the surrounding community.

“The firebombing affected us and our families,” he said. “But we got through it. We used an alternate facility for several months. We continued to use parts of the building that weren’t damaged.”

More importantly, Nour said, it has inspired members who normally shy away from speaking about their religion to get out into the community and interact with neighbors.

Nour has been speaking in libraries and churches about the Quran through a series called “Discover Islam.” He hopes those who attend the open house will see that Muslims are no different from anyone else.

“We may worship differently, but we are people like any other,” he said. “We have our triumphs, setbacks and problems like all human beings.”

Open Mosque Day has become an annual event since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and is a method to dispel myths about Muslims and mosques, said Malek Bendelhoum, associate director of the Shura Council, which has 72 member mosques in Orange, Los Angeles, San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Open house to reveal similarities

At the mosques participating in the Southern California open house events, people can come in, take tours, sample free food and refreshments and ask questions, he said.

“We hope that when people walk into these mosques, they’ll see more similarities than differences,” Bendelhoum said. “We hope it breaks down barriers.”

Complaints involving hate incidents against Muslims in California grew by 58 percent in 2015 compared with the year prior, according to a recent report released by the Council of American-Islamic Relations. That increase was attributed to terror attacks in Paris and San Bernardino.

Several local mosques have been victims of vandalism and email threats, but that’s no reason to isolate themselves, Bendelhoum said.

“I think it’s more of a reason to bring people into mosques so we can help clear some of these misconceptions,” he said. “We are cognizant of the risks and we do have extra security, but within reason.”

Visit and learn

Mosques are open year-round to anyone, said Muzammil Siddiqi, imam of the Islamic Society of Orange County mosque in Garden Grove.

“But I’ve heard people say they are hesitant to come in,” he said. “So this is a day when we formally invite the public to come in, meet us and know who we are.”

The best way to learn about someone is by visiting their home, said Mohammed Khan, director of interfaith outreach at King Fahad Mosque in Culver City.

“Sure, we’ve had threats, but we cannot live in fear,” he said. “Last year, there was one woman who came in asking if Muslims hated Christians and Jews and ended up walking out with a better understanding of Islam. If we can change one mind by opening up our doors, it’s worth it.”

Nour said he'd even welcome an opportunity to meet the man who threw the Molotov cocktail into his mosque's lobby.

"As a congregation, we publicly forgave him for what he did," he said.

That man, Carl James Dial, is serving prison time after pleading guilty to hate crime charges.

"This had to happen," said a stoic Nour. "Had it not been for this incident, it might have taken us a lot longer to engage with the community."

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