

# Brought together by 'hand of God'



The Rev. William Mahoney, left, spearheaded the lease agreement between St. Patrick's Episcopal Church and the Islamic Center of Deer Park. Muhammad Wasis Aziz belongs to the Muslim community.

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF LONG ISLAND

## Friendships that grew when faiths shared a space

BY BART JONES  
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The Muslims needed a place to pray until the dental office that they had bought in Deer Park was renovated.

No one, it seemed, wanted to rent to them, leaders of the group said. Then, after a year of searching for a temporary home, they found an Episcopal church not far from the dental office that was willing to let them use the basement once a week. The room was big and open, ideal for them to lay down their prayer rugs.

What came to pass in 2013 was much more than a lease agreement. Over the past half-dozen years, a deep friendship has blossomed between the Islamic Center of Deer Park and St. Patrick's Episcopal Church.

"How they arrived at our rectory door, I don't know, but I like to think it was the hand of God that brought us together," the Rev. William Mahoney, who spearheaded the agreement, said in a 2017 video produced by the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island.

When St. Patrick's opened its doors, the Muslim congregation was beyond touched, said Hesham Khafaga, one of the center's leaders.

"The tears came out of our eyes," Khafaga said. "It was a very emotional situation. It's a wonderful feeling. You feel God is paving the road for you."

Since then, the two communities have come together for picnics and luncheons and to celebrate the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan with a feast in the basement.

When Mahoney was hospitalized in 2016, the center's members visited him in the hospital, said Valerie Mahoney, his wife. The pastor retired a year ago, and the couple now are in Iowa.

"My husband would call me

up at night and say, 'I woke up and the Muslims were praying at my bedside,'" said Valerie Mahoney, who added that her husband is ill again and couldn't comment.

For Bishop Lawrence Provenzano, who leads the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, the cooperation between the Islamic Center and St. Patrick's is a model for interfaith understanding.

"I think it is a great relationship," the bishop said. "I really think if people of faith could spend more time together, breaking down barriers, the world would be a better place."

The Muslims moved into their new home last fall, but the friendship with the Christian congregation carries on. The center and St. Patrick's, for example, use the other's lot for overflow parking on their main days of worship — Friday for the Muslims, Sunday for the Christians.

In the video, Mahoney said he became so friendly with the Muslims that he would join them at times for their prayer services.

Valerie Mahoney and other women at St. Patrick's started teaching the Muslim women how to assimilate without losing their religious values and practices, she said. The women were encouraged "to go out and be proud of themselves and not to worry that they had headscarves or hijabs or anything," Valerie Mahoney said. "I wanted them to understand that as a woman they should be proud."

The interfaith experiment was not universally applauded.

There were times when some neighbors screamed profanities at the Muslims as they were leaving the church, the pastor said in the video. One caller accused Mahoney of "turning the church into a mosque," he recalled.

The Muslims didn't give in to the taunts, Mahoney said.

"Even with the best of resolve, how long can you hear people hurling abuse at you and not have a negative feeling?" he said. "But they've never been negative and they sustain themselves."

Valerie Mahoney came up

with the idea of a luncheon so the Muslims and the Christians could get to know each other better, he said. That gesture of friendship led to individual bonds; they visited one another's homes and shared meals, Valerie Mahoney said.

The center's roughly 250 members raised about \$1.5 million to convert the dental office building into a three-story mosque, the newest of more than two dozen that serve Long Island's approximately 80,000 Muslims, said Khafaga and Dr. Abdul Malik, another leader of the Islamic Center.

The Muslims want the mosque to be a place for everyone of all faiths to feel welcome. "We want to be part of the community," Malik said. "Even if they are not Muslim it doesn't mean it [the mosque] is not for them. They are very welcome to use our facility."

"This interfaith dialogue — it is really important for us moving forward as a country," he said. "A lot of us are basically the same."

## NY considers allowing felons to serve on juries

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY  
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ALBANY — Felons would be able to serve on juries in New York under a bill making its way through the State Legislature.

The bill, with strong sponsors in the Senate and the Assembly, has already passed, 12-3, in the Senate Judiciary Committee and is on the calendar for the Senate, where it could be voted on as early as

this month.

If passed, the measure would make New York just the third state to allow felons who have done their time to serve on juries. Colorado and Maine already allow felons on trial juries. About 8 percent of the population, or 19 million people nationwide, have felony convictions.

"If a person has completed the sentence for a felony, that person should be considered rehabilitated and given the oppor-

tunity to the full rights of citizenship, including the right to serve on a jury," according to the memo for the bill sponsored by Sen. Brian Benjamin (D-Manhattan).

In opposition to the measure are the American Bar Association and the Senate's Republican minority.

"Allowing a cold-blooded killer to sit in judgment of a defendant on trial for murder or a rapist to decide the fate of an in-

dividual accused of serious sex crimes, isn't reform," Scott Reif, spokesman for the Senate GOP, said. "It's tilting the criminal justice system away from innocent victims and their families."

James M. Binnall, a professor of law and criminology at California State University in Long Beach, said the opposition to felons serving on juries is usually based on a belief that felons lack the character needed to serve and that they

would be prejudiced against prosecutors. A frequent objection is that one juror with a bias against police or prosecutors could force a hung jury, he said.

"I have found no evidence of that in any of my research," said Binnall, himself a convicted felon on a past drunken driving charge. His research included showing a trial video to people including felons, then studying them as they deliberated over the charge. He found no bias.