

## Learning about walking in another's shoes, or shoeless



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**W**hen I hear someone making critical comments about a specific group of people — whether it's about ethnicity, sexual orientation, political or religious affiliation — I have a few standard questions: Have you met such a person? What does your (labeled) friend think and feel? What are you learning about (that group)?

Pretty well stops the conversation. It's easy for us to generalize about "those people" until we actually make the effort to meet and get to know a few of "them" — to listen and learn.

This is how I felt when my wife and I visited the Islamic Center of Asheville a few weeks ago. We both have friends and colleagues in the Muslim community and wanted to show support for our Muslim neighbors here.

Arriving at the small neighborhood masjid (mosque), we were warmly welcomed by smiling adults and children greeting us with, "Thank you for coming!" We removed our shoes and entered the well-lit room and sat on the carpeted floor with a roomful of members and guests listening to a sermon by the president of the Islamic Center, Khalid Bashir. Reading from his notes, Mr. Bashir was presenting a slow, deliberate explanation of Muslim teaching on equality and justice drawn from Qur'an passages he read in Arabic and English.

"Oh you who believe, Be staunch in justice, witnesses for Allah, even though it be against yourselves or your parents or your kindred, whether the case be of a rich person or a poor one, for Allah is nearer unto both" (surah, "chapter," 4:135).

He went on to quote from surah 49:13: "O mankind, Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another."

When the time for prayer arrived, I slipped out to give more room for the stream of worshippers pouring in. Many people from all over the area were quietly waiting on the grass. I stepped closer to a young man standing by himself and asked if he had been to a mosque before. Shyly he whispered that he had not, and said, "I didn't even know there were Muslims in Asheville."

I spoke with Mr. Bashir by phone later and he told me the community doesn't always have an imam (teacher), but he and several other volunteers speak on the Qur'an each week. The center was opened in 2005 and there are now 75 to 100 families who represent numerous nations around the world. Bashir came to the U.S. from Pakistan.

Some have a feeling of uncertainty about the current immigration chaos. But members feel the good support from other faith groups in the Asheville area and are pleased that many people show a desire to learn.

Bashir calmly assured me that their members don't force their beliefs or teachings on nonreligious or other religions. They are committed to showing respect for individual decisions. Regarding secular people, he said he doesn't criticize or look down on others for their belief or lack of belief.

When I asked Mr. Bashir if there was anything he would want Asheville to know, he answered that Muslims have been here a long time and wish to live in peaceful co-existence with all neighbors. He invites anyone with concerns or questions to come to them directly rather than to the media, because it is very important to speak with "knowledgeable sources" regarding Islam or the Qur'an.

The public is welcome to visit the masjid (mosque) on Fridays to hear a sermon from 1:30-2 p.m. Prayers begin at 2 p.m. (note that women enter by a separate door and sit in a separate section — feel free to ask about that). Everyone takes their shoes off, and people are welcome to sit and observe or kneel for prayer.

The image that stays in my mind is the young man standing alone outside. He was invited in, removed his shoes and entered quietly and respectfully.

Maybe that's one key that opens the door of understanding. Make the effort to go, to learn, to meet people you may be curious about, maybe even fearful of. Leave the fear — one human to another — ask questions or just be quiet and respectful.

As a nonbeliever (some might say "infidel" or "heretic"), I welcome the opportunity to sit, stand or even pray (or sit silently) with all peaceable people who teach justice, equality and hospitality.

My American Muslim colleagues are not particularly interested in convincing me that their faith is the best, or



Not all of life's paths are this scenic, or this well marked.

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that I should believe.

If they, or believers of any religion, choose to follow ancient teachings of equality and justice, secular folk like me can respectfully meet them at that door any day — and even remove our shoes.

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