

TORONTO STAR

Muslim and LGBTQ communities stand together against hatred and prejudice after Orlando shooting

Muslim and LGBTQ leaders came together at The 519 community centre, in the gay village, to denounce Islamophobia and homophobia. No one knows how many American bombs have gone off on Middle Eastern soil.

By Geoffrey Vendeville
Sun., June 26, 2016

Muslims and LGBTQ people both know how it feels to be treated badly or even hated sometimes because of who they are.

Mostly, these groups have suffered separately. But the tragedy in Orlando brought some members of both communities together on Friday night to end the daily Ramadan fast together in an expression of solidarity.

More than 150 people gathered at The 519 community centre, on Church St. in the gay village, to break bread and denounce Islamophobia and homophobia in the wake of the June 12 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub. Outside, candles burned in a shrine for the 49 victims of the massacre, the worst mass shooting in modern American history.

Guests sat at long fold-out tables to share *iftar*, the evening meal marking the end of daylight fasting. They passed around plates of spicy samosas, strawberries and dates before a larger dinner of naan, biryani and other South Asian dishes.

“It symbolizes togetherness,” Anela Jadunandan, an activist who wore a rainbow-patterned headscarf, said of the meal. “I think this tragedy that happened in Orlando was a watershed moment. A lot of people who have been hesitant to embrace each other have realized we’re all part of the human race.”

Muslim and LGBTQ organizers issued dual statements at the event, signed by community leaders and prominent organizations on each side, denouncing hatred and bigotry. Mayor John Tory and provincial Environment and Climate Change Minister Glen Murray, who is gay, were there to show support.

“As a community we stand firmly against all forms of oppression including homophobia and transphobia,” said Jeewan Chanicka, a public school principal, and Shaila Carter, CEO of the Muslim Women’s Collective, reading from a Muslim statement endorsed by Islamic scholars and Muslim writers, businesspeople and imams, including Yusuf Badat of the Islamic Foundation of Toronto, one of the Canada’s oldest Muslim organizations. It warned that Islamophobia is on the rise after the Orlando shooting because of the gunman’s identity: U.S. citizen Omar Mateen was the son of Afghan immigrants and an observant Muslim who reportedly pledged his support for Daesh before carrying out the massacre.

Mateen’s identity is “sadly being used to make assumptions about all Muslims,” says the LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, intersex and queer) statement. “Some are using this attack on LGBTIQ people to justify their racism and Islamophobia.” We strongly believe that homophobia cannot be fought with Islamophobia, racism or any other form of xenophobic action.”

In recent days, a few alleged hate crimes against Muslims have made headlines, including an incident in which a woman wearing a Canada T-shirt spat on and punched a hijab-wearing mother shopping with her 4-month-old son in a London, Ont., supermarket. The idea for the event grew from a string of Facebook messages between Muslim and LGBTQ people, said Douglas Kerr, a community organizer and consultant to the non-profit sector. The 519 has long welcomed the queer Muslim community and has held *iftars* before, but Friday’s dinner was a first, according to Kerr.

“This is a little different in the sense that non-queer identified Muslims have reached out to the queer community,” he said. “It’s wonderful that they reached out to us. It’s really heartwarming.”

The LGBTIQ solidarity statement was signed by dozens of people and organizations including the Glad Day Bookshop, Canada’s first gay and lesbian bookstore, downtown city councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam and MPP Cheri DiNovo. After both statements were read aloud, Muslims and LGBTQ people went to the front of the hall, took off their shoes and shared the floor for the Maghrib, the fourth of five daily prayers for Muslims. For Thompson Yen, a 24-year-old architectural designer, it was the first time participating in a Muslim rite.

“It was really touching,” he said later. “It’s important to understand that all these identities intersect and we aren’t separate.”