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Muslim, Christian cross faith divide

A minister and head of an Islamic trust urge the faithful to break bread during Ramadan

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If you pay federal income tax and you have at least one friend that you like despite your differences, you may be two steps closer to understanding Ramadan.

The Muslim month of fasting, which begins today in Oregon and Southwest Washington, is a lot like April 15, says Wajdi Said, executive director of the Muslim Educational Trust.

"Everyone knows that's the day on which you give the government what you owe," he says. "Ramadan is the time in which you give God what you owe."

And what does a Muslim owe God?

"Much more than fasting," Said says. "Ramadan is not just a month to re-evaluate yourself, to hold yourself accountable, to make a roadmap to felicity, to piety, to self-consciousness. It is a time to be mindful of the people around you; and here (in the Northwest) the people around you are not all Muslims."

Which brings us to the part about friends, and the lessons of one particular friendship, between Said and the Rev. Hector Lopez, who is Central Pacific conference minister of the United Church of Christ.

The two men, both leaders in their own religions, say their friendship began four years ago, before -- actually two days before -- the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

On Sept. 9, 2001, Said and Gail Ramjan visited Ainsworth United Church of Christ to talk about Islam.

The congregation listened attentively, but Lopez heard his heart speaking. He and Said

began a friendship that grew under the fire of 9/11 and the hope and hostility that has come and gone in Muslim-Christian relations since that fateful day.

"Wajdi is like a brother to me," Lopez says.

Said speaks of Lopez with respect, admiration and affection. The two of them have continued to work together in interfaith groups and to meet almost every Tuesday most of the year for lunch at a cafe, Alexandria Mediterranean Cuisine, near Portland State University, where they welcome anyone who wants to know them both better.

"Sometimes it's just us, sometimes its three, sometimes it's seven," Lopez says. "It's a marvelous, informal setting where we break bread together and tell stories."

It is in sharing a meal that true friendships form, Said says. "And breaking bread together is part of Ramadan." The fasting lasts only during daylight hours, and the meal that ends each day's fast is often a time of celebration.

"In Ramadan, we invite others to break our fast with us, to get to know each other," Said says. "Ramadan can be the catalyst to create friendships."

And friendships, Lopez says, are a way to break through barriers, the walls that arise between Muslims who don't know a Christian and Christians who don't know Muslims.

An interfaith friendship "puts a face, a real genuine person to this whole abstract news item" of Muslim-Christian relations, he says. In face-to-face conversations, he has learned that Muslims "are poignant when they tell hard stories, humorous when they tell about the wackiness of their communities."

And, yes, sometimes Muslims and Christians disagree.

He laughs at the idea that friendships depend on total agreement. "We (Christians) are not in complete agreement with other Christians," he says. "But we try to respect their journey and ask them to respect ours." The same thing can happen between Muslims and Christians, between those of different faiths.

He and Said say they would like to see more people -- Christians, Jews and others -- take advantage of this Ramadan to meet Muslims, to put a face on the faith, beyond the ones that make the news.

"It is an opportunity to move beyond toleration," Said says. "Human chemistry is love for your brother, love for your sister, love for yourself. Love is not toleration. Love means you meet and sit together. Love means you break your fast."

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