

Faith, fear clash in middle Tennessee over proposed mosque

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. (ABP)—Mike Smith, pastor of [First Baptist Church](#) in Murfreesboro, Tenn., received an anonymous letter this summer asking him to warn his congregation that a proposed new mosque near the city was part of “a long-range plan to destroy Western civilization as we know it.”

Hundreds gathered to sound off on a proposed Islamic Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Since he didn’t know who sent the letter, he decided to respond publicly in his personal blog.

“I’ve never had much use for anonymous letters, but this one got under my skin,” he said in part. “To tell the truth, the letter saddened me. It’s not every day I find so much fear and miscomprehension packed into one page of type!”

Fear and faith have divided residents of this rapidly growing community 30 miles southeast of Nashville—previously best-known for its role in Civil War history and as home to Middle Tennessee State University—since the [Islamic Center of Murfreesboro](#) bought roughly 15 acres of land last November to build a mega-church-style mosque facility just outside the city limits.

Permitted under a state law enacted in 2009 to make it easier to build

churches without interference by local zoning boards, the action set off a wave of protests from citizens voicing concerns ranging from traffic and environmental impact to where a relatively small Muslim community expects to receive funding for a 53,000-square-foot complex that eventually would include a new mosque, multipurpose and educational facilities, gym and athletic fields.



Supporters and opponents of a proposed mosque in Murfreesboro, Tenn., face off. (PHOTOS/Bob Allen)

"To go from a small operation to a massive complex, it certainly gives one rise to question where the funds for such an operation occurred," said Dusty Ray, the pastor of the independent Heartland Baptist Church. "From the numbers that they say that they have, it makes one wonder what the actual intent is, and because of the history involved and the thousands of years that we have to study on this, we do certainly, I think, have reason to be concerned."

Since a similar controversy arose in New York City over construction of the so-called [Ground Zero Mosque](#), Murfreesboro's mosque controversy has received national attention. In mid-August, televangelist Pat Robertson weighed in on *The 700 Club*.

"I don't think we should interfere with the free worship of God by any group, but ladies and gentlemen, this isn't just religious," Robertson said.

"It just isn't. You mark my word, if they start bringing thousands and thousands of Muslims into that relatively rural area, next thing you know, they are going to be taking over the city council. Then they are going to be having an ordinance that calls for public prayer five times a day. Then they are going to be having ordinances that there have to be facilities for foot-washing in all the public restrooms and all the airport facilities.

"Before long, they are going to demand, demand, demand, and little by little, the citizens of Murfreesboro or whatever little town it is are going to be cowed by these people—not to mention their ability to bribe folks. I don't know whether anybody's getting a payoff, but it's entirely possible."



Controversy over issues like building the Islamic Center bring out a range of opinions, many based on fear.

Another segment on the same program interviewed opponents of the Murfreesboro mosque.

"It does seem to be part of a larger strategy to build large mosques in rural areas and create Islamic communities, large Islamic communities, in rural areas for some larger purpose," said Rebecca Bynum, publisher for *New English Review* and formerly news editor and board member of Jihad Watch.

Laurie Cardoza Moore, president of the pro-Israel group [Proclaiming Justice to the Nations](#), offered an explanation of what makes Murfreesboro attractive to Muslims.

"We have the Bible book publishers," she said. "You have Christian book publishers. You have Christian music headquartered here. So, this is where the gospel message goes out."

Later Moore was interviewed on Comedy Central's *Daily Show*.

"This has nothing to do with religion," she said of the mosque controversy. "It's about stopping the advancement of radical Islam in the United States of America."

Muslims "believe that Jews and the Christians are the infidels and they are, according to the Quranic teachings, supposed to be killed," she said.

Moore went on to claim that "Islam is a political system of global domination," that 30 percent of Muslims are terrorists and there are already 35 training camps in America.

"We know we've got a huge terrorist network here in Tennessee," she said. "The Nashville Islamic center appears to be the mother ship."

While heated, most of the debate so far has been civil, but there have been acts of violence.

In January, someone vandalized a sign at the future mosque site by spray painting it with “Not Welcome.” The Islamic Center of Murfreesboro labeled it an “effort to gain publicity and sway public opinion towards stereotyping views against Muslims.”

A second sign vandalism occurred in June, when someone slashed the sign reading “Future Site of Islamic Center of Murfreesboro” in two.

Early Aug. 28, four pieces of heavy construction equipment on the site were doused with accelerant and set ablaze. Federal officials are investigating the suspicious fire as a possible hate crime.

“It’s still a little mind-boggling,” Camie Ayash, a stay-at-home mom and the mosque’s spokesperson, told *Time* magazine. “It seems like the community is very accepting of us as individuals; when I take my kids to school, I don’t run into any prejudice because I cover my hair, but the concept of Islam overall makes people nervous because of 9/11.”

Smith, the pastor of First Baptist Church, reminded his congregation their Muslim neighbors are U.S. citizens entitled to freedom of religion, and Christians should treat all people, including those of other faith traditions, with respect.

“Our nation is at war with terrorists, wherever they may be found. We are not at war with a religion,” Smith wrote.

“Christianity is not at war with any other religion. Instead, we are called to minister to others through prayer, worship, teaching and good works. We should trust God with the world and seek only to be faithful in the tasks God has given us.”