

BPFNA urges support for Muslims; N.Y. project director decries discourse

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NEW YORK (ABP) - As the leader of an effort to build an Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan expressed his dismay Sept. 13 at the rising tide of anti-Islam rhetoric across the country, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America called on Baptists to build bridges of understanding with their Muslim neighbors.

"The events of the past few weeks have really saddened me to my very core," said Feisal Rauf, chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, in [a speech](#) hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

"I regret that some have misunderstood our intentions," he continued. "I deeply distress that in this heated political season some have exploited this issue for their own agendas. And I have been deeply disappointed that so many of the arguments have been based on deliberate misinformation and harmful stereotypes."



Feisal Rauf and Daisy Khan
(ASMA photo)

Rauf's organization is at the center of a national controversy over building the center called Park51 that would include an Islamic prayer space and other facilities about two blocks from the northern edge of the site known as "Ground Zero." Likely 2012 presidential candidates Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin are the most prominent of politicians and commentators who oppose the plan, saying locating an Islamic facility so

close to the site of the first and deadliest of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States would be insensitive to the loved ones of those killed on 9/11. Local opposition to mosque construction projects has also sprung up in other places across the country, [such as Murfreesboro](#), Tenn., and Temecula, Calif.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship's board of directors released [a statement](#) Sept. 13 saying the group is "dismayed by actions such as calling for the burning of holy books; the protesting of building of Muslim community centers and mosques, not just in New York City but in many areas around the world; and direct attacks on Muslim people."

"We say that those who use Christianity to persecute and prejudice Muslim people do not speak for the vast majority of peace-loving Christians," the statement said. "We urge our peace and justice loving partners to resist the disease of Islamophobia. This leads us farther away from the peace we all seek."

It continued: "There are better ways to address conflict. Even amidst the current wave of hate-filled hysteria, the possibility of positive change exists if people of good will take action. And so we urge our members, our congregations, and our friends to use this opportunity to act in ways that will create healing, mutual understanding and cooperation."

Feisal said in his speech that opposition to the New York project lends false credibility to Islamic extremists' contention that there is a war between Islamic values and Western values.

"Radical extremists would have us believe in a theory of a world-wide battle between Muslims and non-Muslims, and some intellectuals and thinkers have furthered that idea," he said. "That idea, ladies and gentlemen, is false. The real battlefield — the real battle that we must wage together today — is not between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is between moderates

of all the faith traditions against the extremists of all faith traditions.”

Some have asked Rauf and the Cordoba Initiative to consider moving to a less-sensitive location. While he and his wife, Daisy Khan, have so far declined to say they would compromise, Rauf said in a question-and-answer session following the speech that they “are exploring all options as we speak right now and we are working through what will be a solution, God willing, that will resolve this crisis, defuse it and not create any of the unforeseen or untoward circumstances of what we do not want to see happen.”

However, he declined to elaborate on whether those options include moving the center. In response to a question about whether the controversy raised by the location actually undercuts his mission to teach interfaith tolerance and to raise the profile of moderate Islam, he said the site was important precisely because of its symbolic value.

“It’s not good enough to teach where no students can hear you,” he said. “We need to create a platform where the voice of moderate Muslims can be amplified.”

-Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for Associated Baptist Press.

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