



## **Building Inclusive Communities: Engaging with our Muslim-American Neighbors**

*Adapted from Critical Connections blog post*

*“All of us share more similarities than differences; the obstacles we have to overcome are ignorance, fear and alienation. Our job is to become more energetic and more convinced that we can in fact make change.”*

*(Dr. Kamal Ali)*

In spring 2015, Critical Connections and the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding hosted a day-long symposium, "Building Inclusive Communities: Engaging with our Muslim-American Neighbors," as a central connecting-point for our ongoing Bridging Muslim/Non-Muslim Divides event series in the Pioneer Valley. The symposium drew over sixty participants and speakers and consisted of four panels focusing on the roles of educators, law enforcement, social services, and faith communities in building safer, more inclusive communities and improving understanding of the American-Muslim experience.

On the first panel, local educators discussed best practices around increasing diverse perspectives in the classroom. Ms. Barbara Sahli observed that the most effective way to counter negative perceptions about Islam and Muslims is to provide opportunities for Muslims and non-Muslims to meet, play, talk, work, and eat together. Professional development and diversity training can further mitigate these impressions and help bridge the gaps that often exist between students and educators.

On the second panel, which featured varied perspectives on the role of law enforcement in the community, Dr. Kamal Ali underscored the importance of understanding the context in which

mass incarceration takes place. "Being black in this country is difficult, and being black and male is even more difficult," Ali explained. "Being black, male and Muslim is the perfect trifecta." He emphasized that until conditions of inequality, alienation and urban poverty are addressed, recidivism among prisoners will continue.

The vital need for cultural competency and training was a central theme of the third panel, in which Ms. Kathryn Buckley-Brawner noted that the lens service providers look through often become barriers to providing services. Cultural awareness and competency, as well as a conscious dismissal of one's own biases, can help overcome such obstacles.

The final panel included representatives from the local Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities who emphasized the need to build relationships among different faith communities. "Too often religion is misused as an instrument for division and injustice," said Dr. Mohammad Saleem Bajwa. Rabbi Justin David addressed the need "to engage in relationships with the goal of changing ourselves" in order to "grow in empathy, understanding and kindness." For Rabbi David, this is where faith comes in: "through these micro acts of mutuality and reciprocity, perhaps some tiny ripple will develop and eventually lead to some kind of a change none of us can foresee."

Participants and speakers then joined one of the four sector-specific working groups to devise strategies and recommendations, including: developing media analysis classes for students, mutual assistance associations to aid recent refugees, interfaith youth activities, and Muslim-administered trainings for police and FBI personnel.

The symposium was a day of deep listening and learning, resource-sharing, and creating opportunities for intra- and inter-sector collaboration around building cohesive and resilient communities, with many participants requesting to "keep the momentum going." It was evident that connections were being made as participants and speakers exchanged contact information and promises to stay in touch and share information. As District Attorney Sullivan reflected, "the diversity of people represented at the symposium opened many new doors."