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UPDATE

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Call to Service Resonates in Muslim Community

When President Barack Obama called on the nation to serve in remembrance of the 2001 terrorist attacks, many Muslim-Americans were mobilized to act and some have managed to shape new roles in their communities as a result.

In June, President Obama kicked off a "United We Serve" initiative encouraging volunteer work, with an emphasis on interfaith projects, and culminating in a National Day of Service and Remembrance on Sept. 11.

One aspect of the initiative was to use existing Muslim-American networks and charities to further mobilize their communities to participate in service projects and work with people of other faiths.

Initially setting a goal of 1,000 service projects over the summer, Dalia Mogahed, executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, who is also a member of the president's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said the effort among Muslim-American groups multiplied into 3,000 projects -- the vast majority of which involved another faith community.



"We wanted to encourage people to get to know their neighbors and for their neighbors to get to know them, and I don't think there's anything as powerful as serving together to accomplish that," she said.

The emphasis on working with people of other faiths, she explained, stemmed from President Obama's speech to the Muslim world delivered in Cairo, Egypt, where he spoke of building bridges: "Around the world, we can turn dialogue into interfaith service, so bridges between peoples lead to action -- whether it is combating malaria in Africa, or providing relief after a natural disaster."

The results of the call to service also revealed another face of the Muslim community, Mogahed said.

"I think that local communities perhaps saw a side of the Muslim-American community that isn't often reported on in the media -- them simply living out their faith," she said. "We found that in contrast to the popular perception of Muslim-Americans being religiously devout and therefore self-isolating, that it was in fact Islam's core message of serving the needy that was at the heart of this call to action."

In addition, according to Mogahed, the initiative helped draw out Muslim-Americans, many of whom had kept a low profile after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"It was a catalyst for Muslim-Americans to start to shed a feeling of being under siege, which is what many people said that they felt for the past eight years, and move to a place where they are engaged, active citizens, not only asking for acceptance but in fact uplifting others and helping to build our country," she said.

The initiative encouraged new participants in existing programs, such as free medical clinics staffed by doctors of different faiths offering their services to the uninsured, and sparked new projects that forged interfaith bonds.

For example, in Orlando, Fla., teams of Jewish, Hindu and evangelical Christian students participated in a national feeding program for the homeless, called Project Downtown, which is sponsored by the Muslim Students Association. Mogahed said one church pastor reported back to her that his students were so excited and moved by the experience that they plan to make the relationship a permanent one and continue the project.

The summer's call to service came at a time when Americans still widely consider Muslims to be the religious group that is most discriminated against. A Pew Research Center poll released Wednesday showed nearly 58 percent of adults feel Muslims face more discrimination than other religions. The [poll](#), conducted in August, surveyed 2,010 adults across the country.

"I think that's what makes this response so significant, because despite challenges of discrimination and despite perhaps feeling that the public isn't necessarily looking at their community positively, that instead of isolating themselves in a defensive way, that they're doing exactly the opposite -- that they're reaching and actually helping people that might, if asked, say they actually have prejudice against Muslims," said Mogahed.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, several groups have formed to promote cross-cultural understanding, such as Our Voices Together, which organized an event that brought together 30 musicians from different countries. Other groups foster economic development projects in other countries, such as the Safer World Fund, which supports clean water, education and health care programs in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Eric Gardner, board member of Americans for Informed Democracy and data analysis adviser with the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, said citizen-to-citizen interaction around service projects can foster a sense of shared values, not only within a country but with those abroad.

"It's about showing a different face overseas and how important it is to have this citizen to citizen interaction," he said. "It can create a degree of solidarity [and] a possibility for the global community to have a sense of shared values. The greater the degree of communication and communication at different levels is a key element to that.

"Certainly on an anecdotal level, I think there is less baggage when citizens are working with citizens. It's a different type of interaction than governments working governments."

The U.S. service initiative has also gotten some positive play in the Arab media abroad, said Mogahed, for connecting Sept. 11 with service and unity, rather than the divisiveness it provoked for many Muslims in the beginning.

But amid the progress, some observers say more still needs to be done to improve religious and cultural awareness.

David Paine, president and founder of MyGoodDeed, one of the organizers of the 9/11 National Day of Service and Remembrance, said movement on the issue of cultural understanding depends on your perspective.

"If you're a 9/11 family member, I think there is a considerable awareness and understanding of the issues that people of other nations are facing today," he said. "On a broader level, in terms of the American public, I'm not sure if there is much of a change of our understanding of other cultures post 9/11."

Mogahed said what would help is increased education about the beliefs and norms of people of different faiths, and people just plain getting to know each other better. "We find in our research that if someone actually knows a member of another faith, they're much less likely to say they have prejudice against that group," she said.

-- By Larisa Epatko and Meaghan Wilson, Online NewsHour

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