

Milpitas Mosque Leader Reflects

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community president acts as father-figure, adviser

BY KEN YODER REED

The first time we met, July 4, 2008, I told Wasim Malik I was sorry to read about the vandalism at his mosque on Evans Road. "Hey, we're all Americans and we're neighbors. I'd like to get to know you," I said.

He invited me to join the community for their Thanksgiving weekend seminar. Inside the special events tent we lined up on our knees in rows, cupped our hands to our ears and bowed until our foreheads touched the canvas as the 1,400-year-old ritual call to prayer rang out in Arabic. As far as I could tell, I was the only Caucasian, but no one seemed bothered by it. Everyone else looked like their roots were the Indian sub-continent.

About 100 of us men sat on chairs and listened to lectures on Islam and civil society. By lunchtime I was convinced the Ahmadi Muslims were different, somehow.

Of course, I'd prepared by reading the pamphlets Malik gave me. The pamphlets said Ahmadi Muslims believed in a Messiah, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who in 1889 proclaimed he was the One promised in Koranic scriptures, the metaphorical second coming of Jesus of Nazareth to inaugurate an era of peace, harmony and love. Ahmad promised to restore Islam to its original essence and divest it of fanatical beliefs and practices, which he claimed had subverted the truth of Islam. He taught separation of mosque and state, no compulsion in religion and rejection of jihad as holy war for the spread of Islam. For this he was rewarded with the title Heretic by many Muslim believers, an apostate whose assassination would be an act of worship to God.

Something started rumbling deep in my inner psyche, my gut, that weekend. Growing up Mennonite in Pennsylvania, I'd spent hours as a boy poring over the "Martyrs' Mirror," looking at the pictures of Mennonites strung up by their heels, turned into human torches, drowned in the rivers of Switzerland and Germany by Protestants and Catholics alike, who declared them Heretics. Were the Ahmadi Muslims more like me than I'd realized?

In the middle of a rainstorm, I came back to the mosque for my third meeting with Malik. As always, he looked the gentleman — his suit and tie went together well, his gray Jinnah hat matched the gray in his goatee and the big onyx ring on his pinkie said Businessman. But Malik was upset. He immediately began to denounce "jihad." The Mumbai terrorist attacks were underway although he didn't mention them by name.

"These mullahs are causing it. They're saying this and that is what the Koran means. They're completely intolerant."

Malik told me he knows intolerance from personal experience. He grew up in Pakistan, joined the Pakistani Army in 1972 and was commissioned second lieutenant, just before the National Assembly declared the Ahmadi community to be "non-Muslim," which led to a nationwide vendetta against them. "A huge number of Ahmadi Muslims were murdered and not one of the perpetrators has ever been apprehended," Malik said. "When I became active in community work, the local mullahs sent death threats to me as well."

Malik fled with his wife, Hena, and their two small children to California, where he became an educator, working as the director of a school readiness program. Hena used her bachelor's in early childhood to teach and, eventually, run a licensed child-care facility. They helped build the AMC (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community) mosque on Evans Road, and Malik was elected president in 1994, a position he has held ever since.

What does a mosque president do? I asked. "Not much," Malik grinned. It was his only crack of the evening. Life is serious stuff for him. "Really, I'm like a father, like a brother, like a friend to everyone in our community. Everyone expects a phone call, you know, and there are 100 families."

Most evenings Malik is engaged in what he calls "jihad." "It's marital issues most of the time. Husband and wife unhappy. I try to mediate. Arrogance and ego create the problem. And there's the real meaning of jihad, you know. The inner struggle to kill



Wasim Malik grew up in Pakistan and joined the Pakistani Army in 1972 before the National Assembly declared the Ahmadi community to be "non-Muslim," which led to a nationwide backlash against them. He fled with his wife and their two small children to California, where he now leads a Milpitas mosque.

Photo by Ken Yoder Reed

your ego and arrogance."

As Fate or God would have it, the beliefs of this little mosque on Evans Road were going to be mightily tested.

"9/11 was an abhorrent act," Malik said. "No justification for it at all. AMC was the only mosque in the Bay Area to open its door on Sept. 12 and hold a prayer vigil." He brings out mounted newspaper clippings, pointing at familiar faces on the photos. "Mayor (Henry) Manayan. The superintendent of schools. Zoe Lofgren. They all came. First we sang the national anthem. Then I spoke a little. Then Zoe spoke. We prayed for the families and then a moment of silence for the fallen."

Still, I had more questions. The daily

rain of news about terrorists, Taliban, beheadings, suicide bombers and honor killings leaves large stains on all of us. I had to know what Malik believed about family.

"Ahmadi Muslims profess 'no compulsion in religion,'" I said. "But what if your children — Mehrunisa or Nooruddin — leave the faith. How do you feel about honor killings?"

Malik stared back in horror. "Absolutely not! What could I do? I could only pray God shows them the way back."

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