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Jews and Muslims Set Up Big Interfaith Effort

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Sunday, December 16, 2007; A09

Two major Jewish and Muslim organizations unveiled an interfaith dialogue curriculum yesterday and are urging their hundreds of thousands of members to use it. Both sides say it is the broadest Jewish-Muslim interfaith effort in the continent's history.

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, North America's largest Jewish movement, announced the partnership with the Islamic Society of North America at his group's biennial convention in San Diego.

"As a once-persecuted minority in countries where anti-Semitism is still a force, we understand the plight of Muslims in North America today," Yoffie said yesterday. "We live in a world in which religion is manipulated to justify the most horrific acts, a world in which -- make no mistake -- Islamic extremists constitute a profound threat. For some, this is a reason to flee from dialogue, but in fact the opposite is true. When we are killing each other in the name of God, sensible religious people have an obligation to do something about it."

This summer Yoffie became the first major Jewish leader to address ISNA, the continent's largest Muslim organization with 30,000 attendants coming to its annual convention. ISNA President Ingrid Mattson will address the 980-congregation Jewish group today, the first leader of a major Muslim group to do so.

The manual and video are built around five sessions that touch on topics including the place of Jerusalem in Jewish and Muslim tradition and history. The toughest potential sticking points will probably be related to Israel and to stereotypes both groups carry about the other, Mark Pelavin, director of interreligious affairs for the Jewish group, said in an interview. "Jews want to know how Muslims feel about terrorism in the name of Islam, and Muslims want to know how Jews feel about Palestinian suffering."

Eleven synagogue-mosque pairs have already been set up as pilot programs, including two in the D.C. area: the Islamic Society of Southern Prince George's County of Temple Hills and Temple Solel in Bowie is one, and the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Sterling and the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston is the other.

Yoffie also announced that the two groups created an adult curriculum on Islam and pressed every synagogue to consider offering it.

"There exists in our community a profound ignorance about Islam, along with a real desire to learn about what moves and motivates Muslims today. We must respond to this desire with serious programs of education," he said.

Both groups already have dialogue programs with various other faith groups, but on a much smaller scale.

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