

AAR Regional Development Grant Application: Southeastern Region

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Efforts for Authentic Inter-Religious Dialogue

Project Narrative:

Over the past several years, every mosque in Middle Tennessee has been targeted by vandals in some way. The Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, TN has been targeted numerous times and the building of this center, completed in July, 2012, caused such an uproar that it drew national attention. Featured in articles in *The Huffington Post* and the subject of a multi-part CNN documentary (*Unwelcome: The Muslims Next Door*), this mosque has been at the center of much controversy. Last year in TN, legislation that would have outlawed Sharia law was proposed by a state senator and a state representative. The proposed legislation was defeated.

In the midst of such events, it is apparent that there is a need to promote understanding and tolerance among adherents of different religious traditions, not only in middle Tennessee, but also throughout the United States and elsewhere. All too often, accounts of religious intolerance and misunderstanding are scattered across the news. As the religious landscape of the United States becomes more pluralistic, inter-religious dialogue becomes more of a necessity. There is a challenge for religious leaders to model authentic dialogue for community members that will truly engender a deeper understanding of religious similarities and differences that will foster not only tolerance and peaceful co-habitation, but also dynamic and productive interfaith communities. This project will bring together religious leaders and scholars to model such dialogue in the AAR's Southeastern Region. Receiving a Regional Development Grant would help provide a solid start for this inaugural conference that the participants plan to hold on an annual basis.

Project Focus/Goals:

- The first conference, to be held on November 3, 2013, is entitled *God's Books*. Participants are presenting scholarly papers focusing on how sacred texts are read within their respective religious traditions. The goal is to move inter-religious conversation to a deeper level that allows for significant consideration of commonalities and differences in textual criticism, thereby promoting a deeper understanding among adherents of these faith traditions. The Islamic Center of Murfreesboro is the chosen location for the first conference. The intention is to hold the conference in a variety of locations over the coming years. The focus of the conference will also change every year. Talks are already underway to choose a topic for 2014.
- The conference will promote “intercultural competence” by working to increase “knowledge and understanding of people from a variety of backgrounds” (Hampden-Sydney College 2006). This may be achieved when persons grow from an ethnocentric perspective to an ethnorelative perspective (Bennett & Hammer 2005).

- This process of growth is made possible when individuals not only **acquire** knowledge about a variety of peoples and religions but are also able to **interact** with individuals from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds (Covenant College 2007). In this ongoing process of growth and understanding, individuals learn to search for the commonalities in humanity while seeking to navigate, appreciate, and respect the differences (Harris 2000).
- This conference could be duplicated in other regions and will provide a model for educating a wider audience about religious discourse, whether that audience is in an academic setting, a formal religious setting, or within the larger community. The conference model would promote civil dialogue and inquiry and could be replicated in a variety of settings (college or university campuses, mosques, synagogues, churches) that would further understanding and the work of scholars and religious leaders in the regions, as well lay persons interested in such conversations. In sum, we seek to establish lines of contact and productive communication among scholars, religious leaders and communities of faith. Our conference will establish a framework for ongoing dialogue, and we will lay the important groundwork for future collaboration and development over time, building a model through which we will create more productive inter-faith communities.

Project Participants:

- Dr. Bahloul serves as the imam of the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro. A native of Egypt, he was recently invited to speak about his experiences at a local TEDx event (<http://www.tedxnashville.com/speakers/2013-speakers/dr-ossama-bahloul.563507>).
- Dr. Holt is an associate professor of religion at Belmont University and teaches courses on world religions and inter-religious dialogue. She also directs Central Seminary's satellite program in Nashville, TN and serves as the regional coordinator of the AAR SE.
- Dr. Messier is Professor Emeritus, Middle Tennessee State University and President of the Southeast Regional Middle East and Islamic Studies Seminar (SERMEISS). He directs the Moroccan-American Project in Aghmat (MAPA) which consists of the archaeological study of the medieval city of Aghmat and its context.
- Rabbi Shapiro has served in a synagogue and has worked as a college professor (http://www.rabbirami.com/Rabbi_Rami/Home.html). He is a well-recognized speaker and the author of numerous books.
- Fr. John Oliver served on the faculty of St Tikhon's to lecture in Old and New Testament and American Religious History, and he currently serves as pastor at St Elizabeth Orthodox Christian Church, in Murfreesboro, TN, a mission of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese.
- Dr. Frederick Bauerschmidt is chair of the department of theology at Loyola University and is the author of several books.
- Dr. Jamal Badawi is founder of the Islamic Information Foundation and a member of the Islamic Society of North America. He formerly taught at St. Mary's University in Nova Scotia.

Conference Description & Plans:

The conference will be held on November 3, 2013. The Islamic Center of Murfreesboro has the capacity to hold 500 people. Our hope is to attract between 200-300 people to the event. We know we will draw attendees from our own faith and scholarly communities, and we also hope to draw interested individuals from the wider community. Six speakers will present their papers and one participant will moderate. We will invite guests to write questions before and during the presentations for the conversation that will follow. The conference will conclude with a social hour where presenters and participants will share food and beverage while continuing with informal, community-building conversation. Thus, conversation will be held on a variety of levels that will allow those who attend to address a number of interests, not only textual issues.

Local press will be invited to cover the event. Invitations will be extended to members of local mosques, synagogues and churches, and the conference will also be advertised at local colleges and universities.

Papers for the conference are being collected a month in advance. Participants will have time to read and critique all papers before the actual conference date. Plans include producing an edited volume of the conference papers. Several participants have working relationships with publishers, and we believe a book contract is close at hand. The intention to publish is tied to the participants' desire to foster such conversation in various locales. Those involved in completing the proposal for the Regional Development Grant are also interested in and willing to participate in the SECSOR meeting in Atlanta, 2014 to further this conversation in an academic setting. If such conversation is desired, consideration regarding additional funding to cover some travel expenses to Atlanta would be helpful, though it is not required nor requested in this grant application.

See Budget on Page 4

Itemized Budget:

The *God's Books* conference is a product of our own interests and arises out of our concern for our community. We have relied on the hospitality offered by Dr. Bahloul and the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro in our efforts to organize and hold this event. We have no other formal source of funding.

Transportation Expenses: Flights-2 round trip plane tickets to BNA (one from Nova Scotia/one from Chicago) Cab Fare	Total=\$
Lodging and Food: Lodging-2 hotel rooms, 2 nights each @ \$ per night plus estimated taxes Meals for out of town guests over 2 night stay Food & Beverage for conference social hour-approx. 250 people	Total=\$
Advertising/Supplies: Promotional Brochures-for advertising in places of worship and college/university campuses Printed Programs-for dissemination at conference Supplies-paper, pens for attendees	Total=\$
Project Total Requested from AAR	\$