

Rumblings of Peace

As America fights war on terrorism, locals meet to try to form organization to push peace

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

About 30 people came to a meeting last week aimed at starting a local peace initiative to counter the nation's war against terrorism.

The meeting, which was held at the Forsyth County Main Library, was spearheaded by the Community Mosque of Winston-Salem. It was the second community forum in three months sponsored by the mosque. In April, the mosque invited representatives to give the pro-Palestinian side of the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

Last Thursday's meeting was a planning session for the initiative, which is being called Community for Peace. Participants discussed what the organization's mission statement should entail and suggested ways to recruit new members. They also discussed ideas for disseminating their objectives to the community.

"There are a lot of different reasons why a peace initiative is important," said Imam Khalid Griggs of the Community Mosque.

Some expressed interest in the peace initiative because they say the nation's war against terrorism is not well defined and has no end in sight. Others hoped that some type of peace effort could, in some way, help head off a war against Iraq, a possibility that has been frequently hinted at by the Bush White House.

Jean Hopson, a local Christian who formed the group Friends With Palestinian Christians in 1998, recently returned from a religious conference in Beirut. She said Middle Easterners there predict only bad things if the

United States attacks Iraq, one of the nations in Bush's "axis of evil."

"This is not going to go well at all. We are in for a hellish situation if we continue," Hopson said. The meeting drew a diverse group — men, women,



Griggs

blacks, whites, people of Middle Eastern origin, Muslims and Christians. Participants agreed that the group should continue to open its doors to any and all who want peace. It was also agreed that despite the fact that representatives from at least two Muslim houses of worship were on hand, the peace initiative would be an independent organization that would welcome people of any religion and race.

Participants made it clear, however, that those not interested or iffy about wanting peace should not be involved in the group.

"We are not trying to create a debate about peace.... We do not want to fight with people for a whole meeting about wanting peace," Griggs said.

Many in attendance said that the news media were not giving the American people the whole picture of the nation's war against terrorism or of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Some said that in order to effect any change at all, there will have to be some educating of the public.

"We must inform people of

their ignorance with a smile," said the Rev. Otto Gaither, an associate pastor at Dellabrook Presbyterian Church. "We are the ones who are going to have to make a difference. No one else will."

Participant Mischi Binkley said the peace group will be a welcome alternative for many local people.

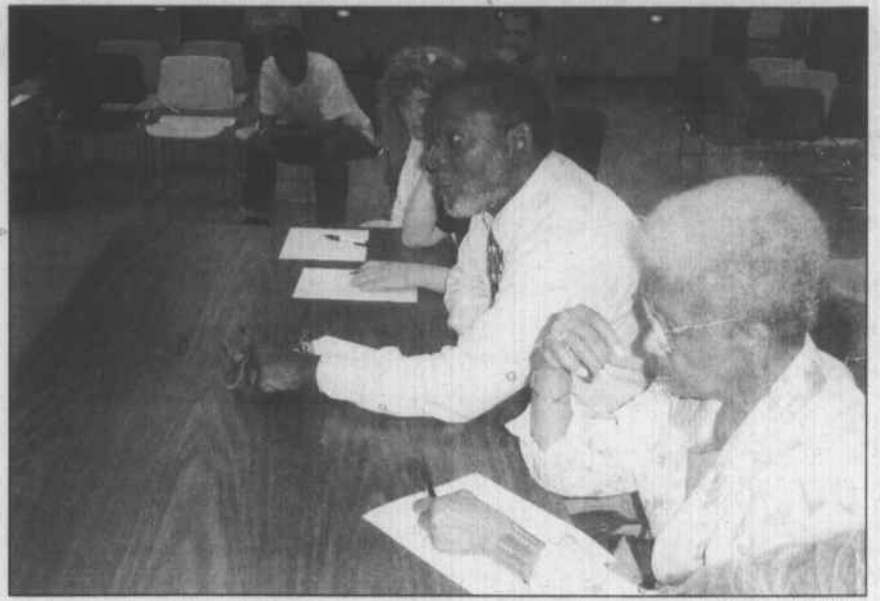
"People are looking for the truth," she said. "There are a lot of people out there seeking it, and we need to provide an environment where they can get to it."

Although some at the planning session were clearly not pleased with the Bush presidency or with many in his cabinet, the peace initiative will not be partisan. Group members insisted that what they are trying to do — stop a war and violence — goes beyond politics and patriotism.

"I think our interests and objectives are noble," said state Rep. Larry Womble, who has been a critic of the war in Afghanistan. "I think our calling is a higher calling."

The group will continue to meet regularly to hash out ways to try to divert the nation from its current warpath. Participants also discussed the possibility of taking their message to upcoming community events, holding essay contests to promote peace among local students and of holding a peace rally on Sept. 11, the one-year anniversary of the terrorists' attacks that killed more than 3,500 people.

To many, it is hard to fathom that a local peace group, and groups like it throughout the nation and world, can have a big impact during a time when most Americans feel the nation is justified in its response to Sept. 11. But par-



The Rev. Otto Gaither makes a point at last week's meeting of Community for Peace.

Participants say the voices of a few have helped to create great social change in the past.

Griggs used apartheid — the system of racial repression that existed in South Africa

for decades until 10 years ago — as an example. No one could foresee the end of the practice, because South Africa enjoyed support from nations around the world, Griggs said. It took

the voices of a few to raise questions and stir things up, he added.

"Some of our efforts were able to put a dent into the policy-makers," Griggs said.



Min. Mikal Muhammad addresses the crowd at a rally Saturday in East Winston Shopping Center as Min. Kevin Muhammad, left, and Min. Willie Muhammad look on.

NOI

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truck. NOI Muslims say that Farrakhan has been the only prominent religious leader to speak out against the war. Prominent black religious leaders such as Bishop T.D. Jakes have been silent, the Muslims said.

"Min. Farrakhan is more than able to sing a solo to bring the world's attention to the injustice that is not only going on in America but is going on around the world," Effriangan Muhammad stated.

NOI Muslims also made it clear Saturday that they are unhappy with the way Farrakhan has been portrayed in the media since embarking on his trip in June. During Farrakhan's trip to Iraq, the Washington Times (a D.C. newspaper known for its conservative views) and United Press International reported that Farrakhan told Iraqi officials that he would pray for an Iraqi victory if the United States ever attacked the nation.

Farrakhan and NOI Muslims throughout the nation fiercely denied the report. Farrakhan himself said the false report was meant to discredit him.

"That was designed in this atmosphere of patriotism to make Farrakhan look like an enemy of the United States of America," Farrakhan said late last month after returning to the United States. "I want to make it clear: I am a citizen of the world but this is my land. And I was most happy to get back here safe."

But Farrakhan's words didn't stop many conservatives from

verbally lynching the minister. Some argued that the Nation of Islam leader should be put on trial for his alleged words. NOI Muslims say Farrakhan is being treated like other black leaders of the past who swam against the current.

"Min. Farrakhan is the baddest black man in America," Min. Kevin Muhammad said. "They don't want Min. Farrakhan on the streets."

NOI Muslims don't like the tough talk against their leader. Several held picket signs that read, "Hands off Farrakhan."

"Leave Farrakhan alone," said Min. Willie Muhammad, who heads the Greensboro mosque. "If you move against Min. Farrakhan, he will be the last one standing."

The head of the Winston-Salem mosque said he hopes the rally will force local people to ponder the current war and the state of America. He also said he hopes that more people, especially African Americans, view the war from a religious, godly perspective, not an American perspective.

"You don't pledge your allegiance to no flag; you pledge your allegiance to God," Min. Mikal Muhammad said to a crowd that gathered at nearby East Winston Shopping Center. "We honor and respect the flag of the United States, but we don't bow down to no American flag. We bow down to God and God alone."

Mikal Muhammad also told the crowd that the vast majority of those affected by the war in Afghanistan had nothing to do with Sept. 11 or Osama bin Laden.

"Why should we be wasting

our time, fighting innocent people?" he asked. "We should be here in America, fighting for our own survival, fighting for the fruits of our children."

A week before the rally, the Winston-Salem mosque held a town-hall meeting to inform locals about the Nation of Islam's stance on the war. Mosques across the country will likely hold other events aimed at spurring peace, officials said.

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