

Clergy call on Louisville Metro to welcome Syrian refugees despite fears, backlash

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Faith leaders representing more than 20 Metro area religious communities offered a show of solidarity Tuesday. (Source: James Thomas, WAVE 3 News)

LOUISVILLE, KY (WAVE) - Imam Muhammad Ramadan Almoutem wasn't among the half-dozen clergy who quoted the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Quran at a news conference and rally in support of Syrian refugees

Tuesday morning at Kentucky Refugee Ministries.

Only three years removed from his native Syria, the leader of the Metro's largest mosque found himself without words to describe the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, CA.

"We cannot express our feeling, we are broken," he said.

Around three dozen local religious members attended Tuesday's rally. Dr. Muhammad Baber, a native of Pakistan and board member of Interfaith Paths to Peace, offering nothing but condemnation for ISIS.

"These cowards are nothing but murderers and ruthless killers," Babar said. "They have nothing to do with Islam, and the 1.6 billion people who practice it. We are those who've suffered the most."

The true tenets of Islam and of Sharia Law, Baber insisted, are embodied in the U.S. Constitution.

"Compassion, pursuit of equality," he said.

"Jewish history and tradition teach that it is a moral imperative to help people in need," Rabbi Joel Slosberg, of Congregation Adath Jeshurun, told those assembled. "Regardless of race, creed or national origin."



Imam Muhammad Babar (Source: James Thomas, WAVE 3 News)

"Fear, that's the primary issue," said The Rev. Joey Puscateri, Pastor of Simpsonville Baptist Church.

Rally organizer Derek Penwell, the bearded pastor of Douglass Boulevard Christian Church, drew light laughter and applause in his

condemnation of remarks from presidential candidate Donald Trump, who has called from blocking all Muslims from entering the United States.

"When radical white Americans with obvious hair problems seek to incite fear that could potentially result in violence -- it is incumbent upon those of us who are moderate white Americans with obvious hair problems to speak up," Penwell said.

"The antidote to fear is information," said Catholic Charities Deacon Nick Caruso. "It's almost two years of vetting, fourteen-some checks. People then take a deep breath and say, 'Oh, I didn't realize all of this.'"

America's highest-ranking elected Republican remains unconvinced.

"There have to be safe areas, inside Syria, where (refugees) can go, " Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) told WAVE 3 News Saturday. "Otherwise, they're gonna keep on coming."

"We're bigger than that," Crescent Hill Baptist Pastor Jason Crosby said. "We have more resources. We're braver than that."

McConnell and others have argued for tightening requirements for tourist and student visas. Some 1,000 foreign nationals study at the University of Louisville. The campus office that aids them was unwilling to comment Tuesday, citing tensions following the San Bernardino attacks.



The wife of a soldier at Fort Knox brought her three children to the interfaith rally. (Source: James Thomas, WAVE 3 News)

Kimberly Mohammed understood the reluctance. The wife of a soldier at Fort Knox brought her three children to the interfaith rally.

"My husband is Catholic, and he's raising the children Catholic," she said. "But the name

alone indicates that we are Muslim although we are not, and we do face some of that backlash."

Metro Muslim leaders met with the FBI to discuss security one day before the Paris attacks, Dr. Babar said. Administrators from Jefferson County Public Schools are expected to gather

at the Louisville Islamic Center Sunday to discuss ways to protect Muslim students. Leaders expect to meet again with federal agents and prosecutors Dec. 22, he said.



Rev. Joey Puscateri (Source: James Thomas, WAVE 3 News) **Rabbi Joel Slosberg** (Source: James Thomas, WAVE 3 News)

Imam Almountem maintains that the Mosques themselves are the bridge to quell fear and extremism.

"Hear about Islam from the pure source," he said. "Our youth here. Don't go to the internet. Get your information from the pure source."

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<http://www.wave3.com/story/30694901/clergy-call-on-louisville-metro-to-welcome-syrian-refugees-despite-fears-backlash>