

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, we continue discussing religious diversity in healthcare, now focusing on the religion of Islam.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. Our purpose is to engage you, our listeners, and encourage you to open your hearts and minds to diversity. This month, we've been focusing on religious diversity and the role it plays in healthcare. We've been honored to have guests on our show to discuss Judaism, Christianity, and now Islam. Our featured guest is Omar Conteh, the community outreach coordinator for the Islamic Center of Maine in Orono. He is also a psychiatric clinician at Northern Light Acadia Hospital. [foreign language 00:00:48] Omar.

Omar Conteh:

[foreign language 00:00:51].

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. Thank you for joining us here today. So to begin with, could you share with our listeners a little bit about the Islamic Center of Maine and your role at the center?

Omar Conteh:

First of all, thank you for having me and thank you for this opportunity, and the little blurb that we just had there. Tim said to me [foreign language 00:01:12] which means, "May peace be with you," in Arabic. And I responded [foreign language 00:01:16], and I responded by saying, "And may peace and blessings be with you as well," in Arabic. Thank you for that. The Islamic Center of Maine, the freestanding building of the Islamic Center of Maine has been there since 1999, as we are a small Muslim community made up of a handful of families and individuals that are mostly professionals that come to this part of the world, this part of the country in Maine, for temporary period of time for a couple of years or few months at a time, and they move on to other places. And our community's also made up of international students who come to the University of Maine for a degree program, whether it's a bachelor's degrees, or master's degrees, or PhD, and most of them also return. So our community is a pretty transient community.

Omar Conteh:

However, we do have a few permanent families that live here and work here for quite a bit of period of time. It's a community whose members are made up of at least a dozen different countries, including the United States of America. My role at the Islamic Center of Maine is to help connect and maintain contact with other communities of faith in other civic organizations, in order to help build bridges of dialogue and understanding by sharing our faith with them and also them sharing their faith with us, by learning who they are and them learning who we are, in order to foster a goodwill within ourselves, in order to foster understanding and corroboration. And by building this faith coalitions that allow neighbors to know one another. The goal of this is born out of a scripture from our book that says, "O mankind, we have created you from a single person." [foreign language 00:02:55], may peace be with him, in order that we made you into different nations and different tribes and spread you out throughout the world, in order that you may come to know one another, not that you may come to despise each other.

Omar Conteh:

So out of that scriptural belief that we have, we feel that it is necessary and it is vital for human beings to know one another. And we understand, and we believe that distance creates fear. It creates suspicion and it creates tension. So therefore we believe that proximity to one another, by understanding each other, by speaking to each other, by having this dialogue and breaking bread with each other, creates care for one another and empathy for one another and love for one another. And that is why we started the Islamic Center of Maine, not just for the worship of the Muslim community, but also to reach out to the broader community in the hopes of coming to know one another.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you, Omar, a love for one another, that's it. I'll talk in a little bit about the international experiences that I've had, which framed up so much of my spirituality, my heart and soul and who I am as a person. And what I found is what we all have in common, not what we have opposed to one another. And what we have in common, no matter where I went in the world, it was a love for one another. So that's it, you said it, you said it all right there, and there's so much more we can talk about though, so I'll keep going here. What are the biggest challenges for you in getting to know different communities and getting them to know your community?

Omar Conteh:

Well, first I think we are all up against this notion that self-sufficiency, therefore we don't need the other. I think in this day in age, in large, I don't necessarily need to go to my neighbor and ask for salt or sugar, borrow salt or sugar from them. Therefore we tend to feel that we are self-sufficient from and independent from others. So therefore we don't need them on a day-to-day basis. And that creates distance between one another, when we feel that we don't need each other. That is foremost the biggest challenge that we have, is that people don't regularly come into contact with each other because of that separation of self-sufficiency that our current world created for most of us. And second, the biggest challenge that we have in doing this work is that we have to cut through all this enormous amounts of suspicion, misinformation, fear, anger, all the stuff that has been perpetuating out there for decades and decades and decades about the other, the other person.

Omar Conteh:

And that's a lot of work to tear down those walls that have been built for such a long time. And dispelling fear, dispelling misinformation, is a very difficult work, but we are grateful that we are in Maine, and Mainers are curious by nature. And that has been vital to the work that we do that has helped us to be able to connect with people, otherwise we will not be able to connect with Mainers who are very welcoming and very curious. And we are tremendously grateful that we open our doors and people come in to talk with us and they invite us to talk with them.

Omar Conteh:

So these two things have been the biggest challenge that we have, this notion that we don't need the other, and everybody stay in your own corners and do what you do and not worry about the other person that creates, again, that fear and that suspicion, because you don't know who that person is across from you. However, the other challenge, as well, as I said, is this atmosphere that is so tense, that is built upon generations of fear and misinformation that we all have to dig through and sift through in order to get to better understand each other. Those been the biggest challenges that we have so far.

Tim Dentry:

Yeah. Great. We need one another, that is now during this COVID time. And I started as the CEO of Northern Light Health right around the time that COVID really began and with all the effort, all the things that we've done in a really great way to take care of all the communities we serve, that's the universal truth. Once again, Omar, you put your finger on the universal truth and that is, we need one another. And if we think that we're so self-sufficient that we don't, we're creating distance. If we create distance, then this virus who doesn't care about any of our backgrounds or anything like that. So we need one another is the universal truth.

Tim Dentry:

And the other thing you made me think of, you said Mainers a couple of times. And so we all know part of the definition of that is you got to be born here. And so I've been here going on five years, I guess. So I know I'm not a Mainer, I'm an adopted Mainer, maybe. I hope to be adopted. But you have a far longer background here in Maine than I do. Could you just share with our listeners, so if they don't know you, they get a deeper sense of you as a person from Maine?

Omar Conteh:

I am originally from Gambia, The Gambia in West Africa. Small little tiny country of a couple million people. I moved here at 14 years old. I had an uncle that lived here for quite a while, and for the purpose of coming here and going to school for education, he brought us here back in 1997, and shortly after the ice storm of '98 took place, so that was my introduction to Maine. So that was something for us. But we've been here ever since, living here and working here and studying here in Maine for 23 years now. It's really been a wonderful experience for me individually as a person. I can't speak of any other person's experience of being in Maine, but for me, it has actually been a wonderful experience.

Omar Conteh:

I've always told people that my positive experiences in Maine far outweighs the negative experiences to the point that the negative ones are not worth speaking about in any way, shape, or form. So it's been a wonderful ride being in Maine and every winter I dream about leaving and the summer comes and I forget, and it's been going on for a while, but that is my story in Maine. And I've been part of this community and I've come to understand Mainers and I hope be considered a Mainer now, but been here for a couple of decades or more, maybe on the 25th year, it will formally [inaudible 00:09:13] me as a Mainer. I'm not sure, but it's been wonderful. It's been wonderful to say the least.

Tim Dentry:

That's great. Thank you for that personal reflection, Omar, really appreciate that. What might be on your mind right now that you'd like to ask me about?

Omar Conteh:

We're in a holiday season, it's a big holiday seasons and everybody's celebrating, and there's a lot of festivities in the air and rightfully so, and people should celebrate and get together with family and friends, except that in this COVID time, keep it as distant and safe as possible. But my question to you is, it is easy for people who are not part of the holiday celebrations of the dominant culture or religion to feel lost during these times when these celebrations are present all around us. What can you do at Northern Light to address this so that everyone feels included and in their times of celebration as well?

Tim Dentry:

Yeah, thanks for that question. Part of my reflection on this is what I've learned and the way I was treated and the way [inaudible 00:10:15] comment, it's how people make you feel that sticks with you, how the people of Ethiopia, where I lived and worked for two years and how the people of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, where I lived and worked for six years, how they made me feel, how they made me feel during my traditional celebrations of holiday times and how they welcomed me into their celebrations. So in Ethiopia, it is a country of about a hundred million people, and it's about half are Muslim and half are Christian. And I saw them honor and celebrate each other's holy days. And they would give them space to celebrate their own holy days as well. And I was invited to weddings, for example, in Ethiopia.

Tim Dentry:

And I was made to feel like a VIP and it was the last thing I wanted to do. I just wanted to blend in, but it was their respect. And they detected that I was from away and I was someone from a different culture. And they wanted me to feel comfortable in their celebrations because they're joyous at those times and they're deeply reflective. And they wanted me to feel that and understand that. In Abu Dhabi, during Ramadan, I would gain 10 pounds because I was invited to Iftars when they would break the fast at the end of the day, and I would go to, I don't know, four or five a week, probably, because my dear friends, my dear Emirati friends, would say, "Hey Tim, come and be with my family," or, "Come and be with us," and that kind of a thing.

Tim Dentry:

And I learned so much about their love of Allah, their love of family, their respect for one another, their humility. It was a great way that they welcomed me into their holiday celebration, so I understood more about them. So that's what I try to emulate in my life. That's what I've taught my children, and that's what I'm trying to do here at Northern Light Health is, no celebration should happen in a way that makes someone else feel lesser, lesser cared for, or lesser loved. So let's use it as a way to celebrate and to express that and not hold back. And so I hope that that's what everyone can begin to reflect on so that when we know other groups, other individuals, it's their holy time, great. Give them room and also show them love and embrace them.

Omar Conteh:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for that reflection on that. And just why I always say that one of the greatest gifts that I have as an American being here is that blue passport that allows me to be able to travel so freely and experience other cultures, and think that benefit's something that most of us should take advantage of, and commend you for going around and seeing the world. It's a wonderful thing.

Tim Dentry:

Another reflection I have is it's a story, and it's something I like to, when you and I were talking about this, maybe you can complete the story for me. It's a story of Maryam. And so I'll explain this to our listeners and then you and I will join together to finish this story. So when it was one of the Christmas times over in United Arab Emirates, and my Emirati friends, my Muslim friends, would send me more Christmas presents and say Merry Christmas. And they really out of their way to make me feel like it's okay to celebrate your holiday here. And I'll never forget a discussion with two men and two women. And they said, "You know, Mary, or Maryam, is in the Holy Quran. And she's mentioned there many, many times, she's a very important figure in the Holy Quran."

Tim Dentry:

I said, "I did not know that, and what is the story?" And they said, "Well, she was close to the time of giving birth, and she was tired and the like, and she was leaning against a palm tree, a palm date tree, and she said a prayer." And angel Gabriel, and most of us in the tradition I was raised in, we know angel Gabriel. So same angel, angel Gabriel, said, "Here are three dates," and you'll finish this story for me, because I learned from you when you and I talked about this. "Here are three dates," and they dropped to the ground. She picked them up and ate them. It gave her the nutrition and the strength that she needed to give birth to Jesus. So, would you finish that story?

Omar Conteh:

You said the story wonderfully. And so this is exactly the point of why we need this community outreach. We need people to get together and talk with you and with each other, understand one another. Oftentimes we get this a lot when we do interfaith dialogues or with civic groups or other religious faiths, especially with Christianity and Judaism, that people become very surprised to know that we do have a lot in common of these faith traditions and the stories that are so common between us. And when they hear these stories from us, sometimes they're surprised that you also believe this type of stories. Do you believe in Mary, do you believe in Jesus Christ, may peace be with him, and do you believe in the angel Gabriel? And they become quite surprised that you can see people perk up and set up and start to pay attention more because now they're hearing something that is familiar to them as well.

Omar Conteh:

So the story of Maryam, may God's peace and blessings be upon her, it's also very familiar towards us Muslims as a entire chapter in the Quran named after Mary, actually. It documents the entire story, from our perspective, entire story of Jesus, may God's peace and blessing be upon him, and the family of Jesus and family of Mary, or Maryam in the Arabic language. And that particular part of our story, as you said, is that when she conceived this child and she was about to give birth, that this is a very difficult period of time for her and, in our lexicon, that she was actually wishing that she didn't exist because how difficult this whole experience is for her. And then God, in his mercy, [inaudible 00:16:44], in his mercy sent angel Gabriel from the seven heavens to her to comfort her and to instruct her to take hold of this date palm tree and shake it, and dates will fall to her lap.

Omar Conteh:

And she would have this nutritious food to eat, to gain energy, to gain strength in order to carry out this important duty, the important job of giving birth to Jesus Christ, may God's peace and blessing be upon him. And this story is something that is shared amongst Muslims. We know this story as much as we know the story of Muhammad, may peace and blessing be upon him, amongst us. So it's a wonderful story that when we share this with others and they get quite surprised that we believe in the same thing and we have a lot more in common than we have in differences. And with that, we can become good neighbors to each other.

Tim Dentry:

Yes. Thank you so much. That means a lot to me. And since you and I had that conversation a few days ago, I've actually repeated that to a few of my brothers and sisters and my children as well. That meant a lot to me, Omar.

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Omar Conteh:

Absolutely. Thank you.

Tim Dentry:

So Omar, thank you for joining me here to continue this conversation.

Omar Conteh:

Thank you so much for having me.

Tim Dentry:

And that will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Thank you to you, our podcast listeners, as well. Until next time. I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity, and inclusion. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to hear more, please go to northernlighthouse.org/podcast. We welcome you to join us when Tim will speak to James Varner, a long time civil rights leader and community activist.