

Faith leaders support 'Ground Zero mosque'

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WASHINGTON -- More than 40 Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders say they are "deeply troubled" by the opposition to a proposed Islamic community center and mosque located two blocks from Ground Zero in lower Manhattan.

The statement singles out remarks made by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin in the divisive debate over the planned Cordoba House project.

"We are deeply troubled by the xenophobia and religious bigotry that has characterized some of the opposition," the statement said.

Gingrich, a Catholic, has "cast this debate in a way that demonizes all Muslims and exploits fear to divide Americans," the statement said. Palin, an evangelical Christian, is criticized for calling the center a "provocation."

Catholic leaders signing the statement include: Sr. Mary Waskowiak, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, a Catholic social justice lobby; Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious; David Robinson, executive director of Pax Christi USA; Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and co-president of Pax Christi International; and Jesuit Fr. T. Michael McNulty, the justice and peace director for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

The statement said that both Gingrich and Palin "would make a more lasting contribution to our nation if they stopped issuing inflammatory statements and instead helped inspire a civil dialogue."

Campbell of Network said, "It's simply wrong for Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin, public figures who frequently reference their Christian values, to malign all Muslims by comparing this cultural center and mosque with a radical ideology that led to the horrific attacks of 9/11. We fail to honor those killed by terrorists when we betray the bedrock principle of religious freedom that has guided our democracy for centuries."

Other groups signing the statement included Clergy Beyond Borders, the Islamic Society of North America and the National Council of Churches.

Chloe Breyer, executive director of the Interfaith Center of New York, said, "Cordoba House is exactly the kind of initiative that we need here in New York -- it will serve people of all faith traditions and enrich the city."

Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, said that "Love thy neighbor" is a fundamental tenet of the Torah, but harder is the admonition to "Love the stranger, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt."

The statement praised Cordoba House as an example of efforts that "foster dialogue [and] break down barriers."

?Fear-mongering and hateful rhet-oric only undermine treasured values at the heart of diverse faith traditions and our nation?s highest ideals,? the statement said.

The full statement with signatories is available online at faithinpubliclife.org.

Faithful America -- an online community that claims to have 100,000 members -- has started an online petition drive to support American Muslims and ?to denounce bigotry and limits on religious freedom as a betrayal of American values.?

The petition reads in part, ?A wave of anti-Muslim sentiment is sweeping the country. Some are even trying to prevent Muslims from exercising their right to worship freely. Our country is better than that. Our faiths are better than that. Help us support the American Muslim community during this painful time.? For details visit www.faitfulamerica.org.

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