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Afghan project unites faiths

Groups hope to rebuild mosque in war-torn Kabul

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Staff reporter

A mosque that has been destroyed in the war in Afghanistan will be rebuilt, employing local suppliers and labourers, if a group of Greater Toronto-area faith congregations fulfils its dream.

The plan was hatched underneath Toronto's streets one gray morning earlier this month as Mark Persaud, a crown prosecutor, was riding the subway to work. He was reading a newspaper account of the war and suddenly felt something practical had to be done to help the Afghan people.

Rebuilding a mosque in the capital of Kabul would be perfect. It wouldn't provide food or clothes, but something perhaps more valuable: opportunity. Moreover, it would be a powerful symbol.

"This project helps illustrate that this is not a war against Islam, though that's the tone it appears to have taken in some corners," said Persaud, 40, adding a mosque has not yet been chosen.

He took the idea to his own church, Lansing United in North York. Then he approached his good friend Mobeen Khaja, 61, president of the Association of Progressive Muslims of Ontario, whom he had met at the Islamic Eid ul-Fitr celebrations at Queen's Park over the years.

Khaja drove to the church for a meeting with Persaud and Rev. Brian Brown.

"I had no idea what they were going to say," said Khaja, 61. "When I got there and they told me, I must tell you I was so touched and moved, that, literally, I had tears in my eyes.

"People outside my faith were trying to help. I was so surprised and I thought, 'This is what Canada is all about.'"

Since then, the "international peace project" has moved quickly and some \$6,000 has been raised.

Brown said they have been recruiting other faith congregations — Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu — to help raise the estimated \$100,000 needed.

Heavy convincing wasn't necessary, Brown added.

"The war has done a lot of damage to worshipping places, hurting the deep sensibilities of Muslims," said Javed Akbar of the Pickering Islamic Centre, which was invited to help raise funds.



KEN FAUGHT/ TORONTO STAR

Rev. Brian Brown, left, and Mobeen Khaja, at Brown's Lansing United Church.

"The United Church has taken initiative out of the goodness of their hearts to foster understanding between Christians and Muslims."

Farad Najmi, who escaped mujahideen shelling of the Russian occupiers in Kabul a decade ago with his family, has some ideas on choosing a mosque.

He said people in the West haven't heard of all the mosques destroyed in Kabul — mosques the Taliban used to hide themselves and their weapons.

"My relatives confirmed that the mosque where we used to go was destroyed," said Najmi, 27, referring to the Aloudeen Mosque. "You didn't see that on TV."

Now, he's helping to advise the project.

His family is ideally suited to help; they've been in the construction business for years. They helped build the Ummah Nabawiah Afghan Mosque in Etobicoke.

"I feel great about people getting united to do something good," Najmi said.

"If things like this happened all the time we'd have a better world to live in than the one we have now."

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