

A Major Surprise

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All I did was make a reference call on a Stated Clerk candidate and it changed my life. I called Dr. Sayyid Syeed on March 8. I was charmed by his story telling and how he traveled all over the world. His kids have all been educated in the United States and live here. Two of them are film makers which greatly intrigued me.

I was feeling bold and I asked him if he ever spoke in small towns. He said, "Well if I am asked." I invited him to come to Redwood Falls.

I thought, wouldn't it be great if he would talk to the kids at school because there is so much fear and misunderstanding about the Islam religion. I talked with Rick Ellingworth and then the rest of the administrators at the school a few weeks later and they told me to invite him. I immediately tried getting hold of Dr. Syeed but I did not hear back from him until April 10, when he emailed and said he could come in October. Then he sent a second email and said: Why don't you come to Washington, D.C., on April 14 and 15, for a forum on interfaith and government. I thought I can't go. I was just in Louisville last week for the stated clerk nomination committee. I can't be away from the church again. I can't afford it financially.

But then I thought how can I turn an invitation like this down, I may never get one again. So I cleared my schedule. The Synod of Lakes and Prairies graciously agreed to pay for my hotel room because it was an interfaith ministry event. The Session gave their blessing. On April 13, I flew to Washington. I had pretty good seats, so I thought, but they even bumped me up to first class. That was always on my bucket list. I was tearing up wondering why God was being so good to me. I was the first one to walk off the plane. As I was entering the airport, everyone started to cheer. Not for me, there were veterans from Minnesota getting off the plane next to me.

Once I checked in at the hotel, I contacted J. Herbert Nelson, who is now the new stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At the time his nomination was still a secret because it would not be announced until April 19. He showed me around the Washington office, took me out to eat at a nice restaurant where politicians often eat, and spent three hours talking with me which was just awesome. He is coming to preach in Redwood Falls for our 150th Anniversary in March.

He was invited to speak at this national interfaith press conference that I was invited to observe, but he had Presbyterians coming from all over the country for his own event so he could not come. He asked me to give his regrets to Dr. Syeed and tell him why he not could come. He told me not to be late for the press conference.

I showed up bright and early for the press conference. I was the second person there. I met lots of people before it started. People were very impressed that I came all the way from Minnesota on such short notice. I met Dr. Syeed and told him about J. Herbert not being able to attend and why. When the press conference started all the Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders were invited to come to stand shoulder and shoulder to speak out against Islamophobia that has been on the rise, indicated by comments that both Democratic and Republican politicians have been making lately.

These religious leaders at the press conference were heads of their denominations or religious organizations. It was quite an impressive group including a Cardinal. A Muslim Imam, in full dress with turban, asked me to sit by him in the front row. The moderator announced, "And now from the Presbyterian Church, we will hear from the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson." I said, "He is not here; he is at his own event." The moderator said, "and now we will hear from you," pointing at me.

I stood up like a deer in headlights. I saw all these TV cameras and reporters. I spoke from the heart. I told people that I was tired of how human beings are treating one another — the hatred, the ignorance, the prejudice, the fear. We were put here to love one another, to treat one another with kindness. I may have said a few more things.

Then I sat down. Dr. Syeed told me to go stand with the other leaders. Afterwards all the others leaders mobbed me and said what a great job I did

and the Muslim people swarmed me and thanked me. I had an instant rapport with the Muslim people that gave me a great two days with them.

My adventure took me into the White House, meeting with seven of President Obama's top senior staff, to a reception put on by Senator Orin Hatch, to prayer meetings Muslim style (the bowing shoulder to shoulder was powerful; I could feel the presence of God; I was praying to Jesus), to intimate discussions of what is like to be a Muslim in America, to hear how much American Muslim's love our country and don't want to be anywhere else, to dining on delicious middle eastern food, to hearing about hate crimes from the Justice Department and how different religious groups have been targeted in the United States' history, to similarities of the Holy Bible and the Koran.

If everyone in this country had just one Muslim friend it would end so many problems. Once you meet someone face to face, once you laugh with someone one, once you dine with someone, once you pray with someone, once you converse with someone, you realize how we all are alike. We all want to be treated with respect. We all want to go on living our own lives without people making hateful remarks about us as we try to go to work or school.

The wonderful Muslim people I met love our country and don't want to live anywhere else. They started every meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance. Their kids are active in the Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts. Many of them are affluent business leaders who are active members in their communities. They don't want to dominate the world, they just want to be a fellow a American like you or me.

I was treated like royalty during my time in Washington. I felt like I had found long lost friends. I am so honored that Dr. Sayyid Syeed is coming to Redwood Falls on October 8-10, to build bridges, to tell people that most Muslims are peaceful loving people. He has a wonderful, engaging spirit that hopefully will change negative perceptions that people may hold.

I feel blessed to have had this opportunity to be out in Washington. I grew in an educational sense, but also in a spiritual sense. You never know how one phone call may change your life.