

# DEFYING THE NAZIS

## THE SHARP'S WAR

### CONGREGATIONAL STORIES

#### BELL STREET CHAPEL, PROVIDENCE RI

##### Type Action: Protest

An anti-refugee group held a press conference at the Rhode Island State House in February, spreading toxic misinformation about Syrian and Muslim people. Bell Street Chapel and its allies rallied to proclaim that refugees are welcome in Rhode Island; Islamophobic bigotry is not.

On February 23, 2016, a handful of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee speakers hosted a press conference in front of the Rhode Island State House to demand that the governor rescind her pledge of welcome to Syrian refugees. They argued that “an influx of Syrian refugees may pose a significant danger to Rhode Islanders;” and accused refugees of spreading anti-Semitism and other baseless charges.



Photo credit: Steve Ahlquist, RI Future.org - Used with permission.

However, they were met with a wave of protestors<sup>1</sup> who had come to share a message of welcome and solidarity. Bell Street Chapel in Providence and several other UU congregations, members of the Massachusetts branch of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), and other faith leaders were among the protestors.

## GETTING INVOLVED

Bell Street Chapel in Providence, set a goal for themselves of deepening their engagement in the larger community.

Rev. Margaret Weis, the minister at Bell Street Chapel and member of the Rhode Island Council of Churches, heard about the anti-refugee event being planned. She knew that progressive faith communities in the area should organize a response. “Everything about that press conference seemed so wrong,” Rev. Weis said. The Council of Churches decided to organize an interfaith counter-press conference for the same day.



Photo credit: Steve Ahlquist, RI Future.org Used with permission.

1 <http://www.rifuture.org/anti-syrian-refugee-rally-overwhelmed-by-refugee-supporters.html>

This was not the first time the RI Council of Churches had raised its voice against Islamophobia. Rev. Weis and other members, along with the head of the Rhode Island Board of Rabbis, had also attended a press conference organized by the Islamic Center of Rhode Island shortly after the Paris attacks in November, 2015. This event both strengthened its ties to neighboring interfaith groups and also broadened its relationship with other UU congregations in the area. At a February 23 event, Bell Street was joined by members of First Unitarian in Providence and Westminster Unitarian in East Greenwich, RI.

At around the same time, the Murray UU Church in Attleboro, MA (just north of Providence) was getting involved in counter-Islamophobia activism as well. Rev. Gretchen Weis of the Murray Church had also begun reaching out to other UU communities, local mosques and Islamic centers in the area after the November Paris attacks. They began strengthening their relationship by co-hosting a potluck meal called “A Taste of Faith” at the Islamic School of Rhode Island, which allowed them to deepen their connections to one another.



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## LESSONS LEARNED

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**“Not only strike while the iron is hot, but make it hot by striking.”**

Various

Bell Street became more deeply involved in solidarity actions through this preexisting interfaith network. Rev. Margaret Weis reminds us that engaging effectively in multifaith work should not mean letting go of one's own religious identity. “I found at a lot of these events that because I was in the Council of Churches, I would get lumped in with the Christians,” she told us. “So I had to learn to be proactive about offering a distinctly UU perspective.”

Weis noted that an interfaith partnership of any kind has to be built on two-way communication. “We need to do the work ourselves of thinking up ways to offer support,” she said. “First, though, we have to ask if someone even needs or wants our help. We can easily do just as much harm as good.” She talked about the need to start planting seeds of interfaith relationships early, so that when the chance comes to make a timely statement of friendship, it can be offered on a solid basis.

“We tend to be so silo-ed in our churches,” said Rev. Weis, noting that it can be easy to assume that if an action is going to be organized, one's own congregation has to be the one to do it. “We as UUs are not the only ones who care,” she said. Weis points to the truth at the heart of all interfaith organizing: we will find allies among our neighbors if we have the courage to look for them.