

# DEFYING THE NAZIS

## THE SHARP'S WAR

### CONGREGATIONAL STORIES

#### SHAWNEE MISSION UU CHURCH, LENEXA, KS

**Type Action:**  
**Solidarity Demonstration**

Last December, Unitarian Universalists near Kansas City were tired of the negative messages they were hearing about Islam, knowing that their faith had a different message to share. Learning that the local Islamic Center would welcome a show of solidarity, members of the Shawnee Mission UU Church (SMUUCH) joined their Muslim neighbors in a public demonstration of welcome and peace.

This simple interfaith act attracted over a hundred participants, including members of the Islamic Center of Kansas, local Christian churches, and others, garnering the attention of local media<sup>1</sup>.



Photo courtesy of Rachel Wathen. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kctv5.com/story/30732868/muslims-christians-rally-for-peace-understanding#.Vm2Vvau3yKA.twitter>



Photos courtesy of Rachel Wathen. Used with permission.



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Every person's life has a moment when you are thinking of doing something that will jeopardize yourself. And if you don't do it, no one will be the wiser that you even thought of it. So, it's easy to get out of it. And that's what David is doing [in Michelangelo's statue]. He's got the rock in the right hand, the sling over the left shoulder, and he's saying, "Do I dare, do I dare?"

I hope many of you, or at least a significant few, will dare when the time comes, if it hasn't come already.

William Kunstler

The congregation's solidarity demonstration was only one aspect of a broader effort made this past year to deepen their impact in the larger community. SMUUCH Director of Religious Education, Rachel Wathen, found herself taking on a larger role in social justice organizing than she had originally expected. She noted that "someone might really want to initiate an action but they're not sure they have the authority to do so, so it never happens." Developing a culture of shared leadership empowers people in various roles to become activists.

Wathen sensed members were itching to find new ways to reflect their values in public, noting, "From what I was hearing from people in the church and seeing on our social media, there was a strong feeling that we needed to get out there and make our voices heard." The church started with an adult RE class on "Building the World We Dream About,"<sup>2</sup> providing materials for discussions and worship services on white privilege and racial justice. "Around this time was when Trump started in on his extreme rhetoric about Islam and refugees," said Wathen.

Wathen and the interim minister at SMUUCH, Rev. Ben Maucere, decided to reach out to the Islamic Center of Kansas. Wathen emphasized the importance of asking this question. "Whenever you're doing a justice action—

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/curricula/building-the-world-we-dream-about>



Photo courtesy of Rachel Wathen. Used with permission.

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**“To parents do good, and to orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler, and those whom your right hands possess.”**

The Qur'an (4:36)

especially if it's on someone else's behalf -- you have to honor their wishes and practices in every way,” said Wathen. Good intentions on their own are not enough.

Wathen was glad to hear that the Center would join them in the solidarity action. They invited members of SMUUCH to share a meal, deepening their relationship. In the meantime, the congregation set to work creating signs and banners bearing messages of welcome and support. Within a week of first contacting the Islamic Center, they were ready to host the event.

Thanks to help of one SMUUCH member, who works in public relations, local media covered the event. Even though one reporter<sup>3</sup> struggled to pronounce the term “Unitarian Universalist,” SMUUCH certainly did its part that day to make the name a more familiar one to the larger Kansas City community.

Members of the church were deeply touched by the depth of gratitude they received from individual members of the Muslim community. “One woman came up afterward and told me ‘You don't know how much I needed this right now,’” said Wathen. The event has served as a basis for a deepening relationship between the two communities. The Islamic Center recently invited SMUUCH members to join them at the mosque in December and learn

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<sup>3</sup> <http://fox4kc.com/2015/12/12/church-holds-rally-to-show-support-for-kc-muslim-community/>

more about their faith, and Muslim members of SMUUCH in turn felt empowered to wear their religious identity proudly at the church.

Wathen noted something that local media commented on as well, that the event was truly intergenerational. She also observed, however, that some aspects of the action were not fully accessible to people of all abilities.

“Some of it involved standing and walking for long stretches,” she said. She reminded other organizers to think seriously about the roles people of varying abilities can take in organizing an action.

For SMUUCH, Wathen concluded, there were really “no negatives” to the entire experience. Indeed, it brought new life and energy to the congregation as a whole. Wathen said she drew courage from our UU forebears whenever she felt anxious. “I think about what they were up against, and what they did in spite of it – including [Waitstill and Martha Sharp] in Ken Burn’s film – and I realize it is far better to take the risk than to stay silent.”