

# Muslims to meet on response to Islamophobia

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June 23, 2011

(RNS) With the 10th anniversary of 9/11 looming, attendees at North America's largest Muslim gathering next month will be told that the best way to deal with Islamophobia is not to lay low, but get involved in politics, interfaith work and community affairs.

That's the message that leaders of the Islamic Society of North America want to send to the roughly 40,000 U.S. and Canadian Muslims expected to attend ISNA's 48th annual convention over the July 4th weekend in Rosemont, Ill.

"Our conventions in the past years have changed. You'll see more questions dealing with interreligious cooperation and understanding," said Mohamed Elsanousi, ISNA's director of community outreach. "We are opening the convention more to people of other faiths."

Prominent non-Muslims, including California megachurch pastor Rick Warren, have attended past ISNA conventions; this year's guests include the Rev. Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches.

A majority of the 90 or so panels and workshops are based on suggestions from members. ISNA officials said the feedback showed that U.S. Muslims' biggest concern was Islamophobia and a desire to learn how to respond.

While many of the programs deal with typical religious convention topics like spirituality and family, 15 to 20 will focus on educating Muslims about public service, interfaith work, media training, and other civic activities as ways to alleviate American fears of Muslims.

A Pew Research Center report last March found that 40 percent of Americans thought Islam was more likely than other religions to cause violence, up from 25 percent in 2002. In addition, a March Rasmussen Reports survey found that 57 percent of Americans thought Muslims do not speak out enough against domestic terrorism.

Some conference panels this year include "Islam, Pluralism, and Social Harmony," "Empowerment Through Engagement," "Interreligious Collaboration Inspired by Love of God and Love of Neighbor," and "Ethics of Disagreement and Coexistence in Islam."

ISNA officials said the conference theme -- "Loving God, Loving Neighbor, Living in Harmony" -- and the convention programming reflect a belief that, despite the difficulties created by Islamophobia, the situation can be improved through engagement.

"We have seen the fruits of this work," Elsanousi said.