

Muhammad Musri, peacemaker

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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There are a lot of ways to look at what happened with Terry Jones, the pastor from Florida who wanted to burn the Qur'an on Saturday but later thought better of it. We can accuse the media, as Jason Linkins [does](#). We can blame a frightening wave of anti-Islamic rhetoric and action, enflamed by people whose political interests it serves. We can examine the dynamics of a small church and a big world. But there's another story here.

In the spotlight of the controversy was Muhammad Musri, director of the Islamic Society of Central Florida, who went to meet with Terry Jones last Wednesday. Few details of their conversation were offered to the media, but those details were telling. Jones's meeting with Musri marked a turning point in Jones's rhetoric and accomplished what long-distance denunciations by world leaders could not.

When Musri waded into a difficult and tense situation, he used exceptional skills at interfaith dialogue:

- He took a risk. Musri had little to gain from wading into the controversy. It would have been safer to sit on the sidelines and wait for the drama to play out. He risked failing, looking like a fool and making everyone angrier.
- He entered the conversation with a premise that few of us would have offered. "I believe that Terry Jones is a good person at heart," he [told CNN](#). He spoke, as a Quaker might say, to "that of God" in Jones. Jones [cited](#) the imam's expression of respect as crucial to their conversation.

- He sought common ground, agreeing with Jones about the need to stand against terrorism and suggesting room for dialogue on the issue of the mosque in New York. While this was tricky, it provided space for more dialogue.
- He used an empathetic understanding of Jones's religion to move the conversation forward. "He [Jones] will pray about it," Musri [told reporters](#). "I told him that Christ in the Bible has offered a different solution, a different way."

Jones

did pray about it, and remarkably, he heard God telling him to stop. Musri has since been accused of "religious blackmail." Bloggers immediately began to try to dismantle his reputation. But Musri succeeded in having a conversation and made a careful, but dramatic, step toward peacemaking.

See also the *Christian Science Monitor's* [profile](#) of Musri, along with AOL's [post](#) on Musri's other moments in the spotlight.