

Two Faiths, One Community

The Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative aims to unite the often at-odds religions to focus on service and discussion

By Tamar Myers

Students coming to the University of Wisconsin-Madison from a foreign country can be bombarded with new experiences: their first dining hall meal, first University class, first football game, first roommate. For Lamin Manneh, attending a coexistence dinner on campus his sophomore year led to a new notch on his list of firsts: he talked to a Jewish person.

Manneh, now a senior, hails from Gambia and practices Islam. He attended the event hosted by the newly formed Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative at the suggestion of one of the groups' founders. The coexistence dinners are still held by the organization, and features a shared meal followed by a discussion of faith-related issues.

The History and Political Science major is now a co-president of the Muslim-Jewish Initiative. Two presidents of each religion, one male and one female, fill the four seats of the organization. Manneh named Jeremy Levinger, one of the Jewish co-presidents, as one of his best friends and said they'd had "many, many long conversations.

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Manneh said he had heard about Jews growing up, but the coexistence dinner was the first time he'd had a friendly conversation with someone of the religion, and he learned that they did not embody the stereotypes he'd been taught.



Initiative members discuss upcoming plans. The group stresses the importance of dialogue to create understanding among members
Photo: Stephanie Daher

In Gambia, Jewish people were primarily discussed in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Manneh said. Israel, and by default Jews, were seen only in a negative way, as oppressive to Muslims.

The Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative focuses on Islam and Judaism's common goals of service, peaceful coexistence and education, according to the groups' mission statement on the Wisconsin Involvement Network website.

They frequently hold volunteer opportunities like Savory Sundays, where members meet in the basement of the state capital building and serve food to the homeless. The group also hosts events like movie nights in which they invite students to watch film relating to Judaism and Islam and then participate in a discussion. Recently, attendees watched a documentary about protests against a wall protecting Israel's border from the West Bank that cut through Palestinian villages.

Manneh said he sees the primary purpose of the group as getting to know

people of different faiths.

"It's about meeting and being in the same place together and seeing our own humanness, finding out what we have in common, what we like," Manneh said. "And while we're doing that we're doing something good as well."

Manneh has been criticized by other Muslims for his involvement in the group, who he says have trouble understanding why he would want to work with Jews.

"I try to tell them, your way of thinking is not the best way of thinking," he said. "It's so easy to sit back and list stereotypes of who you don't know."

Manneh believes people of different backgrounds should have an opportunity to talk, and said interfaith organizations create a platform for this dialogue.

"Someone needs to create this space where people meet," Manneh said.