

The long road to understanding

By: **None**

Tuesday, Mar. 1, 2016 | [Comments: 0](#)

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“We are no different from any other law-abiding citizen in the country. We carry out all the responsible jobs, as anyone else does. We have children and we want the protection of our children: we want our country to be safe, and our country is Canada.”

— Faiz Ahmad, president of the Brandon Islamic Centre

The Trudeau government marked a milestone last weekend when Canada welcomed the 25,000th Syrian refugee into the country. And while it wasn't quite what he had promised during the election campaign — 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015 — it is, nonetheless, an impressive accomplishment.

There are, of course, good reasons for Canadians to be proud of this, not the least of which is the fact that our country has resettled more Syrian refugees than most others in the world. CBC reports that only Germany has made more official spaces formally available than Canada, though nearly one million have sought asylum in Europe as a whole.

But with the rising number of Syrian refugees to our shores, there has also been a noticeable rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric in North America. With potential presidential candidates like Donald Trump, for example, it seems that it has become fashionable as of late to build walls between people — both physically and socially — instead of working to tear them down.

Indeed, the rise of blind hatred and bigotry in North America, including Canada, is more than a little disturbing.

On Monday, we reported that members of the Brandon Islamic Centre had invited parishioners from Catholic churches in Neepawa and Carberry as part of an open house at the organization's mosque on Saturday.

The move was part of an outreach program by the Islamic Centre to help Westman residents better understand the Muslims in their midst. The centre's president, Faiz Ahmad, said there are about 250 people in Brandon who practise Islam, and they hail from many areas of the world, including “India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria ...” Unfortunately, it seems that there remains misunderstanding within the city and surrounding communities about Islam, and the Muslim faithful who live, work and play alongside us. A large part of this misinformation is due to the media, which all too often focuses on international news that tends to paint all Muslims with the same brush — that they are all dangerous radical terrorists. The reality is actually quite different. As Ahmad states in the quote above, the majority of Muslim people are peace-loving people who want to raise their families in safety and security.

In spite of this, attitudes are proving difficult to change. A recent poll by the Angus Reid Institute suggested that about 42 per cent of respondents wanted Canada to stop taking in Syrian refugees, while 29 per cent said Canada should draw the line at 25,000.

As the Globe and Mail has reported, there have been several racist incidents across the country directed at Syrian refugees, including graffiti sprayed on a school in Calgary urging “Syrians go home and die,” and to “kill the traitor Trudeau.”

And here in Brandon, just yesterday we received a few messages to our Sound Off line — that we will not be printing in full — in response to our coverage of the Muslim open house on Saturday.

“I am not interested in their culture and I don’t want it, I am tired of these people wanting more and more,” wrote one bigoted commenter. “Canada is no longer the Country we were living in. When are you people going to give your heads a shake. You will pay the price.”

We applaud the Islamic Centre for opening its doors to the public, and for bringing its religion and its members into the public eye as a means to foster understanding. These kinds of outreach programs, we think, are a good way to try to give people a better understanding of their neighbours and of their beliefs.

But in these days in which we live, it faces an uphill battle when it comes to educating an already suspicious and fearful citizenry.

Republished from the Brandon Sun print edition March 1, 2016

Brandon Sun - PRINT EDITION

Brandon rallies around mosque after Quebec killings

By: Ian Froese

Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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COLIN CORNEAU/THE BRANDON SUN [Enlarge Image](#)

Muhammad Abidullah leads services during Isha prayers at the Brandon Islamic Centre on Monday evening.

It was a brief conversation with a woman Muhammad Abidullah never met, when he opened the doors of the Brandon Islamic Centre to a stranger a day after six people were killed at a Quebec City mosque.

"I could see something in her eyes, maybe a second or a fraction of a second," Abidullah recalled.



[Enlarge Image](#)

David Winter drops off a bouquet of flowers during Isha prayers on Monday evening at the Brandon Islamic Centre. Brandon has joined other communities across Canada in an outpouring of sympathy following Sunday's attack at a Quebec City mosque. (COLIN CORNEAU)



[Enlarge Image](#)

Local Muslims gather during Isha prayers on Monday evening at the Brandon Islamic Centre. (COLIN CORNEAU/THE BRANDON SUN)

"I could see tears in her eyes and the only thing I could say to her, when I got flowers from her, is that this is what we build on," he said. "The love, the affection."

Abidullah stepped back inside where other men were arriving for the sunset prayer Monday. He raised the bouquet of flowers with one hand as if to shrug.

He was floored, Abidullah said afterwards.

"That's the community we have here."

A single bouquet rested outside the door of Brandon's lone mosque by early afternoon, but as the day wore on, more guests, some bearing bouquets, showed up to offer condolences.

"The Muslim community is an intrinsic part of the Brandon community," David Winter said after shaking hands with several Muslims.

The outpouring of support comes as this country's Muslims grapple with the shocking news a gunman claimed the lives of six people Sunday night. They were praying inside a Quebec City mosque.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has denounced the incident as a terrorist attack.

Yet as Muslims nationwide express their grief, Brandon's Muslim community is responding not by closing doors but opening them.

An open house planned for late February has been pushed forward to this Saturday. From 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., the public is welcome to tour the Brandon Islamic Centre.

President Faiz Ahmad said the event isn't meant to be a memorial, but remarks will be shared about the recent attack and the current place of Muslims and other ethnic groups in the world.

"It's a time for anyone who would want to come, whether to pass on condolences or they want to know more about Islam or the community," Ahmad said.

A biology professor at Brandon University, Ahmad didn't have time by mid-afternoon Monday to respond to the array of condolences he has received from friends, strangers and organizations including the Brandon Police Service and Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

He stepped into the mosque later in the day, holding a card from a pastor, which read: "You are in our prayers."

Many people, Ahmad said, have offered to help in whatever way.

"It's really difficult to tell someone what they can do, other than to thank them," he said.

"There are these people with extreme views everywhere, but they don't represent the community. The larger community is with us. That's the message I will put across."

The shooting of Muslims, while arguably at their most vulnerable, with their heads bowed, surprised Ahmad. It hits close to home, too, considering about two decades ago, he lived in the same Sainte-Foy neighbourhood where the shooting happened on Sunday.

He figured Canada was immune to such violence.

"We had a firm belief that our country is a safe country, none of that happens here. That confidence is a little bit weaker now."

In the past few months, the Brandon Islamic Centre has considered increased security, such as employing video cameras. Three times in the past decade, a window at the centre was smashed, and anti-Muslim sentiments expressed south of the border have worried locals.

"The world kept on changing. There's so many incidents, so many things have been happening in the world that we've become concerned," Ahmad said.

Ahmad notes he has never described the acts of vandalism as a hate crime, but the thought has occurred to him.

Even before the Quebec City shooting, Muslims were on high alert. Only days earlier, U.S. President Donald Trump banned refugee admission and travel from seven Muslim-majority countries. Critics of the move say it is discriminatory.

Wadood Myireh, a Muslim who works for Sobeys in Brandon, said over the phone he cannot worry too much about the Islamophobia of others.

"My religion, it tells me not to call anybody names ... it places more responsibility on me to be patient."

Instead, Myireh does what he can to be a good citizen, in a country he believes is overwhelmingly kind and supportive.

He hopes to win over the few fearful of Muslims.

"You have to show them that you're likable and you have to go out of your way to make sure they're happy with you, then they will come around," he said.

» ifroese@brandonsun.com

» Twitter: @ianfroese

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Brandon Sun - PRINT EDITION

Prayer service will be show of solidarity

By: **Uncredited**

Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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COLIN CORNEAU/THE BRANDON SUN [Enlarge Image](#)

Members of Brandon's Muslim community gather during Isha prayers on Monday evening at the Brandon Islamic Centre. [An interfaith prayer service in memory of the victims of the Quebec City mosque shooting will be held at St. Matthew's Cathedral tonight at 7 p.m.](#)

An interfaith prayer service in memory of the victims of the Quebec City shooting is being held this evening at St. Matthew's Cathedral, in partnership with the Brandon Islamic Centre.

Don Bernhardt, dean of the Anglican cathedral, said the general public is invited to show their support.

"We are going to do this as a sign of solidarity between the faiths," Bernhardt said.

The horrific shooting, which occurred at the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québecin the suburb of Ste. Foy on Sunday night, claimed the lives of six men who were at the mosque for evening prayers.

"There has also been events in the United States that have caused a lot of people, both Muslims and non-Muslims concern, as to the way that particular faith is being viewed," Bernhardt said. "We feel here that we need to make a statement that we support our Muslim brothers and sisters, we do not see them as threats, they are fellow travellers on the road, so to speak."

Bernhardt is optimistic that Brandon's residents will come out in a big way.

"For the sake of our Muslim brothers and sisters, I would like to see a lot of people there to show their support and I'm suspecting that that's going to happen," he said.

[The service will be held at 7 p.m. at 403 13th St.](#)

» The Brandon Sun

Republished from the Brandon Sun print edition February 1, 2017

Show of support speaks volumes about Brandon

By: **None**

Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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Brandon is a small, yet remarkable city. One of many in this country.

Built by the railways, and thus serving as an artery for the settlement of Western Canada, Brandon's experience has been unique in history, and yet so very Canadian in scope.

This year will mark the Wheat City's 135th birthday, which will be enjoyed within the same year as Canada's 150th. This is a significant achievement for our community, and our hope is that all Brandonites will be able to come together in celebration.

The massive and lasting economic, political, spiritual and social changes that have washed over Canada's landscape since Confederation have not left Brandon unaffected. In the last decade, especially, there have been many changes and challenges come to Brandon. We have become a more multicultural city than ever before in our history, and for the most part our citizens have risen to those challenges.

And while this is yet another reason to celebrate, like every other community, Brandon has had to grapple the ramifications. Politics and race, religion and money — society's great dividers — have become ballooning flash points in our society. This is especially true in recent months as we have watched the ascension of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, hand in hand with the white supremacist movement.

Whether it be the Trump administration's temporary ban of refugee admissions from seven majority-Muslim countries, his promise to force the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, to his inflammatory push to build a \$15-billion wall along the Mexico-U.S. border, it is a rare person who has not fallen down on some side of these issues —either for or against. Sometimes vehemently.

With tensions rising south of the border, it was always inevitable that these pressures would spill over the border and into Canada as well — or rather, dragged over the border by our political class and those who would use politics as a weapon.

So it was that following a weekend of protest in the United States against Trump's executive order to ban refugees, and the resulting fiasco in that nation's airports, Canada had its nose bloodied by bigotry and hatred when six members — all fathers — of a Quebec-City mosque were gunned down during evening prayers on Monday.

This horrific act caused disbelief across the country, from all of us who value the virtues of justice and freedom. Thousands of Canadians have tried to show their support for the victims of this cowardly shooting spree. They have shown the best of Canada, even as we are forced to come to grips with the worst of us, and the Islamophobia that has taken hold on a portion of our citizenry. The Muslim community in Brandon remains small. The Brandon Islamic Centre on 10th Street not outlandish or showy — rather an older structure that allows the faithful to practise their faith in peace. Yet, as Brandonite David Winter told the Sun on Monday, the Islamic community has become intrinsic to the fabric of our local community.

In the wake of Sunday's shooting spree, the Islamic Centre was the focal point of Brandon's attempts to show solidarity to this somewhat isolated community, which is nonetheless growing solid roots here in Westman as we welcome more immigrants and refugees.

Centre president Faiz Ahmad told us that he didn't have enough time on Monday to respond to the array of condolences he received from friends, perfect strangers and organizations such as the Brandon Police Service and even the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

As much as Muslim faith in Canada has been shaken by this tragedy, we suggest our local community take solace from this local show of support, which has cut across both religious and social lines.

For those readers who want to show further support to our Muslim neighbours and friends, we suggest you make your way down to the St. Matthew's Cathedral tonight at 7 p.m. for a memorial service for the victims of the Quebec shooting.

Let's show them how remarkable Brandon really is.

Republished from the Brandon Sun print edition February 1, 2017

Support lifts Muslims

By: Ian Froese

Thursday, Feb. 2, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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COLIN CORNEAU/THE BRANDON SUN [Enlarge Image](#)

Brandonites crowd the pews of St. Matthew's Cathedral on Wednesday evening during an interfaith vigil to remember the victims of the Quebec City mosque shooting. Members of the community came together in a service featuring Christian and Islamic readings.

At a moment when the Muslim community in Brandon felt most vulnerable, Faiz Ahmed told a congregation of more than 150 mourners they have been lifted up by strangers.

The solidarity shown by everyone who attended the interfaith service of remembrance Wednesday night in memory of the six victims of Sunday's Quebec City mosque shooting — and the many more who offered their condolences before then — has been inspiring, said the president of the Brandon Islamic Centre.



[Enlarge Image](#)

A member of Brandon's Muslim community holds his hands in prayerful observance during Wednesday's interfaith vigil. (COLIN CORNEAU/THE BRANDON SUN)



[Enlarge Image](#)

Faiz Ahmed, the president of the Brandon Islamic Centre, speaks to the audience during an interfaith vigil on Wednesday evening at St. Matthew's Cathedral to remember the victims of this week's Quebec City mosque shooting. (COLIN CORNEAU)

It "reaffirms the faith that Muslims are an integral part of the society. The Muslims are an important thread, weaved into the fabric of our country Canada," Ahmed said.

"It reaffirms from you that though our ladies may choose to dress differently or we may pray differently, we are the same human beings and we all deserve the same respect."

Ahmed said the outpouring of support has left the city's Muslim community "speechless."

He said they have received flowers, cards, phone calls and messages from many.

"It is hard to believe that we are so loved by the community," he told the vigil at St. Matthew's Cathedral.

There was solemn remembrance of the lives lost, mentioning the six men's roles as sons, husbands and fathers to "children too young to even comprehend what happened," Ahmed said. But the takeaway message from the service was one of hope, in the power of the human spirit coming together.

"In times like these, that's when humanity is basically tested, and what I've seen is so much love," said Akis Peerzada, a Muslim dental hygienist who moved to Brandon last August, after the service.

"We are one, in so many ways," explained Pat Turner, while seated for a service the Christian said was her privilege to attend.

"Solidarity goes a long way toward solving the world's problems."

The 45-minute vigil intertwined the practices of an Anglican cathedral with a mosque, a joint prayer service put on by St. Matthew's Cathedral and the Brandon Islamic Centre.

A welcome from Rev. Don Bernhardt, dean of the Christian church, was followed by a Muslim call to worship, spoken by Abdul Banuga.

Verses from the Biblical book of Leviticus were recited after a reading from the Quran, spoken in Arabic and translated to English.

An emotional Brandon West Progressive Conservative MLA Reg Helwer said this was the second time he heard the Muslim call for prayer this week, after attending a vigil Monday in Winnipeg that moved him.

"I was struck by the welcoming words of the imam, your mosque is a place of safety, as is our cathedral," he said.

Muhammad Abidullah, a doctor in Brandon, read passages from the Quran.

At one point, he singled out two words, "O mankind!"

"It doesn't say just Muslim, just Jew or just Christian," he said.

In his own remarks, Ahmed said 20 years ago he lived in the same Ste. Foy neighbourhood where the shooting took place.

That mosque, Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec, did not exist back then, but he believes he must have worshipped with some of the men whose lives were taken.

"I'm sure I must have prayed with the elderly people who died there," he said.

Ahmed left the congregation with an invitation to join him and other Muslims this Saturday at the Brandon Islamic Centre for a special prayer at 2 p.m.

He said people would be welcome to pray together and exchange thoughts "about how to make our community even better."

» ifroese@brandonsun.com

» Twitter: @ianfroese

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'We are really moved by this love'

By: **Tyler Clarke**

Monday, Feb. 6, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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TIM SMITH/THE BRANDON SUN [Enlarge Image](#)

Muhammad Abidullah, a committee member with the Brandon Islamic Centre, explains some of the verses in the Quran for visitors to the centre's open house on Saturday. The centre also held a prayer for the lives lost recently in the Quebec mosque shooting.

An adoptive mother of a Syrian son, Andrea Oswald found herself lost in the days following the fatal shooting of six people at a Quebec City mosque on Jan. 29.

She knew that she had to do something to help out the local Muslim community during this time of grieving, but struggled to pin down what approach to take.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Brandonites pack the Brandon Islamic Centre on Saturday during an open house and prayer for the lives lost recently in the Quebec mosque shooting. (TIM SMITH/THE BRANDON SUN)

She resolved to drop off a bouquet of flowers at the Brandon Islamic Centre, where she was greeted at the door and invited inside with open arms.

Oswald relayed this story during a prayer and open house at the centre on Saturday — a followup to the interfaith vigil that was held at St. Matthew's Cathedral on Feb. 1.

"I want our hearts to come together," she said, affirming that the day's event, where people from all races, cultural and spiritual backgrounds came together, is "what Canada is about."

Centre president Faiz Ahmad said that the community's support in the days following the Quebec City shooting had been "tremendous."

"We didn't even know there was so much support available in the city for us," he said after Saturday's prayer. "We are really moved by this love and affection that we see."

Throughout Saturday's event, members of the public stood up to share their insights with the local Muslim community, with the overall theme one of acceptance.

Correcting one Brandon University student who apologized for their inability to contribute to society due to their time being tied up in study, Mayor Rick Chrest took a moment to clarify the role they are already playing in the Wheat City.

Chrest told the student that they were already "enriching our culture with yours," adding that this applies to everyone who has aided in Brandon's "metamorphosis" over the past decade or so, during which the city has become more multicultural.

It has become "a much greater place," Chrest said — a "much more diverse and giving and accepting and loving place."

While Saturday's prayer and open house will be the Brandon Islamic Centre's final event directly related to the Quebec City mosque shooting, Ahmad said that the public is always invited to visit their centre, both during their regular open houses as well as any other time there's someone present to take them in.

Visitors may ask whatever questions they wish to ask, he said, adding that more inroads need to be made in order to help make our country and community even better than it is today.

» tclarke@brandonsun.com

» Twitter: @TylerClarkeMB

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Brandon Sun - PRINT EDITION

BU hosts discussion of Islamic culture, community

By: **Uncredited**

Wednesday, Mar. 15, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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FILE [Enlarge Image](#)

Faiz Ahmad joins other local Muslims during prayers at the Brandon Islamic Centre recently. Ahmad, who is a biology professor at Brandon University, says the upcoming Walking Forward with Muslims event provides an opportunity to sit down and have a healthy conversation about Islam and Muslims in the community.

Brandon University is honoured to partner with Westman Immigrant Services and the Brandon Islamic Centre to host Walking Forward with Muslims on March 24.

The event will provide an introduction and exploration of Islamic culture and Muslims in Brandon, featuring a panel discussion regarding current challenges, a film presentation by Brandon filmmaker Meghan Cronkrite and traditional foods, tea and music.

"Islam is a tremendously rich and diverse religion," said Faiz Ahmad, president of the Brandon Islamic Centre and a biology professor at BU.

"The Islamic Centre has received considerable support from Brandonites, but there is also a great deal of misinformation that continues to be spread. This event gives us an opportunity to sit down and have a healthy conversation about Islam and Muslims in the community."

The panel discussion will be chaired by Emma Varley, an associate professor of anthropology at BU. Varley's research focuses on Muslim community life, religious beliefs and practices, and women's health and well-being in Pakistan. The panel will include faculty members from BU and Assiniboine Community College, as well as students and community members.

"We need to turn the conversation around because the image of Islam that is too often portrayed to us is far from reality," Varley said. "In truth, Muslims have a vibrant and long-standing history in Canada, and share with non-Muslims in a common experience of Canadian society and culture. For individuals less aware of this reality, the panel provides a venue to engage in productive and peaceable discussion concerning the beliefs and concerns shared by Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians alike. This is also an opportunity to dispel those myths or misconceptions that present a barrier to intercultural and interfaith understanding."

Alison Marshall, a professor of religion at BU, has traced the history of Muslims in Manitoba to the early 1900s.

At the time there were less than 1,000 Muslims in Canada. While Canada's Islamic community has grown greatly since then, Cronkrite fears that recent world events are creating a chasm that needs to be bridged.

She raised the idea of holding an event at BU after helping to organize a similar event earlier this year at the University of Prince Edward Island.

Cronkrite's short film "Keep Walking Forward" will be screened at BU along with "Letter to a Terrorist," by Winnipeg filmmaker Ayat Mneina.

"Letter to a Terrorist" was produced by Mneina in response to November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, as well as Lebanon and Turkey.

"The reaction to these films has been very positive," said Cronkrite, who has also held a public screening for "Keep Walking Forward" at Westman Immigrant Services.

"I feel it is very important for people to see the effects that terrorism has on Muslims as well. By sharing their perspective, we can find a way to walk forward together."

The free event will take place from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in Harvest Hall and is open to the public.

» Submitted

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Brandon Sun - PRINT EDITION

BU event a show of support for Muslim community

By: Erin Debooy

Saturday, Mar. 25, 2017 | [Comments: 0](#)

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TIM SMITH/THE BRANDON SUN [Enlarge Image](#)

Brandon University student Fatumo Ahmed speaks during a panel discussion at Brandon University's Harvest Hall on Friday evening as part of the Walking Forward with Muslims community event. The evening included the screening of two short films, food, and a question and answer session and panel discussion aimed at dispelling myths and misconceptions regarding the Muslim faith.

More than 60 people filled Brandon University's Harvest Hall Friday night to show support and promote awareness of the Muslim community.

BU hosted Walking Forward with Muslims: A Community Event in partnership with Westman Immigrant Services and the Brandon Islamic Centre to start a discussion on what it means to be Muslim in Canada in the current political climate.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Dr. Mohammad Abidullah (bottom left) speaks during a panel discussion at Brandon University's Harvest Hall on Friday evening as part of the Walking Forward with Muslims community event.

"It's the first time we've had an event like this ... and with the recent shootings in Quebec, we decided that this needed to happen sooner than later," said Lisa Park, BU's diversity and human rights adviser.

Attendees enjoyed baklava and samosas while taking in two short films — Meghan Cronkrite's short film "Keep Walking Forward," along with "Letter to a Terrorist" by Winnipeg filmmaker Ayat Mneina — followed by a panel discussion.

Cheers erupted in the room as panel moderator Emma Varley, an associate professor of anthropology at BU, announced the gathering was a celebration of diversity.

"There has been an increase in hate speech ... The number of police reported hate crimes in the past three years has more than doubled," Varley told the crowd. "We come together ...for productive and peaceful dialogue."

Faiz Ahmad, president of the Brandon Islamic Centre, said events like this should have been happening earlier, as it is a great platform to begin discussions, clear up assumptions and lead to better understanding.

"It's a very timely event. There's a lot happening in the world, there's a lot of misconceptions ... Muslims are all roped in the same view by the media," Ahmad said. "Realizing that whatever is happening in the world in the name of Islam, very bad things, those people are not representing Islam. The Muslim community condemns what is happening there, we don't think that they are representing Islam at all ... they are tarnishing Islam."

The Brandon Islamic Centre has also been holding open houses in an attempt to break down these misconceptions and barriers, Ahmad said, adding they have received positive turnouts.

"People fear the unknown ... but once you get to know (the community), you realize we're all the same," Ahmad said, "We may come from a different country, a different race, a different culture, but deep down we are all human beings — we have the same responsibilities, we have the same needs, we have children, we work ... the newcomers are no different from people who came before."

Ahmad said Brandon has also grown, becoming more accepting over the years.

"Every now and then you run into someone with very extreme views ... but there aren't very many of those people (in Brandon)," Ahmad said. "Generally speaking, the Brandon community has been very accommodating and supportive ... They're very open. Brandon was a different place 10 years ago, it's not the same today."

University students Kristen Smart and Victoria McDougall came to the event in a show of support.

"It's important to be here especially with the times as they are ... certain communities aren't as accepting of different cultures and I think it's extremely important that there is acceptance here in Brandon," Smart said.

Both students said they found it encouraging how many people attended.

"Brandon can definitely use some improvement (with acceptance) but everywhere can," McDougall said.

"There's always room for improvement."

» edebooy@brandonsun.com

» Twitter: @erindebooy

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