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Eye-grabbing church sign ignites debate

AP - Report Section
Nov 28, 2004

SUNNYVALE, Calif. - Some church signs display passages of scripture to comfort, while others sport pithy expressions to challenge passers-by to stop and think.

Sometimes they go a bit further and ignite debate, such as the one in front of the Church of the Nazarene in this San Francisco suburb. It's promoting a Sunday sermon titled, "Why I am not a Muslim."

"I thought, 'That is an offensive sign, per se,'" said Jay Keller, who lives around the corner. "I work with a lot of Muslims and don't know why someone would put up a sign like that. They can't possibly be oblivious to the fact that it might be offensive to some people."

The Rev. Donald Fareed, pastor of a San Jose-based organization called Persian Ministries, said his talk was intended to explain his conversion to Christianity and try to close any rifts between Christians and Muslims since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"My goal is not to offend Muslims, but to communicate why I changed my religion," said Fareed, who was born an Iranian Muslim and fled after the Islamist revolution. "It was mostly spiritual reasons that led to my conversion."

He converted to evangelical Christianity about 14 years ago after rebelling against Islam's holy laws. He said the change allows him to have a closer bond to God.

Fareed hosts a weekly television show in the San Francisco Bay area that is broadcast globally by satellite in Farsi. He believes he now reaches about 30 million people each week and said Muslims he has spoken to have begun considering other options in the face of harsh Islamist governments.

Nazarene Pastor Terry Irish said the electric signboard was taken from a brochure Fareed sent him last month.

"It is not intended to be either insensitive or inflammatory," Irish said. "My intent is never to offend. My intent is always to inform."

Sunnyvale resident Waheed Siddiquee said he was disappointed by the sign, which is a few blocks from his home, because it appears to challenge his Muslim faith.

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"It's a free country and he's free to speak his mind," Siddiqee said.
"There is nothing we can do about it."

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