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Posted on Sat, Nov. 27, 2004

Sermon subject raises hackles

NEIGHBOR CALLS SIGN OFFENSIVE

By Chuck Carroll
 Mercury News

The sign in front of the Church of the Nazarene in Sunnyvale, promoting a sermon by Sunday's guest speaker, is raising a few eyebrows.

"Why I am not a Muslim," reads the electric signboard in front of the church at 975 Fremont Ave. Church officials and the speaker say the message isn't intended to inflame.

Guest speaker Donald Fareed said the sermon he will deliver is intended to explain to Nazarene members how he arrived at his own decision to convert to Christianity. It is not, he said, a spiritual attack or anything as far from it.

But the sign surprised Jay Keller and his wife, who have lived around the corner from the church for many years.

"I thought that is an offensive sign per se," he said. "I work with a lot of Muslims and don't know how they would put up a sign like that. They can't possibly be oblivious to the fact that it might be offensive."

Nazarene Pastor Terry Irish on Friday explained that the wording on the signboard was merely one of several topics in a brochure Fareed sent him in early October. Explaining the topic further was impossible in the available space, Irish said.

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

Fareed, the pastor of a San Jose-based organization called Persian Ministries, said his overall goal is about promoting peace and understanding. He wants to help Christians and Muslims bridge a gap that perhaps intensified since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Unlike other Muslim-Christian converts, Fareed said, he is not merely expressing spiritual ideas but also democratic ideals of the West.

"My goal is not to offend Muslims, but to communicate why I changed my religion," he said. "It's not v

spiritual reasons that led to my conversion."

Fareed is an Iranian Muslim by birth who fled his homeland following the Islamist revolution that dominated the Tehran government today. Rebelling against the perceived harshness of Islam's harshness as interpreted by leaders there, he moved to the United States and, about 14 years ago, converted to Christianity after a spiritual journey in which he first dabbled in Sufism and Scientology.

He said he converted because Christianity allowed him to have "a personal relationship with God" whereas Islam does not. In his mind, a personal relationship with God allows a person to seek help to salvation, whereas Islam simply demands its adherents to stick to rigid laws with no feedback.

The founder of a San Jose-based organization called Persian Ministries, Fareed hosts a weekly TV show in the Bay Area. More than two years ago, he said, he vastly expanded his reach by broadcasting his show on a satellite in Farsi.

He believes he now reaches about 30 million people each week. He said large numbers of Iranian Muslims he has talked with have begun to open up to other religious options in the face of harsh governments.

Sunnyvale resident Waheed Siddiquee said he was "disappointed" at the tone of the sign in front of the church, a few blocks from his home, because it comes off as a challenge to his Muslim faith.

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

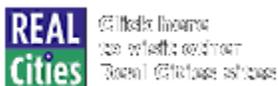
Siddiquee said he questions how much headway Christianity is making in terms of winning converts in an area run by Islamist regimes. "I imagine there is a certain percentage of more moderate Muslims who are unhappy about some of the rules and regulations that are being implemented, and might be turning to Christianity. But most Muslims are very comfortable with their faith."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Rev. Donald Fareed will deliver his sermon at 10:45 a.m. Sunday at the Church of the Nazarene, 1500 Fremont Ave., Sunnyvale. His Farsi-language TV show is seen on San Jose cable Channel 15 on Sundays at 10 p.m.

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