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Speaking Up Against Racism and Islamophobia

St. Paul, Minn. – January 27, 2016 – *Joan Haan, an organizational coach and consultant in the Twin Cities co-facilitates the active nonviolence curriculum Creating a Culture of Peace with Mary's Pence Executive Director Katherine Wojtan. In July, Joan and Katherine lead a group of local and international Mary's Pence staff and other local community members through this weekend-long nonviolence workshop.*

Joan offers a guide of ways we might choose to respond to the racist comments and alarmist rhetoric that seem to be increasingly filling up our newsfeeds, happy hours, family get-togethers, workplaces, and neighborhoods. With Joan's guide, those of us who can no longer remain silent can learn to respond powerfully and peacefully in these situations.

What do you do when you hear someone make a demeaning comment about a person, whether it reflects racism, religious intolerance, or an assumption about a person's immigrant status? Often, we want to say something, but freeze. We might fear escalating the situation or we simply don't know how to respond in the moment.

Like many, I have relatives, acquaintances and Facebook "friends" who say things that qualify, in my mind, as Islamophobic or racist. What I know from the active nonviolence curriculum I co-facilitate, Creating a Culture of Peace (CCP) is how important it is to practice and rehearse!

The following came from that internal conversation and soul searching, participation in a study group, *White Awake*, and conversations with participants and colleagues after a St. Paul Interfaith Network (SPIN) event on Islamophobia with the MN Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR). May I grow in this practice . . . not perfection!

This is a brief guide to help you think about these situations in advance so you feel prepared to be an ally when the time comes, and speak up.

It is important to respond nonviolently, and to center prior to engaging.

Mahatma Gandhi described active nonviolence as "constructive work" which includes dialogue (and takes most of our time and effort) and "resistance," interrupting and interfering. We may need to start with "resistance". Before responding, take time to center yourself. Take a deep breath. Say a prayer or mantra. Remind yourself that people are both wounded and sacred. Perhaps envision the offending

speaker as someone you love but who you intensely disagree about an issue (this idea is adapted from the CCP curriculum).

Respond with the intent to disrupt the offensive behavior. Show solidarity with those who are offended, and respect for all.

Speak firmly. Be willing to walk away and not engage further unless hearts are softening. Some phrases that may be helpful:

- “It’s important for me not to let that comment pass and give my tacit approval. I believe all people deserve respect.”
- “Please stop,” or “Stop!”
- “Peace”
- “This remark/joke offends me.”
- “I don’t understand what is going on here. Can we step back? This is hurtful to me.”
- “I am standing in solidarity with [this person] who deserves respect and a sense of safety,” or “I stand with you” (Speaking and/or physically standing next to the person).

If you notice hearts softening, continue to respond with the intent to be in dialogue and deepen understanding, not argue or demean.

Be willing to be vulnerable and share yourself. Listen to your “opponent.” Without agreeing with their position, look for an opportunity to acknowledge and respect who they are. Find out what concerns them most, tell them a core value you hold, and try to connect on that level. Some phrases that may be helpful:

- “My family came to this country as an immigrant/refugee/ for religious freedom.”
- “My religious tradition teaches love of neighbor; welcoming the stranger.”
- “I will not (we cannot) live in fear.”
- “I need (we need) to get to know neighbors who are not like me (us).”

And finally, join in random comments and acts of kindness to Muslims, immigrants and people of ethnicities other than one’s own: from a smile, “Salaam Alaikum” (peace be upon you) to “I am so glad you are part of my community!” Let friendship flow; not hatred grow!