

Christian Center to Open Near Proposed Ground Zero Mosque

A Florida evangelist is responding to efforts to build a multimillion-dollar mosque two blocks from Ground Zero with plans to open a religious center of his own.

Bill Keller (pictured), host of the evangelistic website , said his 9/11 Christian Center near Ground Zero will begin holding Sunday prayer meetings Sept. 5. The services will be held at a hotel in downtown New York until Jan. 1, when the center moves a permanent site. The facility will be open daily and will house a prayer chapel. Local ministers also will lead regular outreach ministry.

"I was in prayer and God said, 'Listen, if the Muslims can build a temple to their false god at Ground Zero, why can't there be a place dedicated to the true God of the Bible on that same area?'" said Keller, whose website claims 2.4 million subscribers. "Rather than a [protest] event we're going to have an ongoing work of God right there because the Bible says you combat the darkness with the light."

The proposed Islamic center in lower Manhattan has generated a firestorm of controversy. The \$100 million project calls for a 13-story community center that includes a mosque, performing arts center, meeting rooms and gym. The center, called the Cordoba House, is a joint effort between the American Society for Muslim Advancement and the Cordoba Initiative, which says its mission is to improve relations between Muslims and the West.

Feisal Abdul Rauf, a New York imam and chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, said the center is intended to prevent the next 9/11 and will include a public memorial to the nearly 3,000 victims of the terrorist attack.

"My colleagues and I are the anti-terrorists," Rauf wrote in a *New York Daily News* op-ed. "We are the people who want to embolden the vast majority of Muslims who hate terrorism to stand up to the radical rhetoric. Our purpose is to interweave America's Muslim population into the mainstream society. People who are stakeholders in society, who believe they are welcomed as equal partners, do not want to destroy it. They want to build it."

Thousands have gathered to protest the proposed mosque, saying it is insensitive at best for Muslims to build near a site destroyed by Islamic terrorists.

Last week, the debate became a campaign issue in New York's race for governor when Republican candidate Rick Lazio called on his Democratic rival, Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, to investigate the funding sources of the group behind the Islamic center. In a letter sent to Cuomo's office, Lazio cited media reports claiming Rauf refused to label Hamas a terrorist organization and that the imam was a "key figure" in a group that sponsored the flotilla that sought to break Israel's Gaza blockade.

In media statements, Cuomo said his office would review any evidence of wrongdoing while accusing Lazio of religious intolerance. On Monday, the Associated Press reported that New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a Republican turned Independent who has defended the planned mosque, said it would be un-American to vet religious organizations.

Many mosque opponents are supporting attempts to confer landmark status on a century-old building at the proposed site. New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission held a hearing Tuesday to debate the issue, but a vote is not expected until later this summer. A community board decided earlier this month that the building was not structurally significant enough to landmark.

Some critics, including several Christians, say building a mosque so near Ground Zero would be viewed as a victory for Muslim terrorists. They see it as an attempt to establish a beachhead for political Islam in New York.

"The situation in New York is really insulting," said James Lafferty, head of the Virginia Anti-Shariah Task Force who led a protest last month against the building of Cordoba House. "All of the people who were involved in the cowardly attacks on the World Trade Center were from radical Islam ... and they are now establishing a mosque ... in the shadow of the World Trade Center."

Lafferty, whose wife, Andrea Lafferty, is executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition, said the Islamic center is part of efforts to establish Shariah law in the U.S. He points to four Christians who were arrested last month in Dearborn, Mich., while preaching during an Arab festival there and says the U.S. could become like Europe, which has considered the strict Islamic law in some cases of family law among the region's large Muslim community.

"We've watched this movie before, and in Great Britain and in France and even some of the other countries, there's a pattern, there's sort of a template for all this, and that is massive migration then the establishment of mosques and schools, and then attempts to impose Shariah law on a given territory or enclave," Lafferty said.

Rauf, author of *What's Right With Islam Is What's Right With America*, in 2008 supported efforts to incorporate aspects of Shariah law into British law—a move the Archbishop of Canterbury also endorsed at the time. The Rt. Rev. Rowan Williams told the BBC there was "a place for finding what would be a constructive accommodation with some aspects of Muslim law, as we already do with some other aspects of religious law."

In a 2009 *Washington Post* On Faith op-ed, Rauf said U.S. law and Shariah law had common characteristics. "The principles behind American secular law are similar to Shariah law—that we protect life, liberty and property, that we provide for the common welfare, that we maintain a certain amount of modesty," he wrote. "What Muslims want is to ensure that their secular laws are not in conflict with the Quran or the Hadith, the sayings of Muhammad."

Warren Larson, director of the Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies at Columbia International University, said he isn't convinced the mosque is part of a grand conspiracy to establish Muslim dominance in the U.S. But he said building a large Islamic center near Ground Zero sends a different message.

"I'm against [the mosque] because I think it's going to be perceived wrongly," said Larson, who ministered among Muslims in Pakistan for 40 years. "It's going to be perceived as a possible takeover, but I don't think it is. I don't think that's what Muslims are thinking. They're thinking this is a house of prayer. And Muslims do pray; Muslims don't just blow up buildings."

Too many Christians are responding to Islam out of fear instead of faith, said Rick Love, co-founder of Peace Catalyst and former director of Youth With a Mission's U.S. Muslim outreach. He said the vast majority of Muslims aren't terrorists, and while refusing to take sides on the mosque issue, Love said upholding religious liberty gives the U.S. the moral authority to challenge nations that persecute religious minorities.

For Larson, the real danger is not the encroachment of Islam in the U.S. "I hope it doesn't come across as arrogant, but my main concern in the United States is not Islam, it's not fundamentalist Islam, it's weak Christianity," he said. "It's Christianity that is less than what it should be. ... It's the

sense that the church is often not the church. I think our main struggle is not political, but it's really to be good, strong, vibrant Christians who love the Lord and live for Him."

Keller agrees. He has called Islam "a 1,400-year-old lie from hell" and has been the focus of a protest by the Council on American-Islamic Relations. But Keller said his reason for founding the 9/11 Christian Center is not to set up a confrontation with Islam as much as to present an alternative to it.

"I'm looking for people who are lost, hurting, looking for hope and answers; that's who we're looking to attract," said Keller, who plans to commute from St. Petersburg, Fla., to lead the Sunday services until the center opens in January. "That's why Islam has grown. That's why some of the cults and false religions have grown so fast because people, quite honestly Christians, have hid behind the four walls of the church, they've taken themselves out of the marketplace. ... My whole thing is to get into the marketplace and not battle Islam for souls but battle Satan for souls."