

Conversation On Syrian Refugees Set For May 11

By Steve Smith
Staff Writer

The Glastonbury MLK Community Initiative will host a Community Conversation, on May 11, titled "The Muslim Ban. An Examination of the Underlying Factual, Legal, Religious, Humanitarian, Policy, and Economic Considerations."

The conversation will explore whether Muslim refugees from Syria pose a threat to our national or individual security, and whether the "Muslim Ban" is consistent with the moral and humanitarian values which have shaped the foreign policy of the United States.

Leslie Ohta, chairwoman of the GM-LKCI, said the idea for this conversation sprung from today's headlines.

"It is a very current topic that should be of interest to many people," she said, adding that she tried to frame the event's subtitle so that it isn't slanted one way or the other.

"Basically, we wanted to look at what the facts are," she said, adding that those facts include that Syrians have not been involved in any terrorist attacks on the United States, and that the crime rate for refugees is lower than that of the general public.

While there are some economic ramifications for the taxpaying public, Ohta said, those generally are only for the first year that a refugee is in the United States.

"Overall, they will become educated, they will become employed, and will become tax-paying residents, if not citizens, and make contributions to their communities," Ohta said.

Panelists will include Rev. Dr. David Grafton, professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Hartford Seminary; Dennis Wilson, a program manager at Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS); Dr. Abigail Williamson, assistant professor of Political Science and Public Policy and Law, Trinity College; Anna Cabot, William R. Davis Clinical Teaching Fellow in the Asylum and Human Rights Clinic at UConn Law School; and Rev. Richard Allen, pastor, South Church in Glastonbury.

Cabot, Ohta said, will discuss the legal ramifications of whether a ban on Muslims comports with the U.S. Constitution.

"It is a real issue," she said.

Allen will be addressing the issues he and his parishioners faced in connection

with the decision to co-sponsor, with IRIS, the refugee family of Mohamad Albukaai, and the subsequent trials and tribulations of that sponsorship.

Allen said that when he first asked his congregation for volunteers to form a committee to help a Syrian refugee family, "hands went up all over the place."

The family arrived last August, and the committee had already secured housing for them. The children are enrolled in public school and both Albukaai and his wife soon found employment.

"The biggest challenge has been the language barrier," Allen said, adding that modern technology has helped with that.

"There are apps that you can put into your phone where you can speak Arabic into the phone and English comes out the other end, and vice-versa," he said, adding that several Arabic speakers have also helped.

Albukaai will be on hand to talk about the vetting process they underwent and their life here in the United States. Also, Zeyad Al Abass, whose family was sponsored by First Church, will speak about his family's experiences.

"They'll be talking about why they left Syria, what it was like living in Jordan for four years, waiting to get here," Ohta said. "They didn't actually have a choice of what country they could flee to."

Ohta said she expects the conversation to be "candid, informative, and provocative, in a congenial atmosphere, where everybody can voice their opinions and hopefully become better-informed."

"One hope is that there will be a consciousness-raising," Allen said.

The program will be moderated and facilitated by Dean Alfred Carter, an educator, sociologist, and humanist.

There will be a reception, featuring Syrian dishes, from 6:30 to 7 p.m.

A number of advocacy groups will have tables, where participants will have the opportunity to learn about the mission and work of the various groups and explore volunteer opportunities.

The Community Conversation will take place on May 11 from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the Riverfront Community Center.

This is a free event open to all. For additional information, please contact Ellen Carter at 860-659-2922 for elcarter99@aol.com or Ohta at 202-538-1161 or leslieohta@gmail.com or www.glastonburymlkci.org.