

ON RELIGION

An Advocate Lends a Hand as Social Justice Goals Unify Faiths



Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

Lina Jamoul, who works for a group that brings together religious and community organizations, at a meeting at St. Francis Church in Chicago.

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CHICAGO

Lina Jamoul stood amid the London multitudes that day in February 2003, and in the masses of antiwar marchers in Hyde Park she imagined she saw her political future. There were Socialists and fashion models, dentists and nuns, the sort of coalition that an idealistic graduate student like Ms. Jamoul could envision not only stopping the impending invasion of Iraq, but also making social change at home.

Then the weeks passed and the throngs dissipated and the war began and the whole enterprise, at least in Ms. Jamoul's eyes, dwindled to rote slogans and camp followers. Worse still, the sense of futility struck an intimate and familiar chord. Her own family had had to flee their native Syria because her father, a journalist, had fallen afoul of the government as a dissident.

On an unexpectedly brisk night two weeks ago, sitting in a Roman Catholic church on the periphery of downtown Chicago, Ms. Jamoul recognized that those frustrating experiences were not her destiny but more like an instructive counterpoint. She had not lost her desire to right wrongs. She had, however, followed it across the ocean and half a continent, to the working-class neighborhoods and suburbs that radiate outward from the Loop.

She was meeting on this evening with the leaders of a group audaciously called United Power for Action and Justice, and composed largely, though not exclusively, of congregations from across the religious spectrum.

A Muslim herself, Ms. Jamoul sat beside three women from the Mosque Foundation, a major Islamic center in suburban Chicago. Next to those women, each covering her hair with the hijab, a Reform rabbi removed his baseball cap to reveal a yarmulke.

The action and justice being discussed was a major piece of health-care legislation bogged down in the Illinois Legislature. The language of the session had none of the yearning, supplicating tone of do-gooders; it bristled with words like “target,” “polarize,” “enemy” and “vilify.” The people speaking it, Ms. Jamoul included, relished conflict and intended to win.

This kind of lexicon has for decades been a mainstay for the member groups of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the legacy of the legendary community organizer Saul Alinsky. Alinsky’s successor as head of the foundation, Ed Chambers, specifically directed its efforts toward religious congregations, and for much of the past quarter-century that especially meant black Protestants and Latino and white Roman Catholics.

Lina Jamoul embodied the process of ethnic and religious change. She is the only Muslim among the 150 full-time, paid organizers for the Industrial Areas Foundation’s affiliates throughout the country.

The Mosque Foundation is one of the most active congregations in United Power. “Activism has been in my blood since childhood,” Ms. Jamoul, 29, said in an interview. “But I didn’t want to be involved in what’s ineffective and just rhetoric. Here I’m working with the people who are immediately affected by what we do. I’m helping to develop leaders. It seems like the right thing to do on so many levels.”

Ms. Jamoul first volunteered with the Industrial Areas Foundation in London, and even wrote her doctoral dissertation on its style of broad-based organizing. She came to the United States for several months in 2004 to apprentice with Arnie Graf, a foundation organizer in Baltimore who, as a Jew, has formed his closest ties with black Christians. Nine months ago, she joined United Power as one of its three salaried organizers.

There is, of course, nothing new about the role of social justice in Islam. The concepts of charity and egalitarianism form central tenets of the faith. But they have been applied primarily within the worldwide Muslim community or umma. At their most tolerant, Muslim rulers offered a combination of religious freedom for and political control over Jews and Christians as “people of the Book.”

United Power, in contrast, puts Muslims and Ms. Jamoul within an array of Roman Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Pentecostal and secular constituents. Its issues range from some of acute

interest to Muslims, like the addition of Arabic-language classes in local high schools, to more class-based causes like affordable housing, early childhood education and guaranteed health-care coverage.

For Ms. Jamoul, the experience has stretched her in two ways. It has, quite obviously, brought her into close collaboration with non-Muslims. It has also taken her from the secular, cultural Muslim identity of her upbringing into partnership with observant Muslims. While she does not wear the hijab, and will visit the Mosque Foundation wearing a pantsuit, she has begun fasting during Ramadan and studying the Koran.

“We can never know God or see God, but we can see God’s attributes on earth, and one of them is justice,” Ms. Jamoul said. “I came to the language and the ideas partly out of my own faith journey. But it’s also a result of having empathy for the faith narrative of the people I work with and appreciating what their religious institutions have meant to them. I’ve learned what it meant to grow up Catholic on the South Side, how much the church meant.”

The process also has run in the other direction, with United Power serving as a bridge between the Chicago area’s 400,000 Muslims, many of them recent immigrants, and a native population that viewed them warily, even hostilely in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001. The Mosque Foundation’s building in the suburb of Bridgeview, for example, was surrounded for several days by protesters.

Two months after the 2001 attacks, United Power brought together 3,000 Chicagoans at Navy Pier for a series of one-on-one meetings that crossed all denominational lines. A United Power leader among Catholics, the Rev. Edward J. Cronin of St. Alexander Church in Palos Heights, defied some of his own flock by preaching (ultimately unsuccessfully) in favor of the sale of a nearby building for a mosque.

Judith Gethner, a volunteer leader with United Power, had grown up with a literally parochial sense of activism. She was the child of observant Jews, a resident of the Jewish enclave of West Rodgers Park and ultimately a volunteer with the National Council of Jewish Women, raising money for Israeli children.

“I can put it with seven exclamation points,” Ms. Gethner said, “that I never thought I’d be working with a Muslim congregation and a Muslim organizer.”

Yet she has done exactly that. And at a recent rally for Illinois’s health-care legislation, Ms. Gethner found herself on the podium, looking out into the crowd, and spotting Lina Jamoul, who was holding a sign declaring, “Now Is The Time.”

“It made me feel like I was the antithesis of what I read about in the press — all the anger and angst about Muslims,” Ms. Gethner said. “I was thinking, Look who I sit next to, look who I work with together.”