Countering Islamaphobia
by Patrick McInerney

As reported on the previous page, in recent years there has been a sharp rise in Islamophobia, an irrational fear of Islam and Muslims. This fear is heightened by sensationalist reporting of violent, criminal events carried out by a tiny and unrepresentative group of Muslims acting contrary to explicit texts of the Holy Quran and established Islamic principles. It is further heightened by an almost exclusive focus on these acts while ignoring the vastly more frequent acts of political, racist, sectarian and ethnic violence committed by others. It is spread by populist politicians seeking electoral advantage at the expense of vulnerable, targeted groups. It flourishes where ignorance, stereotypes and prejudice abound.

In this toxic environment, what can we do to counter Islamophobia? How can we support Muslims? How can we promote a just and harmonious society where all citizens are given due respect?

Fact check: When you hear or read something, do not take it at face value. There are too many "fake news" and "alternative facts" being disseminated through media and gossip. Just because something is said or printed, repeatedly, it is not necessarily true. Do a fact check.

Mind your language: Do not use expressions such as "Islamic terrorism" or "Muslim terrorist", because they are oxymorons - a contradiction in terms - are offensive to Muslims, and spread a false impression of Islam.

Inform yourself: Make an effort to learn the basics of Islam from a reliable source. Do not rely solely on the newspapers, the TV, the internet or public discourse. Read a published book by a reputable scholar. We recommend *"Ten things everyone needs to know about Islam"* by Professor John Esposito as an authoritative, accessible and attractive account of the basics of Islam.

Meet a Muslim: The best way to learn about Islam is to meet a Muslim. When you meet face-to-face, when Islam is not just a media-generated amalgam of seemingly strange beliefs and practices, the proverbial "other", but has a name - Abidah, Fatima, Maha, Ibrahim, Ahmed, Muhammad - and a face, is someone you recognize as your "brother" and "sister", then the fears, stereotypes and prejudices simply fall away.

Challenge Stereotypes: When you hear racist, Islamophobic comments, whether it be around the water fountain at work, at the restaurant when dining out with friends, or around the kitchen table at home, challenge them: "that is not what I read ....", "that is not what I heard from ...." You may lose some friends in the process, but if they prefer ignorance and bigotry to truth and justice, they weren't worthy of your friendship anyway.

Respect Diversity: Avoid putting people into boxes. Avoid labels. Allow people to be themselves. There is no such thing as "the Muslim community". There are Muslim "communities", which are as linguistically, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse in practice and customs as any other group.

Reach Out to Others: When feeling under siege from the constant barrage of prejudice and overwhelmed by the seeming lack of any prospect of real change in society, resist the temptation to "circle the wagons". It is easy to stay at home, among your own, and bewail your fate, "they're all against us"; but it is hard and takes courage to keep on reaching out to others, building bridges not walls, promoting relations, working for the common good and building one society, but that is exactly what our religions challenge us to do, repeatedly, for as long as it takes.