



April 21, 2014

Alice M. Greenwald
Executive Vice President for Programs & Director of Memorial Museum
National September 11 Memorial & Museum
200 Liberty Street, 16th Floor
New York, NY 10281

Dear Ms. Greenwald:

From our 2002 founding, New York Disaster Interfaith Service's (NYDIS) federation of over sixty member faith communities have served the disaster human services needs of New York City. Although dozens of crises have impacted our City over the past thirteen years, NYDIS has held dear a unique long-term focus on caring for 9/11 victim families, and providing direct services to tens of thousands of survivors, residents and health-impacted recovery workers.

The invitation of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum to our Lower Manhattan Clergy Council and our long-standing partner, the Interfaith Center of New York, to serve as the Interfaith Advisory Group over the past ten years has been both an honor and an extraordinary responsibility. We were deeply moved by the design and opening of the inspiring Memorial. And, we solemnly celebrate the upcoming opening of the museum, and therefore the burial vault within. It will be a seminal event in our city's and nation's recovery.

Last November, when you and your colleagues first invited the Interfaith Advisory Group to tour the museum and give feedback on the program content and exhibits, we were deeply moved by the story-line, the thoughtful inclusion of the victims' life stories, the narrative of the day's events and the recovery efforts at Ground Zero. We also appreciated the attention given to the religious artifacts found onsite, and to the roles of religion and disaster chaplaincy.

If there was any area of concern about the content, it was that there was little reference to the long-term recovery work of faith-based organizations in rebuilding survivors' lives through disaster case management, emotional and spiritual care, and unmet needs assistance. As we all know, people, even those who may not see themselves as religious, often turn to religious leaders and faith communities in times of disaster. Very diverse faith communities and organizations, from Buddhist, to Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim, have played and continue to play a critical role in supporting long-term recovery.

NYDIS member organizations and city religious leaders were very aware that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, partnering with Muslim and Sikh organizations meant we were challenging a fear that arose after 9/11: that Islam as a religion was at fault or that many Muslims are possible terrorists. As you know, the Sikh community has also been targeted by backlash. Through interfaith partnerships in disaster response and recovery that include Muslims and Sikhs, NYDIS has been able to build trust across faith communities in a unique way. Over time, we have grown stronger in our commitment to not only help individuals cope and heal, but also, to moving the fabric of our society away from bias and backlash directed at Muslims, perceived Muslims, South Asians and Arabs. As such, it is very important to us that this interfaith story is captured in the Museum's exhibits and programs.

Nevertheless, we believe the exhibits and their narrative are superbly well-designed, generally inclusive of the faith-based short term disaster response, and deeply moving – with one rather significant exception, the documentary film “The Rise of al-Qaeda”. As you know, many members of the Interfaith Advisory Group have expressed reservations about the narrative script for the documentary. Following our group's request for a second viewing of the documentary and for a meeting with you, we expressed our concerns that, given the content of the video, museum visitors who do not have a very sophisticated understanding of the issues could easily come away equating al-Qaeda with Islam generally. We continue to posit that the video may very well leave viewers with the impression that all Muslims bear some collective guilt or responsibility for the actions of al-Qaeda, or even misinterpret its content to justify bigotry or even violence toward Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim (e.g., Sikhs). Equally troubling is Brian William's narrative juxtaposed to the English translations. All American sources, news quotations and narrative are recorded in “Media English”, whereas translations from Middle Eastern sources were recorded in English or broken English with a heavy Middle Eastern accent.

We would like you to know that concerns about language were voiced by Muslim community leaders and their allies to former NYPD Commissioner Kelly after the publication of the Report, “Radicalization in the West: The Home Grown Threat.” After a series of dialogues held with the former Commissioner, NYPD inserted a Statement of Clarification into the report (see p. 11 of the [Report: http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public_information/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public_information/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf)). In this clarification, the NYPD indicated that its “focus on al Qaeda inspired terrorism should not be mistaken for any implicit or explicit justification for racial, religious or ethnic profiling.”

The Museum has made written claims that “the documentary focuses on the emergence of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization and is not meant to be comprehensive about the long history of Islam and its relationship with the West.” It is important to note, that we also are committed to breaking down the false dichotomy of “Islam and the West.” Like Christianity, Islam has its roots in the Middle East, yet it is a global faith community. Islam is very much a part of the fabric of the West, dating back to the Enlightenment. Islam in America is not simply a religion of immigrants, as implied by the dichotomy. Indeed, African Americans make up a significant proportion of the American Muslim population. Islam has a rich history even here in New York City. The World Trade Center site itself is built atop a neighborhood formerly called Little Syria that had a small population of Arab Muslims. And, there have been Mosques and Muslims in this city since it was a Dutch colony.

Given our concerns and our stakeholder interest in the success of the Museum as educational institution, we therefore we are now taking the following steps:

- 1) NYDIS and the Interfaith Center of New York now formally join the Interfaith Advisory Group to register concern about the documentary narrative and request that it be re-edited prior to the opening of the museum. We remind you that previous viewers, not only our group, have questioned its content (as indicated on the website summary of your Conversation series even in June 2013). If generalized labels are needed, we suggest using specific terms such as “Al Qaeda-inspired terrorism,” and that viewers are given a more comprehensive definition of “jihad.”

2) If the video itself cannot be edited, we request that at minimum a disclaimer or statement of clarification be included at the beginning of the video or posted prominently at the site of the video. Following the example of the NYPD, we ask you to consider a statement such as: "This video in no way intends to imply that the vast majority of Muslims agree with or support the attacks perpetrated by the members of al-Qaeda. Most Muslim leaders and Muslim organizations worldwide have disavowed the ideology and actions of Al Qaeda. The Museum's documentation of Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism should not be mistaken for any implicit or explicit justification for racial, religious or ethnic profiling."

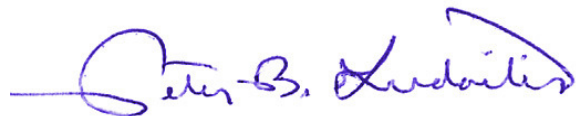
3) We are sharing this letter with you, our members, the City's most senior religious leaders and their national governing bodies – as well as a broad group of local and national victim families advocates and Muslim community civil rights groups so that people understand our concerns.

4) We have begun to be interviewed by the Media and other advocacy groups as further news of inaccurate vocabulary in other Museum content, independent of our communication with you, has garnered the attention of the Media as well as religious and civil rights advocates.

We want to be clear that we remain committed to the overall mission of both the memorial and museum, and we continue to seek strategic opportunities to engage and participate in future programs offered to families, the public and other inquires.

We look forward to your response.

Faithfully,



Peter B. Gudaitis, M.Div.
Chief Response Officer
New York Disaster Interfaith Services



The Rev. Chloe Breyer
Executive Director
The Interfaith Center of New York

On behalf of our colleagues on the Interfaith Advisory Group in attendance:

The Rev. Elise Brown
Shaikh Imam Mostafa Elazabawy
Rabbi Jonathan Glass
Ms. Maggie Jarry
Father Kevin Madigan

Brother Sayeed Chawdhury
Dr. Sarah Sayeed
The Rev. Ann Tiemeyer
The Rev. Ruth Yoder Wenger