



Bishop Christopher meets worshippers at Portsmouth's Jami Mosque, including (right) the imam, Mohammad Muhi Uddin

# Formal prayer in city's biggest mosque

## Bishop reassures Muslim worshippers

THE bishop visited Portsmouth's largest mosque to express solidarity with local Muslims in the wake of the Spanish terror attacks.

Bishop Christopher reassured hundreds of worshippers in the city's Jami Mosque of his conviction that those who claimed to kill in the name of Islam were not Islamic. He reaffirmed his commitment that terrorist acts would not divide people of faith.

His visit to Friday Prayers had been organised weeks beforehand, but events in Barcelona and Cambrils the previous day had made his visit highly relevant.

Many of the worshippers present shook his hand afterwards and thanked him for coming.

Bishop Christopher said: "We meet once again in the shadow of murderous events. The brutal killings in Barcelona and the apparent thwarting of a further attack in Cambrils are further examples of indiscriminate terror.

"Confronted again by actions of people who murder and maim in Manchester or Paris, on London Bridge or Westminster, in Aleppo or Finsbury Park it is appropriate for us, as people of God, to reaffirm our commitment to what builds community and unites us, of faith or indeed of none, in contrast to the actions and voices of those few who would divide us.

"I am here today to say that fear and hatred will not defeat the values we share. Those who died and those injured were denied the respect, dignity and sanctity of life which we believe is God given.

"Emphasis on what divides may perhaps be inevitable and understandable in reaction to brutal acts as people search for an



Bishop Christopher speaks in Portsmouth's Jami Mosque

explanation. It is claimed that the actions of perpetrators have been inspired and orchestrated by IS. It is clear to me that IS is not Islamic; by using Islamic in its name it misuses your faith.

"Actions like those we saw yesterday do not honour the tenets and doctrines of faith, and are not representative of Muslims, and no motivation can justify these murderous acts.

"We proclaim that peace and justice are God-given. There is nothing peaceful in indiscriminate slaughter, nothing just about random acts of terrorism.

"I come today to say that clearly and publicly, and to express solidarity and unity within our distinctive beliefs and faiths. Division and mistrust are not the way forward we choose in this country and in this city or between us.

"We unite in prayer for those injured, for their families and friends, for those bereaved and who mourn.

"We give thanks to God for the lives of those brutally killed, and for the courage and skill of those who brought support and care. We seek to build and grow friendships and relationships under God – not to preach hatred and violence – and so to serve our community and country as well as God."

Bishop Christopher, his acting chaplain Canon David Isaac and interfaith adviser the Rev Andy Marshall, were welcomed by the imam, Muhammad Muhi Uddin, and others from the mosque committee.

The bishop previously visited the Al Mahdi Mosque near Fareham in March in the wake of Westminster terror attack.

**A**s the formal Arabic prayers are said, hundreds of men kneel with their foreheads touching the floor.

The imam leads the congregation in reciting the traditional prayers as they face Mecca and bow to Allah on the carpeted floor.

This is Friday Prayers at the Jami Mosque, the largest mosque in Portsmouth, which is a high-profile building at the junction of Winston Churchill Avenue and Victoria Road North. Friday is the special day of the week when Muslims are expected to gather to pray together.

Many of Portsmouth's Sunni Muslim population come from Bangladesh, so Friday Prayers begin with the imam, Mohammad Muhi Uddin, preaching in Bengali.

A handful of worshippers for whom Bengali is their most comfortable language are already there. Others start to drift in as the imam switches to English and preaches the same text in English, urging worshippers to take care of their neighbours.

As worshippers enter the mosque, they remove their shoes and wash themselves as a mark of purification before entering the prayer hall itself. They find a spot on the carpet, close their eyes and say a brief initial prayer which involves raising their hands, kneeling and bowing. Then they sit on the floor to listen to the imam. A handful of older men are given chairs.

In this mosque, Muslim women attending Friday Prayers will be listening in another room to the imam, whose words are conveyed via a PA system. Islamic teaching forbids men and women to worship side by side in a mixed congregation, but they are allowed to pray in the same space or hall.

The building which is now Portsmouth's Jami Mosque used to be a cinema and then a bingo hall before it was bought by the mosque committee around 15 years ago. The prayer hall is split into three levels, with the imam sitting on a chair on the highest level.

Above him, the old cinema balcony and chairs are still visible, as is the ornate



Worshippers at Portsmouth's Jami Mosque during Friday Prayers

plasterwork and pillars that would have framed the cinema screen.

Many of the men are wearing a round skullcap called a kufi or a topi, and a loose-fitting styled top often referred to a Punjabi or a shalwar kameez. Others are in t-shirts and jeans. Some have prayer beads, which they use to keep count as they recite their prayers. Worshippers listen to the imam deliver the same sermon again in Arabic and to recitations from the Qu'ran before the formal prayers begin.

At this point, the men all shuffle towards the front, each taking one of the prayer spaces that are designed into the carpet. Filling all the available spaces shows that the congregation is one community, and that there is no hierarchy when facing Allah.

The formal prayers themselves take only a matter of minutes. Worshippers then greet each other, drop some money into plastic buckets at the end of each row, and make their way home or back to work.

This communal prayer will be just one of the five times they pray each day. At home or at work, they'll stretch their prayer mats out facing Mecca and say their prayers individually or in congregation. They may also say personal

prayers at other times of the day.

Daily prayer is just one of the five pillars of Islam, which also includes a declaration of faith in Allah; a commitment to charitable giving; ritual fasting, including during the month of Ramadan; and the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, which each Muslim must do once in their lifetime, if they can afford to do so.

They also believe that the Qu'ran was revealed directly by Allah to the prophet Mohammed. Verses are recited in classical Arabic, as any translation is thought to be a deviation from the original text. Abraham, Moses and Jesus are thought to be prophets.

Non-Muslims are welcome to observe Friday Prayers at Portsmouth's Jami Mosque. Find out more at [www.portsmouthjamimosque.com](http://www.portsmouthjamimosque.com)

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