

## GORDON

# Reaching out for tolerance

Uniting Church 'swamped with love' then spammed with hate, says minister



The Grand Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohamed (left), with the Rev Michael Barnes (right) at Gordon Uniting Church last weekend.



## Kenji Sato

GORDON Uniting Church was "swamped with love and friendship" last Sunday when it invited the Grand Mufti of Australia and other Muslims to attend its service for the church's Interfaith Month.

But the church, and its minister the Rev Michael Barnes, found itself spammed by hate mail and anti-Islamic Facebook comments over the event.

"Allowing the evil moslems (sic) into the house of god shows you are not in contact with god," one Facebook poster wrote.

Mr Barnes said that he was saddened but not surprised by the response.

"The hate mail just makes us more determined to continue welcoming, building bridges, and supporting our Muslim neighbours," he told the *North Shore Times*.

Mr Barnes said he was motivated by Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to the Senate, in which she said that Australia was "in danger of being swamped by Muslims."

"In my reflection on Sunday morning I referred to her speech but reframed it. I said I was delighted to be swamped by Muslims. Bring it on," he said, adding that interfaith dialogue was necessary to combat the hate.

"I think it's fear that's driving all this hate. I think

it's lack of engagement with human people who are Muslim. It's fear of those who are different. And the tragedy is that it's completely unnecessary. More than that, it's hurtful and it impacts on the lives of Muslims."

"We think we've got something important to contribute. You can engage people like this and what you discover is not that you need to be afraid but you can benefit and enjoy friendship."

Most of the hate comments on Facebook targeted the Grand Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, who was a guest speaker at the church last Sunday.

Dr Ibrahim spoke on the theme "How does each religion welcome and embrace the outsider?"

"It makes me very happy to be in gatherings like this where we share, because we are all children of the one God and therefore our message is unified," Dr Ibrahim told the congregation on Sunday, before going on to quote the Prophet Muhammad: "You shall not enter paradise unless you truly love one another".

Dr Ibrahim spoke alongside Mona Abdelraheem, who spoke on behalf of young Muslims.

The Gordon Uniting Church holds interfaith services every Sunday throughout September, which they designate as Interfaith Month.