

Off-the-wall approach to God

Andrew Priestley, *The Australian*, 28 June 2011



Muslim activist Diaan Mohamed, left, and the Reverend Ian Powell meet at Sydney's Lakemba mosque to discuss religious beliefs. Picture: Jeremy Piper Source: The Australian

AFTER communicating through billboards and signs on buses around Sydney, Reverend Ian Powell and Islamic activist Diaan Mohamed will now sit down together for a quiet word.

The two have been communicating by billboard since early May, when Mr Mohamed put up signs reading, "Jesus: a prophet of Islam" around the city.

The move stirred controversy, but Mr Powell decided to reply with his own sign on Sydney's M4, which read, "Hey Aussie Muslims, glad you want to talk about Jesus. Love to chat more."

The two will be part of a panel discussion on extremism and religion at Sydney's Angel Place tomorrow.

It will be their first public appearance together.

Mr Powell said he was pleased their chat was moving into a face-to-face discussion. "I did hope it wouldn't stay at the level of billboards. Billboards are blunt instruments," he said.

He hoped the move would encourage discussion between people of both religions to generate a better understanding of one another. "It feels as if we're arriving at the hopeful destination."

Mr Mohamed said he had set out with his billboard campaign to help foster a better understanding and "find commonality" between Christianity and Islam. He was thrilled Mr Powell had responded.

"It was great," he said.

"I welcome and encourage it."

In putting up the signs and founding a website called mypeace.com.au, Mr Mohamed wanted to generate a better understanding of Islam.

"(I hope) that any normal Joe Blow understands Muslims and they're not afraid of Islam," he said. "When you demystify it, you understand it. It creates greater tolerance, which is something very important to us."

He wanted people to see that Jesus -- who in the Koran and Islamic teaching is called one of a number of prophets -- was held to be a holy man by both Christians and Muslims.

It was vital that people of religion be engaged in debate, Mr Powell said. "God gives us a brain that he expects us to use."

The panel will run at the Angel Place Office Tower, 123 Pitt St, 29 June from 1.10pm