

MODERN AND ANCIENT MIX IN WEST VIRGINIA RAMADAN OBSERVANCE

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"Requite evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend."

-- From the chapter "Revelations Well Expounded" in the Koran

About the year 610 A.D., the Angel Gabriel awakened Muhammad and told him "Recite!" Thus began, one night in Ramadan, the writings now collected in the Koran.

The annual observance started this year in late December and ran to Jan. 29. The month of fasting is over when a reliable observer can see the new moon. So the exact conclusion to Ramadan must wait for a sighting; weather can interfere with the sighting.

Modern Muslims can turn to the Internet or NASA to help them find out when to break the fast they celebrate during the month of Ramadan.

Hussein Elkhansa is an engineer for the state, and he writes for the newsletter for the West Virginia Association of the Islamic Community.

Elkhansa said members of his community can turn to their computers to get information about the sighting or contact the Islamic center in Washington.

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims try to draw even closer to God with special acts of charity, prayers and fasting. At sunset, adult Muslims break the day's fast with a light meal.

"You do not eat like a pig. You eat just enough to nourish yourself. God does not want us to suffer," Elkhansa explained.

Children, those who are sick and the old are not required to fast.

As they fast, Muslims think about poor people who must cope with food shortages daily.

Elkhansa, who has worked during this time, said it is not as hard to fast as some might think. During this time, Muslims are trying to get closer to God, and the fasting is part of that discipline.

Ramadan is also a time to try to break bad habits. For example, Muslims must refrain from smoking during the fasting period. If they can go 30 days without smoking, many people will find that they have broken the unhealthy habit.

It is also a time to try to rid oneself of bad spiritual habits, Elkhansa said. "You must be kind and be humble. If you are arrogant, you must concentrate on getting rid of that."

During this month, Muslims also try to achieve a deeper spirituality. But if they have hurt others, they must also seek forgiveness from the people they have hurt. "You do not want to go to sleep with that anger. You cannot guarantee that you will wake up tomorrow."

By seeking the forgiveness of others for wrongs, Elkhansa said, people can become aware of God's ability to forgive. "It helps you to understand God's forgiveness better when you forgive your brother," he said. "This is also called the month of mercy."

Also during Ramadan, Muslims are required to do special acts of kindness. But Elkhansa said these deeds are not to be publicized. "They are between you and Almighty God."

When they break their fast and mark the end of Ramadan with a great feast, the members of the Muslim community will bring all kinds of food to the Islamic center. The children will feast on pizza.

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