

## **MATTERS OF FAITH MUSLIMS PAUSE FOR RAMADAN**

*Publication: THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE*

*Published: 01/02/1999*

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For Christians, who every December give a polite nod to the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, it may be time to notice the new kid on the block and a new set of holy days.

The holiday season is far from over for Muslims, who are nearly midway into their holy month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is a 30-day period when Muslims neither eat nor drink from dawn to dusk. The holiday, the purpose of which is to teach the faithful self-restraint, rotates throughout the year on the Islamic uncorrected lunar calendar. When it falls in December and January, as it does this year, the fasting faithful-healthy adults and females ages 9 and up and males 14 and up - endure the least hardships.

About 200 Islamic families are on the state registry of the Islamic Association, says Mahmoud Shahbandy, the group's Iranian-born president. They have roots in India, Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Bosnia. Most live in the Kanawha Valley, where Muslims have had a growing presence over the last half-century.

"Every year we have a few families adding to the community, a few from overseas, most from other states," Shahbandy says.

In the 1970s, Muslim leaders bought an old church in Nitro and transformed it into the first local mosque. The Islamic Association moved to a new, bigger mosque in South Charleston in 1988. Then-Gov. Gaston Caperton made an appearance at the official dedication the next year.

"Even now we don't have the space we need to feed everyone on a big holy day like Eid Ul-fitr [the celebration marking the end of Ramadan, which this year falls on Jan. 19], Shahbandy says.

The upstairs prayer hall no longer looks so roomy, Shahbandy says. "Eventually, in five years, we'll need to expand. We have the space. It depends on how fast we're growing."

The Islamic population in America now numbers 7 million, putting it ahead of Judaism as the nation's second-ranking religion. "If we considered all the nonpracticing Muslims in this country, we'd have 15 million."

Moslems still maintain a relatively low profile in Charleston. "To an extent it's our fault," Shahbandy says. "We don't do enough public relations. We need to invite more people to the mosque to see what Islam can offer them and offer society."