

MOSQUE FREQUENT TARGET OF VANDALS

Other churches in area not damaged, FBI says

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Even though South Charleston's Islamic Center has been open since 1989, some members say they still don't feel like part of the community.

Since its opening, the mosque -- located at the corner of Valley Drive and Kanawha Turnpike -- frequently has been a target of vandals.

"Even before we opened, we had problems," said Mark Shahbandy, president of the Islamic Association of West Virginia. "We had a break-in while construction was still going on."

A string of acts such as broken windows, graffiti and destruction of property has caused the center to spend thousands of dollars on repairs. Several years ago, Shahbandy said, a second-floor window was shot out while people were in the center.

"I reported that to the South Charleston Police Department," he said. "Every time something has happened, I have reported it to them."

Members went to a South Charleston Council meeting last month to speak about the vandalism problems at the mosque.

The last incident was in November when several satanic phrases were spray painted on the outside of the center. Shahbandy reported the incident to South Charleston Police and the FBI.

FBI Special Agent Steven Viglianco said his local office was contacted about the graffiti, and it still is under investigation.

"We are investigating it as a civil rights violation and a religious discrimination matter," Viglianco said "We are assuming that the center was targeted because it was an Islamic mosque."

Viglianco added that he believes the crime specifically targeted the mosque because no other incidents of vandalism were reported by other churches in the area.

South Charleston Police Detective J.A. Compton said his department does not consider the incident anything major, and it is being investigated as a simple case of vandalism.

Viglianco and Compton said the two departments are cooperating in the case.

"It's tough to solve these types of acts," Viglianco said. "We have no leads at this time."

Shahbandy said he and other center members want residents of South Charleston and surrounding cities to visit the mosque so they can find out what Islam is all about.

"Islam is not that different from Christianity or Judaism," Shahbandy said. "If people would take time to learn about us, then they would see that we have many things in common."

Center member Abraham Falsafi agrees. He thinks the vandals are young people from the surrounding area.

"I can't see someone getting in their car and driving here just to do this," Falsafi said. "I think it is young people from somewhere near by."

The center serves as a place of worship for more than 200 families in the area. There is some type of Islamic Center in every major city in West Virginia including Beckley and Huntington. Shahbandy said Muslim residents of Morgantown are in the process of building a center.

The Muslims follow the teachings of a book known as the Koran. They believe the author of the Koran was the prophet Muhammad. The Koran also mentions many familiar Christian and Jewish prophets. The Koran contains 114 chapters called Surah, which Muslims believe is a map for living according to God's will.

"People don't know, but the Koran mentions Jesus more than it does Muhammad," Shahbandy said.

Members of the center will continue to reach out to the community by inviting residents to join them on Fridays and Sundays. Falsafi said anyone is welcome to come and see what the center is all about.

"Many people see the center and wonder what goes on in here," Shahbandy said. "They should come and find out what we do."

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Correction

Mark Shahbandy of the Islamic Association of West Virginia said that according to Islamic belief, the Koran was dictated to Muhammad from God through the angel Gabriel. The origin of the Koran was misstated in a Daily Mail story Friday about the Islamic Center in South Charleston.

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