

## **AREA BELIEVERS HOPING THEY CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES**

Interfaith series putting religions in the spotlight

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There is one God.

It is important to pray, help the needy, and strive for high moral standards.

These are elements of Islam.

"If you know each other's beliefs, you know we all believe in one God," said Ruby Abdulla as she took a visitor on a tour of the Islamic Center in South Charleston. "There is only one God."

Studying different faiths can create a common bond as we understand differences and celebrate similarities, she said.

The Kanawha Valley Interfaith Council is sponsoring an ongoing series entitled "Interfaith Growing -- Growing in Unity by Understanding Diversity." Each month, a different faith group will sponsor an evening of information. At each site will be a tour of the place of worship as well as a lecture about holy books, important writings, rituals and ceremonies.

Each session will be free and open to the public. Discussion and questions are welcome.

The first session is on Islam and is set for 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesday at the Islamic Center of West Virginia, 1 Valley Drive, South Charleston.

The word Islam signifies peace and submission to the will of God (Allah).

Followers honor the prophet Muhammad but do not worship him. It is believed the word of God was revealed to Muhammad by angel Gabriel 1400 years ago. Muhammad relayed the message to scribes who recorded the book of Quran (Koran). This holy book includes laws for serving God as well as rules for living and conducting business.

On Tuesday, visitors may see the mosque and hear an overview of Islam. One of the speakers will be Dr. Syed S. Ashraf, who was born in India, grew up in Connecticut, and is now serving a residency in internal medicine at Charleston Area Medical Center.

Ashraf sees the upcoming informative session as an opportunity to educate the public about his faith. There are few such occasions, he pointed out, and media reports can be quite negative.

"We tend to fear things we see from a distance," he said. "This is to bridge that gap."

The Islam community includes about 150 families throughout the area and more throughout the state, Abdulla said.

"The (interfaith) series is important because we live here and are part of the community of Charleston," said Abdulla, a realtor and a member of the Kanawha Valley Interfaith Council. "We have friends and socialize with different people. People have to know who we are, where we come from and how we relate to Christianity."

Understanding each other's faiths promotes respect and tolerance, she said. While there are differences among various religions, there are also similarities, she said.

"Islam is not a new religion," she said.

A pamphlet by Abdul Jalil, chairman of Al-Huda Islamic Center in Georgia, says Islam's vision of society is in essence no different from any other monotheistic religion.

"This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity which share with Islam the direct spiritual lineage of the prophet Abraham," Jalil writes. "Islam affirms the divinely ordained missions of the Prophet Moses, through whom God revealed the sacred scripture called the Torah, and of the Prophet Jesus, through whom God revealed the scripture known as the Gospel. The message of Islam in essence is the same as that which God revealed to all his prophets and messengers."

Islam teaches that human diversity shows that God wants people to compete with each other in goodness, Jalil says.

It is believed there is an afterlife and as the judge of human righteousness, God punishes or rewards in this life or the hereafter.

Righteousness means helping the needy, praying, keeping one's word, and being patient during stressful times.

Muslims believe praying five times a day helps adhere to the path of righteousness.

Fasting is observed throughout daylight hours of the Islamic month of Ramadan, during which time there is to be abstinence from eating, drinking, smoking and marital intercourse. They believe in sharing with the poor. If personal circumstances permit, all Muslims once in their lifetime are to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Muslims throughout the world are to try to learn Arabic in order to read the Quran in its official language. There are about 1 billion Muslims in the world. They may be Arabs, Turks, Persians, Indians, Pakistanis, Malaysians, Indonesians, Europeans, Africans, Americans, Chinese or other nationalities.

In fact, Ashraf pointed out the local Islam community consists of a multicultural group of people.

"It is an international gathering," he said.

And on Tuesday it will be an interdenominational gathering when people meet at the Islamic Center of West Virginia to learn more about the Islam faith.

To reach the center from Charleston take the Montrose interstate exit, go left and then turn right onto Kanawha Turnpike. When the road splits, turn left on Valley Drive. The center's telephone number is 744-1031.

Other interfaith sessions scheduled so far include Hinduism on Oct. 17 at the India Center, and the Jewish faith on Nov. 21 at the Congregation B'Nai Israel.

Religious leaders who are interested in sponsoring an evening may send a written request on letterhead to Dr. Linda Geronilla, 92 Cook Drive, Charleston, WV 25314.