

MORE MUSLIMS ANSWERING THE CALL TO PRAYER IN W.VA.

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A local mosque reports a trend similar to the one happening nationwide and one that all churches would like to see - booming attendance.

No one knows how many Muslims there are in America, much less in West Virginia, but Dr. Raheel Khan, an executive committee member of the Islamic Center of West Virginia in South Charleston, reports that the number of families associating with the mosque has more than tripled in the last 10 years. Furthermore, members of the mosque are attending services more frequently, he said.

A national study released last month by the Hartford (Conn.) Seminary, found that 2 million Muslims attend 1,209 mosques nationwide. The number of mosques has grown 25 percent from 1996.

There are four mosques in West Virginia. They are in South Charleston, Beckley, Princeton and Huntington, Khan said.

The one in South Charleston has grown so much that plans for expansion are underway, Khan said. The mosque plans to double its size and construction may begin in a few months.

The number of people attending the weekly service has tripled to 100, Khan said.

"There are some people who are converting to Islam, but the majority of people who are coming now were not coming regularly before. Now people are coming more frequently," Khan said.

He attributes the increase to people's need for social support groups and parents' desire to impart their religious beliefs to their children.

"It provides a social support system. As the kids are growing up, people feel the need to get the next generation accustomed to the religion," he said.

Another thing that may help is views about Islam are beginning to change, he said.

"I think there are a lot of misconceptions. We have to counter the massive attacks by the media. We are always the bad guys. It used to be Russians, now it is (people who are) Middle Eastern."

"(People) take one fraction of the society and try to extrapolate it to the entire community," he said.

Khan attributes the change, in part, to the mosque's participation in interfaith groups. "It is not to convert them, but to enhance the understanding of Muslims and Islam," he said.

One of the difficult things about being a Muslim is that in America everyone works on Friday. In Islam the holy day is Friday instead of Sunday as it is in Christianity.

"It is usually not practical for everyone to attend. Friday is not a holiday here," Khan said.

The Islamic Center still holds traditional Friday prayer, but has also added a sort of Sunday school for children. The parents also gather on Sunday and may pray, but there is no structured program for them on that day.