

## **BELIEF DIFFERENCES MINOR, STATE ISLAMIC LEADER SAYS**

*Publication: SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL*

*Published: 09/08/2002*

*Byline: SUSAN WILLIAMS, Staff Writer*

The new spiritual leader of the state Islamic Association sees himself as a bridge builder. After the tragedies of Sept. 11, he sees that role as more important than ever.

Mohammad Jamal Daoudi is the new imam, or spiritual leader, of the Islamic Association of West Virginia, and the first imam to work in the new Islamic Center in South Charleston. He took his new job in March.

Born in Damascus, Syria, Daoudi earned a bachelor's degree in Islamic law before he ever felt led to become an imam. "I wanted to be well- educated regarding my religion. I thought I could invest that knowledge in a way to help others. The more you know, the better citizen you can become."

He describes himself as a man with "an open heart and an open mind." He said God led him onto his path to become a spiritual leader and to come to the United States.

In all of his studies, he said, "I can never find violence in my religion. 'Peace is one of the beautiful names of God.'"

If someone is selecting passages from the Quran and using them to justify violence, that person is misusing religion, he said.

"Some people misquote chapters from the Bible. They take it out of context. Every group has good and bad in it.

"I have a mission. I have a beautiful message to impart. The Islamic community is like other communities," he said.

He points out that Abraham, the patriarch who can be found in the Old Testament, in the pages of the Torah and in the Quran, is the father of three major religions.

Abraham's wife, Sarah, thought she would have no children, so she urged Abraham to have a child by Sarah's "handmaiden," Hagar. Muslims trace their line through Abraham's first son, Ismael.

Sarah and Abraham went on to have a son of their own, Isaac. Jewish people trace their ancestry through Isaac, and Christians pick up the thread there, too.

"We are cousins," Daoudi said.

"First, I want to work with my Muslim community to take care of their needs," Daoudi said. "I want to help them to live their lives in a successful way. Then I want to help the larger community to see us as good citizens. I want to build bridges based on understanding, tolerance, knowledge and brotherhood."

Daoudi believes religious leaders in each faith must take their jobs seriously. "It is the responsibility of the clergy to be good teachers. You harvest what you sow. We have too many beautiful things in common that we believe in. The others are minor differences.

"If Moses and Jesus and Mohammed were all in the same room, they would not be fighting.

"If every religious leader was doing a good job, you would not have Christians blowing up abortion clinics or Jews trying to blow up mosques.

“Yes, you have bad Muslims, you have bad Christians, you have bad Jews. But we can all come together out of respect for God. We cannot have peace in the world until we have peace within ourselves and connect to God.

“It’s a big challenge, especially after Sept. 11, to get this message across. But we are American citizens. We are living in this country. I want people to know us for the positive things we do. Most Muslims are rational people.”

He pointed out that in his Islamic center, approximately 70 percent of his members are doctors.

“We are contributing to society. We want to continue to be good citizens.”

Last September, Daoudi lived in California. He also worked as an interfaith chaplain in a hospital. Last Sept. 12, at his Islamic center in California, he said he is happy to report that of the 24 calls they received that day, 22 were encouraging.

One of his reasons for wanting to come to America, he said, is to break stereotypes. “I want to teach about the real spirit of Islam. In America, people can reach their full potential as human beings and enjoy freedom and the advantages of the good life.”

In his family, Daoudi, who is 37, is the youngest of three brothers. When he first came to the United States, he went to where a brother lived in Texas. He has also been in Chicago a short time, so he has seen widely varied parts of the United States.

Daoudi and his wife have three children.

As a spiritual leader, an imam leads daily prayers, counsels people, performs weddings and funerals, and represents his community as a whole. He is participating in two interfaith services next week, one on Tuesday at the University of Charleston and one Wednesday at the state Capitol with Gov. Bob Wise.

When he is called before God in the final judgment, Daoudi said he knows God will ask him, “How did you do with this trust I gave you to lead this community?”

“I still have a big hope that in my job I can educate people about the true meaning of Islam. I have a simple message to have a good relationship between the Creator and the created. If we base all of our relationships on respect and love, that is more important than any other obligation.”