

BRIDGING TRADITIONS DURING RAMADAN, MOSQUE FOCUSES ON RELIGION TO CLOSE GAPS OF CULTURALLY DIVERSE CONGREGATIONS

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Mahmood Jawaid has moved frequently for his career.

The engineer for Dow Chemical has lived in very small towns in Pennsylvania and New York, and most recently in Houston, with its population of 2 million.

Almost a month ago, Jawaid's family moved to West Virginia so Jawaid could work at Dow in South Charleston.

He likes West Virginia. The weather is more comfortable than Houston. The people, both at the mosque and non-Muslims in his neighborhood, are friendly.

Jawaid said he is fortunate to move to Charleston during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The holiday began Oct. 15, and continues through Nov. 13.

Usually, Jawaid would meet a few people at the Islamic Center, the mosque's "regulars." But during Ramadan, the Islamic Center holds special break-fast dinners after dusk on the weekends, and special prayers every day.

Imam Jamal Daoudi, the spiritual leader for the Islamic Center's congregation, said Ramadan is one of Islam's most important holidays. "If I had to choose one word to describe Ramadan, it would be peaceful," he said.

During Ramadan, Muslims get up before dawn, and eat a light break-fast. They fast all day until after sunset. Fasting, Daoudi said, cleanses the body and allows Muslims to focus on worship. They believe it helps bring them closer to God.

The Islamic Center holds breakfast dinners on the weekends. Non-Muslims are also invited to the dinners.

Jawaid usually goes to the mosque after work, to hear prayers reserved for the holiday. Daoudi breaks the Quran into 30 sections, and reads a part each night over the month. Because Jawaid has to work early, he usually goes home by 10:30 p.m., but the prayers can continue later into the evening.

Jawaid's family is one of several that have recently joined the Islamic Center in South Charleston. Daoudi said his congregation is growing by a few families every year.

The mosque has plans to add on to their building off Montrose Drive. Construction could start early next year.

The congregation is also becoming more diverse. Daoudi recently counted 15 nationalities represented at his mosque.

Most new members are like Jawaid, Daoudi said — U.S. citizens who have moved to West Virginia for their profession, to work as doctors, teachers and engineers. The families learn about the jobs through the Internet, and through family members who already live here.

About 60 percent of Daoudi's congregation come from Indo-Pakistani backgrounds, and the remainder have a Middle Eastern heritage.

“They all come with these different packages of traditions of their culture mixed with the teaching of the religion,” he said. “I try to focus on the faith, rather than the culture. For me, it is a challenge.”

Jawaid, whose family is from Pakistan, also said Daoudi and others at the Islamic Center emphasize what is similar between people of Muslim faiths who come from different countries. “When the community is too large, they tend to emphasize what is different rather than what is common,” he said.

At prayers last Friday, Daoudi, who is from Syria, wore clothing familiar to the Pakistani tradition, to make his congregation's Indo-Pakistani members feel welcome. He keeps more traditional clothing from other countries hanging in the corner of his office.

Daoudi also pointed out his beard. In the Middle East, Muslim men tend to grow their beards long. But Daoudi said he keeps his trimmed short, to make non-Muslims feel more comfortable.

“I am not the one who is so attached, so close to my culture. I will go, I will do that,” he said. “By being patient with the congregation, and teaching the openness of Islam, we are reducing that gap of culture and tradition.”

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