

LEADER OF ISLAMIC CENTER TO FOSTER EDUCATION

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The new leader of the Islamic Center of West Virginia doesn't see his role as leading others to Islam, but rather just letting them know more about it.

"I never thought my job was to convert others, just to deliver the message," said Mohammad Jamal Daoudi, the first imam, or leader, the center has had in 10 years. "It's up to people to choose."

Islam doesn't have a hierarchical system that demands a leader in each mosque, Daoudi said. Since 1989, committees have made decisions at the mosque in South Charleston.

Now that there is an imam, his duties are similar to those of a priest or a pastor, his Christian counterparts.

He is spiritually responsible for those who attend the place of worship. He leads the prayers, sets a good example and works with the community, he said.

Daoudi has been in the United States for six years. He came to California from his home in Syria to work as an Imam at the Islamic Center of North Valley, which is where he was working until he came to Charleston.

While in California he participated in a number of interfaith activities. He said he would like to do that here as well.

Though he interviewed for positions as an imam in five states, he felt most comfortable in West Virginia, even though it is very different from Syria and California.

"West Virginia is not exposed to many foreigners," he said. "I hope they will be accepting. It seems to me that I have a great potential as a leader in this community."

The three things he most wants to stress during his time as imam are knowledge, cooperation and understanding.

"I believe the more the Muslim families are educated in the real Islam, the better citizens they are in the larger community," he said.

"It's going to take a while, but by spreading that knowledge, by bringing everyone to one level, they can reflect one feature of the community," he said. "Get closer to the true Islam that teaches brotherhood and sisterhood."

He said interfaith activities will assist the relationships with the mosque and other churches and he hopes that having an imam will help strengthen the ties between those who attend the mosque.

"There is the potential to work together and create a wonderful community," he said.

Islam is the most diverse community among the minority communities, Daoudi said, and because of this its followers come from many backgrounds, many countries and with many different ways of doing things.

This was evidenced during February's Eid Al-Adha, the second biggest celebration of the year for Muslims, when the women at the Islamic Center were dressed in many different ways.

Some women wore short sleeve shirts and see-through head coverings. Others were draped in opaque cloth from head to toe.

He said the differences in dress aren't as marked as the differences in the ways people from different cultures interact with the imam.

He said many of them carry "baggage" and pre-conceived ideas from experiences with imams in their own countries.

One thing that will happen during his watch is an expansion of the mosque. The expansion, which will take several years, will allow for a larger sanctuary and a multipurpose room that can be used for children to participate in activities.

"We want to enhance their relationship with the mosque," he said.

He said he also wants to enhance the relationship between the mosque and the larger community.

"This is my ideology about the non-Muslim community: I think we have more in common than to differ about," he said.

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