

LOCAL MUSLIMS OBSERVE END OF RAMADAN

Hundreds gather to pray and feast as holy month ends

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Hundreds gathered at the Islamic Center to kneel, pray and feast as the holy month of Ramadan came to an end.

"This is one of the biggest celebrations," said Mohamad Jamal Doudi, Imam (Muslim spiritual leader).

Celebrants came from Charleston and surrounding areas as well as Huntington and Beckley to the South Charleston mosque on Friday for the Eid ul-Fitr, the feast to end the fast observed by more than one billion Muslims worldwide. The 30-day fast began Nov. 6 and ended Dec. 5. During the past month, Muslims have taken no food or water during daylight hours.

"The purpose of the fast is to build spirituality," said Doudi, who added it also helps identify with the feelings of the hungry.

He said those excused from the fast include people who are sick or traveling and women who are pregnant or nursing. These people may make up their days after Ramadan or pay a ransom to the poor.

The fast marks the month when the Quran was to have been revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Allah (the name of God in Arabic) commanded the fast in the Quran. The holy book contains laws for serving God as well as rules for living and conducting business. The month of Ramadan is the holiest in the Islamic lunar calendar. Fasting to Muslims is defined as abstaining from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse from dawn until sunset.

"We are told by our prophet Muhammad that the scripture of Abraham was revealed on the first night of Ramadan, the Torah of Moses was revealed on the sixth of it, the gospel of Jesus was revealed at the 13th and the Quran of Muhammad was revealed on the 24th," Doudi said.

The fast as well as the feast that ends it are major signs of unity among Muslims.

Eid ul-Fitr is celebrated three days in Muslim countries as a religious holiday but only one here because it is a working day, he said.

The event began at 10:30 a.m. on Friday at the Islamic Center with prayer and a talk by the Imam.

Everyone shed their shoes before entering the holy prayer room. Women with covered heads sat on the floor in the back of the room. The men, some of whom had their heads covered, were in the front. Several children gathered in the center of the room with the boys in front of the girls.

The lecture, delivered in Arabic and English, touched upon forgiveness, grace and overcoming egoism. He called for blessings upon those who gathered as well as the entire community and "our brothers and sisters under oppression overseas."

The feast that followed the service included lamb curry, spinach, rice, grilled chicken, chutney, chickpeas and tandoori bread. Pizza was available for the children.

Participating in the fast brings one closer to God while awakening feelings for the poverty-stricken, said Farrukh Shaikh of Charleston.

"I feel what the poor people feel when they don't have food," she said. "God has given us so many things. This is a blessing to us from Allah. Spiritually, it feels so good. The basis is prayer, not only with Ramadan but with daily life."

Dr. Amal Sakkal, a specialist in internal medicine, said the purpose of fasting is to identify with the poor while honing self-discipline.

"It teaches self-control and being the master of one's self," said Dr. Ashraf Moghal. "It's like the rider on a horse. The fast has to do with the fundamentals of life."

In order to eat before dawn, one must rise early. Maintaining such control builds character as well as good health, he said. He added that fasting consumes extra fluids, trims the body and rejuvenates.

His son, 13-year-old Nishan Moghal, is a seventh-grade student at John Adams Middle School where he said some of his friends teased him in a good-natured way during the fast.

"Kids would bring food and act like they were having a good time eating," Nishan said. "It didn't tempt me that much. I feel I have gained self-control. My will power has increased. It will help me later in life when I have to make big decisions."

Charles Tuitt, a member of the band Carpenter Ants and a library employee in St. Albans, said Ramadan has helped him learn about himself and deal with his own shortcomings.

Hasna Gao of Hurricane said Ramadan is not just about fasting from food but also about abstaining from any harmful behavior such as gossip.

The spirit of the month nourishes the soul, she said.

Dirar Ahmad, president of the Islamic Association, estimated nearly 600 people attended the event at the mosque on Friday.

"This is a time for all Muslims to come together, celebrate and send the message that we are part of this nation," Ahmad said. "We wish for peace, tranquility and prosperity for ourselves and the entire nation."

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