

## ISLAMIC COMMUNITY HONORS RETIRING PASTOR

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The Rev. Esber Tweel's faith and his experience with martial arts help him to deal with his physical problems.

But after a difficult summer of battling the disease that is causing his muscle structure to deteriorate, Tweel decided he will retire as pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Kanawha City.

As part of Ramadan celebrations, members of the Islamic community also honored Tweel on Sunday. Tweel has always been "a strong and good friend of the community," Mohammad Jamal Daoudi, the imam of the Islamic Association of West Virginia, said.

Tweel said, "I have always been passionate about the Middle East." Tweel's family has its roots in the Middle East, and he has traveled there several times in hopes of fostering peace.

Tweel will be retiring soon from Good Shepherd after 30 years, but he hopes to start a program to bring children from war-torn countries to the United States.

He did not begin his working career as a minister. He grew up in Huntington and after graduating from Marshall University, he got a job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

That job brought him to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.

That is where, 40 years ago, he became interested in martial arts. One of his teachers was also the first American to earn an Olympic medal in judo. Tweel actively participated in martial arts and other activities, such as fencing, until his health prevented him.

He still teaches martial arts, but he is not able now to stand and show students movements.

"I still teach about the mental and emotional state of mind necessary to do martial arts. Without that state of mind, it's just like a kickboxing class," he said.

The ability to create the state of mind necessary for martial arts helps him with his physical problems. "It's a great resource. It helps me through the depression, the rage, the despair, the medications. Then I get a little boost. The sun comes out.

"And there is always God."

Six years ago, he was diagnosed with polymyositis. "I had a bad summer. I could not fulfill all the duties I wanted to do." Although his wife helps him, he cannot go up steps in his wheelchair to visit people the way he would like to.

"I don't call this work," he said of his job at Good Shepherd. "This is what I'm called to do. This is my family." His neurologist wanted him to retire earlier, but he has been reluctant to leave.

Members of his own congregation, including Gov. Bob Wise, honored him with a special celebration the last weekend in October, and members of the Islamic community came to his church, too. Wise presented him with the Distinguished West Virginian award, and he was made rector emeritus. He will remain at Good Shepherd through December.

He also took part in celebrations at the Islamic Center on Sunday, when members of the community gathered to break their fast for the day.

During the holy month of Ramadan that ends Nov. 14, Muslims fast, pray and perform good works.

At the end of the day, they gather to break their fast.

"It's hard to leave, but I have to focus on my physical health," he said.

He is also working on a new project through the Episcopal Church and its Peterkin Conference Center in Romney. Through this project, he hopes Palestinian and Israeli children will get a chance to visit.

Previously, when he has visited the Middle East, he always encouraged people to visit refugee camps.

"I agree with the saying that while you are there visiting the holy stones, visit the living stones - the people."

If his health would allow, he said he would like to return to the Middle East, he said.

"That would be heaven, if I could even trade my wheelchair for a cane."

When he retires, he also said, he will "be myself."

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