

## **BRIDGE-BUILDING IMAM GRADUATES FROM SEMINARY**

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Imam Mohammad Jamal Daoudi isn't an engineer, but he has been studying bridge-building lately.

The spiritual leader of the South Charleston-based Islamic Center of West Virginia recently earned a doctor of ministry degree from the United Theological Seminary, a Dayton, Ohio, institution more accustomed to granting degrees to Christian clergy.

He and 15 other clergy — all the others Christian, almost all from West Virginia — will receive their degrees at a graduation ceremony at 1:30 p.m. Dec. 17 at Christ Church United Methodist. He'll be wearing his traditional Islamic robes and a doctoral hood.

Daoudi's doctoral project/thesis was on "Bridge-Building Between Islam and Christianity: A Case Study Between the Islamic Center of West Virginia and St. John's Episcopal Church."

Those who build bridges must understand the ground that will support the bridge from both sides, Daoudi said. "Most of the time, Muslims stand on their ground and try to extend the bridge, and Christians the same. But we rarely find people who would go to the other side and prepare the ground the bridge would stand on."

He learned bridge-building in Syria from his late teacher, the grand mufti of Syria, Ahmad Kuftaro. "He worked all his life to bring the Abrahamic religions to one round table: Jews, Christians and Muslims are members of one family who have lost each other for [so] long."

Daoudi has been building bridges since he came to West Virginia in February 2002 from California, where he led the Islamic Center of North Valley, 70 miles north of Los Angeles. "This is my project for my whole life," he said. "Wherever I am, I try to open up communication between the Muslim and Christian communities."

Daoudi met the Rev. Karl Ruttan at an interfaith event soon after the imam arrived in Charleston.

Ruttan, rector of St. John's, was attending a conference across from the World Trade Center when Muslim terrorists flew passenger planes into the twin towers on Sept. 11, 2001.

"After 9/11, I felt that people of various religions needed to get together," Ruttan said. "At the heart of every religion there is a strong commitment to peace, but we deeply misunderstand each other."

Ruttan and Daoudi met regularly. Ruttan came often to the Islamic Center. Daoudi came often to St. John's.

“I think he has a real vision for community,” Ruttan said. “He shows a lot of respect for me and my faith.”

Last winter, they decided to enlarge their dialogue. “We wanted it to be more people to people than clergy to clergy,” Ruttan recalled. “We took 12 people from each congregation.”

One topic was the various lands each had come from, Ruttan said. “Except for Native Americans, all Americans have been immigrants at one time.”

The local Islamic community consists of people from many countries and cultures, joined through their membership in the only Charleston-area mosque.

“We’re in a very fortunate situation in Charleston to be able to do this sort of thing because Charleston is small enough that the two communities can relate to each other effectively,” Ruttan said

Daoudi is also in active dialogue with the rabbis of Charleston’s two Jewish congregations.

The year has been filled with honors and accomplishments for Daoudi. He received the Advocate for Peace award in January from the state’s Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Commission. He became a U.S. citizen in October. He just received an Islamic Community Service Award for Political Activism from the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Daoudi, 40, and his wife, Fadia, who expects to receive her citizenship Dec. 19 in Pittsburgh, have a daughter who attends South Charleston Middle School. Their two sons go to Montrose Elementary School.

“When people get to know each other as individuals on a personal level and share experiences of a personal nature — like their religious beliefs — fear and misunderstanding can be eliminated,” Daoudi wrote in his thesis. “Knowledge is a powerful thing and the more knowledge one has, the more *powerful one is, and the less there is to fear.*”

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