

City Sees Increased Interest in Islam

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As midday traffic whizzes past on East Washington Avenue near the corner with Milwaukee Street, Salih Erschen steps onto the sidewalk and raises his hand to his mouth.

Speaking in Arabic, the Wisconsin native and amir, or director, of the Madison Muslim Dawa Circle shouts out a call to prayer: "God is great. There is no God but Allah. Come to prayer. Come to prosperity."

The public invitation to prayers that takes place five times a day at the new East Side center is common in Muslim countries, but a rarity in the United States, despite a growing number of Americans who are taking Islam as their religion.

"I haven't seen a call to prayer here in the United States," said Ali Khan, executive director of the American Muslim Center in Chicago.

"We try to keep it very low key," said Khan, whose mosque in northwest Indiana was shot at after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"Most of us, when we're out in the mainstream, try to hide our identity these days," Kahn said, adding the Muslim prophet Muhammad "just became Mo."

But reaction to the call to prayer at the new East Side center "is much more positive than negative," Erschen said.

"We occasionally will get a couple of stares," he said. "We see people across the street - they're like, 'Is he yelling at me?' "

The center is located in space formerly occupied by Yasmin's Meat Market, a couple doors down from the Union House Tavern and across from a plaza housing Papa John's Pizza, Tobacco Deals, and other businesses.

Many of the nearby business are owned or run by Muslims, some who come to the center, Erschen said, adding, "This is one of the highest concentrations of Muslim-owned business in Madison."

Along with fueling anti-Muslim sentiment, the Sept. 11 attacks have raised the visibility of Islam, prompting an increasing number of Americans to explore and to adopt the religion, Khan said.

The number of Muslims in the United States is estimated at between six and 10 million of the 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide, he said.

While many of those who convert to Islam are blacks and Hispanics, Khan said there has been a significant increase in the number of white Americans who are adopting the religion.

"Prior to Sept. 11, it would be something of an oddity to see a Caucasian at a mosque - now it's not an oddity," said Khan, who now sees "one or two whites" a week.

"The first thing we think is it's FBI," he said, adding, "Usually the people that are coming in are always very religious."

"There's a big growth of Islam in Madison," said Erschen, who, like many of those who come to his center, converted to Islam.

Erschen established the center about three months ago as a convenience to Muslims on the city's East Side who might not be able to take time out of their workday to go for prayer at the Islamic centers on the West Side or Downtown, where parking presents an added difficulty.

"We just saw the necessity to fill that void," Erschen said. "Every week, there's more people coming."

On Fridays, when Muslims are encouraged to pray with others, the center is filled with 20 to 30 people, he said.

About 15 children, along with a few adults, take classes in Arabic, the language in which the Quran is written.

The Downtown Islamic Center at 21 N. Orchard, where UW-Madison's Muslim Student Association is based, is Madison's oldest mosque, drawing between 200 and 300 people, Erschen said, adding, "They're looking at an expansion of the facility."

The Madison Muslim Dawa Circle started about six years ago by organizing talks in the community. The word "dawa" means "invitation." About a year and half ago, it began renting space for Friday afternoon prayer at the Warner Park Community Center, where attendance grew to about 20 people.

"Our intention is to help educate people to understand about Islam," said Erschen, who also hosts the weekly "Garden of Truth" show at 7 p.m. Sundays on community television station WYOU.

Part of that education includes dispelling the notion that all Muslims are terrorists. The center has a statement condemning terrorism.

Erschen, 34, who grew up in the Dickeyville area, became a Muslim when he was 21 - one year after meeting his future wife, Yasmin, a Muslim born in Somalia, while visiting friends in Madison. Their relationship prompted him to learn about Islam.

Abdullah Champeon of Madison converted to Islam 12 years ago.

"I used to drink really, really bad," said Champeon, 39, who gave up alcohol and started going to a Presbyterian Church. His love of history prompted him to start reading about religion, beginning with the Roman Empire.

"If this were a war movie, the Christians would be the bad guys and the Muslims would be the ones with the white hats," he said, acknowledging that there have been corrupt rulers of all religions, including Islam. "There have been a number of cases where the Christians went in and just slaughtered, slaughtered, slaughtered."

After being drawn to Islam, Champeon said he had to get over his conception that "Islam equals Arab or Islam equals angry black man in America" and that "it just wasn't a white-guy thing."

His choice to give up "living an American middle-class lifestyle" and convert to Islam still "kind of freaks people out a little," he said. "Even today, people think you're a little weird."

While Champeon doesn't consider his adopted religion to be as strict as other people do, he said, "It's a very different life."

In addition to praying five times a day in a prostrate position with forehead to the floor - symbolizing submission to Allah, whom Muslims hold to be the only God and creator - use of drugs or alcohol is prohibited. Sex outside of marriage, as well as gay and lesbian relationships, also go against Islam's teachings.

Khan describes Islam as more "God-conscious" than many other religions. In praying five times a day, Muslims maintain an awareness of their relationship with God and the teachings of Islam and can quickly right any transgressions, he said.

"The goal is to create a life pattern," Erschen said.

While Muslims do not seek to convert people to Islam, they welcome those who have chosen to practice the religion, Kahn said.

"Everyone I know who has taken on Islam has their own unique story," Erschen said. Among them is a former Jesuit student who was instructed to study the Quran to assist him in doing missionary work with Muslims and ended up converting to Islam.

"Some people are kicked out of their homes right away," Erschen said. "Others' families take it on with them."