

Islam comes to east side

By Mathew K. Jallow (Source: The Madison Times)

The Hawthorne neighborhood on Madison's east side has seen the arrival of its first Islamic center. Located at the corner of Milwaukee Street and East Washington Avenue, the Madison Muslim Dawah Circle, boasting more than 100 members and growing, was founded to ease the congestion at the downtown mosque.

"Many who come here to pray during the day often do so during their lunch breaks; [but] the one hour working Muslims are granted in the afternoon is often not sufficient to go downtown, find a parking spot, pray, and get back to work on time," said Abdullah Champeon, a recent convert to Islam.

The center serves as a fully functioning mosque, and prayers are performed there five times a day, as required by Islam. Prior to the opening of this center, neighborhood Muslims used to conduct their Friday prayers at a location on Northport Drive.

"Now the Hawthorne neighborhood has become particularly attractive, because of the concentration here of businesses owned by Muslims," said Champeon.

In total, there are three public mosques in Madison — the west-side mosque, the downtown mosque, and the east-side mosque — and all three have different social and economic congregations. Champeon says the Muslims on the east side tend to be working class; those downtown tend to be students and professionals who are not long-term Madison residents; and those on the west side are established professionals who now call Madison home.

At the east side center, Champeon said, there are four general programs undertaken by the mosque:

- Dawah or outreach, designed to educate interested persons about Islam and to convert them to the religion
- A children's school, where the Arabic language and Koranic recitation are taught
- Community events, in which mosque members speak at church or community functions
- A Sunday broadcast on WYOU Community Television Inc. (Channel 4), in which various aspects of Islam are discussed and questions from the public are answered

Since Ramadan, the month of fasting, is just round the corner, Champeon will be talking about the significance of the month-long fast and will answer questions from the viewing public on the Sunday program. Champeon intimated that the Madison area is very tolerant, and so far the group has never had to face down hostility to Islam or the activities they undertake. Champeon, who is White and was born in Camden, N.J., said his conversion to Islam had to do with the inability of the Catholic Church to explain such concepts as the Trinity to his satisfaction.

Every prayer time, as required by Islam, Champeon performs the symbolic call to prayer. That call is symbolic — everyone knows the times to pray — but nonetheless the call has to be made. The mosque has an elected imam, whose job is to lead the congregation in prayers and to perform other social service functions, such as counseling members and performing weddings and naming ceremonies. The imam, with the help of volunteers, does a lot of the work needed to keep the center running smoothly.