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## Local Muslims find acceptance missing elsewhere

‘There is something that connects us,’ imam of new Utica mosque says

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**Observer-Dispatch**

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While other parts of the nation have been polarized by the spread of Muslim groups and worship centers, Utica, it seems, has embraced its growing Islamic community.

Evidence of the community’s degree of acceptance could be seen in the almost 200 residents who came Monday night to the newly renovated Court Street mosque – formerly a Methodist church — during a Utica Monday Nite tour hosted by the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica.

The tour came on the eve of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which started Tuesday evening, and also amid national debate about plans for a community center and mosque a few blocks from the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in lower Manhattan.

Inquisitive visitors removed their shoes before entering the newly renovated, high-ceilinged, plush carpeted worship area that once was lined with pews.

“Today, we see there is a lot of misunderstanding between people with different religious beliefs, but today we are showing there is something that connects us,” Imam Ahmedin Mehmedovic said to the crowd packed shoulder to shoulder along three of the mosque’s pale blue walls.

In the crowd that evening, Linda Allen expressed her gratitude to the imam for bringing her family’s former church back to life.

“Thank you so much for continuing this building — which means so much to my family — as a place of worship,” Allen said.

The next day, Allen recounted her and her family’s memories of the Central Methodist Church. She remembers, as a child, flipping through her hymnal from the loft of the church that now is a worship space for Muslim women.

She recalled the wooden beams that stretched across the ceiling above her while exchanging vows with her husband. She expressed joy at seeing those beams – though painted – still intact in the mosque.

“To see this building that had so many treasured memories allowed to just go to rack and ruin was almost heartbreaking in a way, and to see it now revived, beautiful and vibrant, but also still a place where people come to worship and to enjoy community, this is what is so very heartening,” Allen said.

The prayers once recited in the Methodist church might differ from the prayers that will be shared each night in the mosque during Ramadan, which will continue through Sept. 10. But the tenets of the faiths – forgiveness, love and peace – are the same, said the Rev. Robert Umidi of Westminster Presbyterian Church, whose back door faces one side of the mosque.

“The core of all religion is — to a large extent — about creating a better world here and now, and that has to involve learning how to live peaceably in the midst of this diverse world,” Umidi said.

No one is certain why Utica hasn’t reacted to Muslim groups as some parts of the country have. A mosque on Kemble Street has existed largely without incident for many years, as well.

Muslims in other parts of the country have not been as lucky. Take, for example, reports from The Associated Press:

• In Murfreesboro, Tenn., hundreds of protesters reacted to a plan to have a Muslim center built there.

• In Temecula, Calif, Tea Party members used dogs and picket signs to protest the construction of a mosque on a vacant lot nearby an existing mosque.

• In Sheboygan, Wis., Christian leaders noisily rebuked a Muslim group’s request to open a mosque in a former health food store bought by a Muslim doctor.

It might be that Utica has seen how refugee groups, such as the Bosnians (which largely make up the members of the Court Street mosque), have positively impacted the city, Umidi suggested.

“We look at the population decline over the years, and we see the trend has not stopped,” Umidi said. “We realize it could be so much worse if we had not had a steady and increasing number of people had these people not come.”

Cultural anthropologist and Hamilton College professor Doug Raybeck points to a few reasons why the group might have been welcomed so readily. The group’s visibility and accessibility are at the top of that list, he said.

“One of the improvements they made to the community was highly visible,” Raybeck said. “More importantly, they have been reaching out actively to the community and nothing interferes with negative stereotypes more than communication. The absence of information leads us to all sorts of images, stories and fears.”

The fact that the predominantly-Bosnian group looks like the “average Caucasian,” also could have an effect on people’s perceptions of the group, Raybeck added.







“Part of differences is looking different, and Bosnians don’t look that different,” Raybeck said. “I think that does make it easier to be accepting.”

Marcy resident Allen, however, believes that the community’s foundation of strong values and ties to its religious groups is directly related to the ease at which the community has accepted the new group.

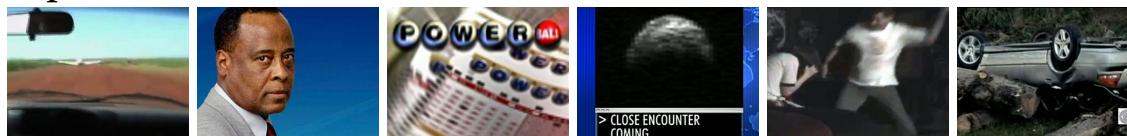
“I hope what it says about our community is that we have all learned the lessons from our own religion, which is forgiveness, love and being neighbors to our neighbors,” she said.

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