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Learning a religion

Islam educational gatherings attendance spikes following travel ban

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Cathy Benson speaks with Aisha Sial, Media Watch secretary for the Seattle branch of the Ahmadi Muslim Women's Association after the Coffee, Cake and Islam event.

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Seattle's director of public affairs Alam Ali said since President Donald Trump's executive order that attempted to ban immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim countries, attendance has spiked at regional Coffee, Cake and Islam educational gatherings.

Three of the tenets of the Muslim religion are community outreach, helping others and promoting the ability to attain knowledge, he said.

"The ask of Snohomish County is 'come meet us,' if anyone is having any concerns or fears," Ali said. "Come and meet us and judge for yourself, but not before you come meet us."

More than 100 people did come to Snohomish Fire District 4 in Snohomish, one of the three Coffee, Cake and Islam events held in the Puget Sound region last week hosted by the 44th Legislative District Democrats.

Party chair Diana McGinness said the event was meant to reach out to community members struggling with the current political climate. The Coffee, Cake and Islam event was planned before the travel ban controversy, but the order "put a point on it," she said.

Tiffany McIndoe wanted to know how to help. She has participated in some of the recent protests in Seattle, but living in a more rural community has found herself, as she suspects many have lately, not knowing how to participate on a local level.

“I don’t think people don’t care,” she said. “I just don’t think we know what to do, or where to turn.”

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community outreach director Waqas Malik said his faith teaches the importance of playing an active role, and that people have three options: “to stop it yourself with your own hands;” “voice yourself, let your disagreement be known;” or “at least in your heart know that this is wrong, but that option is the least favorable.”

Kathleen Buchanan and her daughter, Callie, came because “we’re ignorant,” Kathleen said with a laugh.

“It should be something kids do,” she said. “It should be something people should have a general idea about; just get to you who your neighbors are.”

Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community have worshiped at a mosque in Monroe for about 1 1/2 years now, Ali said. It took around five years to find the right place; once it became obvious the previous center in Lynnwood was too small for the growing membership. When they saw the building on Old Owen Road, the congregation “fell in love with it.” The more than \$1 million purchase was paid for out of pocket, with donations from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, he said.

About 400 members make up the congregation that attends the mosque in Monroe, said Imam Zafar Sarwar, the main speaker at Thursday’s event. The Ahmadiyya sect of Islam has nearly 75 branches nationwide, he said.

The religion is considered a rejuvenation of the faith founded by the Messiah Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1889, Ali said. The sect does not promote a violent jihad (holy war), or caliphate (Islamic state), rejects all forms of terrorism, and advocates for freedom of conscience, religion and speech. The main text is the Quran, he said.

At Thursday’s event, county resident Kathy Halcyan wanted to know whether Islam really addressed the rights of women. Aisha Sial, Media Watch secretary for the Seattle branch of the Ahmadi Muslim Women’s Association with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, commented on her four decades of experience as a Muslim woman.

Women are supported in their efforts to “flower intellectually” in every way, in the home or in the work place, and “there is a dignity to it,” Sial said. The religion has gifted women many rights, and protects their roles in society “to be a child bearer, to be the guidance of, you know, ‘the one who rocks the cradle rules the world.’”

“My understanding is that the abuse of women is not unique to Muslim culture,” Sial said, drawing loud applause from Thursday’s crowd.

Often, Ali and other members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community will direct the inquiring public to trueislam.com, which outlines the distinct differences between their Islam, and the Islam of violent extremists.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community does teach the importance of loyalty to country and national security, but the way the immigration ban was enacted was not right, Ali said. Further, the sect believes it is essential to help “all people who are fleeing from conflict,” and rejects any ban on refugees, he said.

According to a 2016 analysis of terrorism and immigration by the Cato Institute, the risk of dying in a fatal terrorist attack carried out by a refugee is virtually nil.

“The chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year while the chance of being murdered in an attack committed by an illegal immigrant is an astronomical 1 in 10.9 billion per year,” according to the study.

Since joining the Sky Valley community, outreach has been a focus, Ali said. The congregation has carried this out through various events, including an annual Peace Symposium, opening a weekly food pantry out of the mosque, educational gatherings and the Muslims For Life blood drive, a campaign in honor of the victims in 9/11, he said.

Since that day, Muslims have “been telling people at the top of their voices that this is not Islam,” Malik said.