

SOUTH BRUNSWICK: Christians, Muslims bridge divisions with visit

By Lea Kahn, The Packet Group

Posted: Thursday, May 13, 2010 6:33 PM EDT

Ellen Heath did not know what to expect when she visited the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, but she knew it would be a learning experience.

Ms. Heath, along with a handful of members of the Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville's Peacemaking Committee, spent a couple of hours Saturday afternoon exploring aspects of Islam at the center on Route 1 in South Brunswick.

"I expected it to be a learning experience, to learn more about the Muslim faith," she said. "There is great value in being there (at the ISCJ) and to see the community in action."

What Ms. Heath — and other members of the Peacemaking Committee learned — is Christianity and Islam have much in common, both in religious terms and in the family-oriented nature of the center.

When the church members arrived, they were greeted by Imam Hamad Chebli, who is the religious director. They were escorted into a room where representatives of the Saturna Trust Co. offered ISCJ members some information on charitable giving and estate planning in accordance with sharia, or Islamic law.

After removing their shoes, the visitors also were allowed to observe Muslims in prayer. Shoes are removed because worshippers kneel and pray on the carpet. There are no benches or seats for the worshippers.

The men and young children — boys and girls — kneeled and prayed in the front of the room while the women worshiped in the back of the room. Unlike Christian churches, men and women are not seated together. They pray separately, but all face northeast to Mecca.

After a few minutes, Imam Chebli ushered the group into the library where he explained aspects of Islam and drew some parallels between his faith and that of his visitors. Islam, he told the Peacemaking Committee, is a religion of peace.

"We come as one community," Imam Chebli said. The religions trace their roots back to Adam and Eve, who are "our father and mother," he said. Muslims, as a group, are working for peace, he added.

When a child is born, a call for prayer is made into the child's right ear and then the left ear, he said. Allah or God is the greatest, and Muhammad is his messenger. On the seventh or eighth day, male children are circumcised by a physician or midwife, he said.

By the time a child reaches the age of 7, he or she is expected to be able to conduct prayers with some adult supervision, Imam Chebli said. Although parents may pay for Arabic lessons for their children, it is not necessary to be fluent in Arabic — although it is preferable for them to learn to read it so they may read prayers in that language, he said.

The ISCJ offers classes on the weekends, and the children learn about the Koran, the Arabic alphabet and Islamic studies — all taught in English, Imam Chebli said. It is important to practice what one believes, he said, noting, "it's what you have in your heart."

"We never changed the way we pray," he said, adding this is the way the Prophet Muhammad prayed.

Muslims pray five times a day, beginning at 5 a.m. and then periodically throughout the day.

Imam Chebli dispelled some commonly held beliefs, starting with the distinction between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The Koran does not mention Sunni or Shiite, he said. The ISCJ accommodates both, however.

"We try never to use the word 'discrimination,'" he said. "We accept them as individuals. They pray behind the imam. We have Sunnis and Shiites, but we do not promote one over the other. You won't find Sunni or Shiite in the Koran."

Muslims — those who practice Islam — are not a separate race nor is there a belief in the superiority of Arab over non-Arab, Imam Chebli said. All people are equal, because all people — regardless of race or gender — go back to Adam, he said.

Reflecting on her visit to the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, Ms. Heath said she was most impressed with the way the Muslims treated each other with great respect — "even down to the littlest child." It's a vibrant community, she said.

"The children were ever present," Ms. Heath said. "They would go in and come out, even in the prayer (service). You could hear them chattering. It's the whole sense of the people and how they live together and trust each other and support each other in their faith."

The Muslims ensure suffering is relieved in the world through charity, she said, adding she learned the Islamic faith is insistent Muslims give some of their last dollars to take care of the needy.

Ms. Heath observed that while there are some differences in their respective traditions and beliefs, such as the separation of men and women during prayer, there is common ground between the two religions.

"I think it all comes down to widows and orphans," Ms. Heath said. "The Bible says, 'What do you do with your life?' You take care of the widow and the orphan. You help the sick. You take care of the stranger. That's the bottom line."

lkahn@centraljersey.com •