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Va. Mosque Reaches Out, Joining Immigrant Fabric

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For years, the Dar al Hijrah mosque was an isolated, slightly mysterious presence in Falls Church -- a stark stone building hidden behind a row of trees, rarely visited by non-Muslims in the multi-ethnic Culmore neighborhood, and known mostly for traffic jams on Leesburg Pike as worshippers arrived for Friday prayers.

These days, the mosque bustles with visitors chattering in Spanish and Vietnamese as well as Persian and Urdu. Immigrants from a dozen countries gather there each Thursday, many with toddlers and baby strollers, to pick up donated chicken, bread, fruit and vegetables.

On weekends, the doors are thrown open for community blood drives or mental health fairs. At night, mosque officials often attend meetings at nearby churches, synagogues or social agencies, including a monthly brainstorming session called Culmore Partners.

"The average person here has had no interaction with Islam. They may even think we are the enemy, especially after September 11th," said Abdulkareem Jama, a network engineer from Somalia who is president of the mosque's board. "The more we open up and interact, the more we demystify things and seem normal to each other."

Dar al Hijrah has evolved dramatically since 2001, when it came under official suspicion amid reports that a man linked to the terror attacks in New York and Washington had visited there. This year, its glossy 25th anniversary report includes congratulatory letters from a variety of private and public institutions.

The mosque's coming out also reflects the growing cooperation between area Muslim institutions and the largely non-Muslim immigrant communities that surround them. In Culmore, the trend has brought many groups together to help immigrants who struggle with poverty, discrimination and legal problems.

Father Horace Grinnell is the pastor at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church, a longtime anchor of Culmore. Until six months ago, he had never met the leaders of Dar al Hijrah. Now, they are collaborating on a health clinic and other projects.

"There has been a quantum leap in synergy and coordination," Grinnell said. "They were painted pretty harshly after 9/11, but now they are reaching out on all fronts. We can both be a resource for people, whether they are Catholic or not."

Beyond places of worship, the evolving mosaic of shops, restaurants and offices in Culmore and several other Northern Virginia areas reflects an increasingly comfortable meld of Middle Eastern cultures with the Latin American and Asian cultures that once dominated them.

On Leesburg Pike, a Pakistani dentist's waiting room has Spanish-language and Muslim-oriented newspapers; an Arab-owned travel company books trips to Central America; and an Iranian grocery owner often chats with the Salvadoran discount furniture seller next door.

"There is harmony here," said Luis Lazo, 55, as he stopped by to greet Lida Sadahjiani in her shop stuffed with Iranian delicacies. "We don't speak the same language, but we have known each other a long time."

Just across Leesburg Pike, Ali Altaf, 35, a bank employee, was eating lunch at a Middle Eastern restaurant with his wife and children. In the window were signs in Arabic, Persian and Spanish. His waitress was a Peruvian immigrant named Emiliana Navarrete, 21.

"People here seem more knowledgeable about each other's cultures now; they are getting to know each other better," Altaf said. Navarrete showed the notepad where she had written the names of Persian dishes phonetically so she could understand telephone orders.

"Baba kanush, korma sapsi," she practiced with a laugh.

Such public familiarity has not crossed the line into many personal friendships, let alone religious conversions, local leaders said. There are only a handful of Hispanic Muslims in the area, including Farhanaz Ellis, an outreach worker at the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Sterling.

Ellis, born to a Catholic family in Panama, said her mosque had held a celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month and presentations for emergency workers. Yet she seemed to have few personal ties to area Latinos and said much of her work involved explaining Islam to outside groups.

"Many people here have the misperception that Islam oppresses women and that Muslims see non-Muslims as infidels," she said. She does not try to change critics, she said, "just give them food for thought."

One area Muslim who has plunged into Hispanic issues is [Mukit Hossain](#), a Bangladeshi immigrant in Herndon who co-founded a day-laborer center there for Latino workers. The center provoked a public outcry and was shut down last year.

Hossain said area Muslims, most of whom came to the U.S. legally, traditionally had little interest in the problems of illegal or Latino immigrants. After the terror attacks of 2001, however, they began to face public hostility and find common cause with other immigrant groups.

"What happened on 9/11 was a wake-up call for all of us," Hossain said. To those who question why he would help Hispanic laborers, he retorted, "Do they think I am a terrorist here to convert people?"

Immigration is a "human rights issue," he said. "No one from any country should be treated like an animal."

It was the threat of a crackdown on illegal immigrants that first brought Dar al Hijrah into close contact with advocacy groups. A meeting was called in Culmore to discuss how to help families in cases of raids or arrests, and mosque officials offered their premises.

"We were blown away by their hospitality. They even bought us all pizza," said Cindy Brown of Hogar Hispano, a nonprofit aid agency for Latinos on Leesburg Pike.

Mosque officials say they have no desire to push their religion on other immigrants, only to inform them about it. At community events, they set up a booth with brochures in Spanish, including a booklet on the history of Islam, women's rights and "common misinterpretations" about their faith.

"We are one community of many cultures and faiths, and we want to break down the barriers that divide us," said Mohammed Abdelilah, a manager at Dar al Hijrah. "This is nothing magic. It's not for political gain. It is for the sake of God."

At a recent food distribution in the mosque, families from Morocco, Iran, El Salvador, Vietnam, Korea, Guatemala, Pakistan and Ethiopia waited their turn. Although clustered together by language groups, they greeted each other with smiles.

Carlos Moreno, 71, an immigrant from El Salvador, said that with food prices climbing, he and his wife were grateful for the assistance and felt comfortable visiting the mosque.

"The Bible says there should be no divisions between human beings, no racism and no prejudice," Moreno said. "When we die, we all look the same. Rich or poor, black or white, we all go to the same place."

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