

Islamic Center of Portland
Shia (Islam)
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History

The one-story house now known as Islamic Center of Portland became a religious center in 1993, but members of the small but growing Shi'i community trace their history in Portland to the early 1980s. At that time, as at the present, Middle Eastern students attending Portland State University (PSU) came from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Nonetheless, they shared a common religion that helped bring them into contact with one another.

In 1983, an Iraqi student who had fled interrogation by Saddam Hussein's regime came from Buffalo, NY, to visit Portland for a conference of the Muslim Group, of which he was a member. At that time, there was very little by way of a cohesive Portland Muslim community. He met some Shi'i students from PSU and they started planning for a place to worship. They began getting together for Du'a al-Kumayl, the supplication performed by Shi'is just after sundown, in a campus-owned apartment. The makeshift prayer room provided a place not only for worship, but also for study and socializing.

The same student moved to Portland two years later in 1985. The PSU gatherings were still going on, though the community had grown considerably. Complaints about noise and parking problems, as well as a lack of space, helped spur the Shi'i community to find more suitable accommodations. In 1986, an apartment some Shi'i Saudi students had rented in the Cedar Mills Crossing complex in the nearby suburb of Beaverton became the new meeting point. This was a practical choice since many of the congregants lived in the area. They filed for non-profit 501c(3) status and named their organization Islamic Center of Portland (not to be confused with The Islamic Center of Portland, a Sunni mosque also known as Masjid as-Sabr).

With the influx of immigrants and refugees resulting from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Gulf War of 1991, the community grew too big for the little apartment. They requested and received permission from one of the *marja's* (Shi'i religious leader) to use *khums* money (a Shi'i religious tax) for a mosque. Through these contributions they procured enough money by 1993 to buy the building they currently occupy. Four years later they bought the house next door for use as a school for the growing number of children in the community.

Of particular importance to members of this community was the way in which they set up the center. It was not designated a masjid. A masjid has legal and religious implications, and there are specific Islamic requirements and conditions for designating an area "masjid." Designating the building as a center meant it could be used for a variety of community activities, such as a school, a place to socialize, and a place for official meetings. This also meant that there were fewer restrictions on attendance; non-Muslims would be able to come and visit, and women who are menstruating and thus in a state of ritual impurity could also attend and participate in the activities at the center, even if they may not perform the ritual prayers according to Islamic law.

Description

Islamic Center of Portland is located in a commercial zone of Beaverton, OR, about a twenty-minute drive outside of downtown Portland. The surrounding businesses, like the Center itself, are a row of single-family homes, facing an enormous home improvement store. The small one-story house once had a garage next to it. In 1999, they built a small structure between the house and the garage, which served as a make-shift halal meat market until 2002. In 1995, funds raised during the first day of the Eid ul-Fitr celebration were used for the renovation of the garage. Members of the community completed this project, which attached the garage to the house, and this room is now the men's room and prayer area. This is a large room, with only a small window on the East wall that faces Mecca. A sliding glass door painted with lilies to make it opaque serves as a movable partition dividing the sexes. The room for the women is slightly smaller, with plush area rugs scattered on the floor and cushions lining the floor around the room's perimeter. This room looks out on a backyard with toys and a small playground for the younger children to play while the adults pray and socialize. There is also a room for the children to play in, as well as hold their own prayers if they wish. A small kitchen for making tea and arranging refreshments for the community connects the two rooms at the front of the house. The front entrance is labeled "sisters" and has a rack for shoes. The entrance for the men is around the back of the house. There is almost nothing indicative of a religious center from the outside.

Management

At the founding of the community a constitution was written by the same Iraqi student who helped start the prayers at PSU. He also was selected to be the imam, in large part because of the religious training he had growing up in Najaf and because he came from a well-known family of religious scholars. The constitution expresses the goals of Islamic Center of Portland, such as making possible an Islamic way of life for its community members and promoting the understanding of Islam among the non-Muslim community. The constitution also functions as a tool to ensure that any funds or donations given to the Center will be used exclusively for the Center.

Islamic Center of Portland is run by a board of directors, which has five members who are elected by the community members (both men and women) directly from the "general assembly," meaning the people who regularly attend mosque. The five positions include a spokesman, a treasurer, an education officer, an information officer, and a communications officer. There is also a reserve member who will function as a temporary

replacement for an absent board member. These unpaid positions are held for two years at a time, at which point members can be reelected or the community can select someone new for the position. There is a committee of women that arranges activities for the women in the community, such as a swimming group that rents out a pool so that the women can go swimming in a single-sex setting and women-only religious talks and activities. A woman from the community is almost always present at board meetings to express concerns or wishes from the female community.

There is also a Board of Founders, comprised of the three founding members of the mosque. They do not meet regularly, but rather keep watch over the community to ensure adherence to the Center's constitution. Also, if the community is unhappy with the way the trustees are running the Center, they can complain to the Board of Founders, which has absolute veto power.

Demographics

The community at Islamic Center of Portland is very diverse. Members come originally from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Singapore, Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Syria, and the United States. The majority of the people are Iraqi refugees from the Gulf War of 1991. Refugee and Muslim advocacy groups such as Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees (SOAR), and Islamic Social Services of Oregon State (ISOS) have provided assistance to many of the Iraqis who came to the United States as part of a resettlement program designed to help Iraqis (particularly Shi'is) who had fled to Saudi Arabian refugee camps after the 1991 Gulf War.

Because there is no sort of formal membership for the Center, the exact size of the community is not known, but the estimate is put at about 200-250 families. However, not all of these members attend the mosque for regular Friday prayers, and some come only to the Eid celebrations and for the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn b. 'Ali (d. 680), the third Imam of Shi'ism. Many in the Shi'i community organize social activities for members of similar cultural groups, and especially along linguistic lines. Those who speak Urdu will get together with other Urdu-speaking families, and likewise for speakers of Arabic and Persian.

Activities

The religious activities at the Center include the recitation of the Kumayl supplication, held every Thursday evening just after sundown, Friday prayer (*jum'a*), and a Quranic Study Circle every Friday evening. These study circles are for both men and women. During the month of Ramadan the community breaks the fast together every evening after sundown. Each family volunteers to provide food for the community for one or two nights during the month.

In addition to the weekly prayers and supplications, the imam will also perform marriage ceremonies. He offers family and marriage counseling and is available to give spiritual guidance and to answer routine questions regarding religious law. When a community member passes away, the imam will prepare the body for an Islamic burial.

Other than specifically religious activities, there have been some activities for the youth of the community. Until recently, there was a Girl Scout troop run by a couple of the female members. Many of the activities were similar to those found in any Girl Scout troop, but they included discussions about being Muslim and how religion affects their lives. Similarly, the boys in the community gather together to play and socialize. In both cases, the main goal is to make sure that the youth of the community get to know each other. Because so many cultures are represented in the community, sometimes there is less interaction between families outside of religious activities. However, many of the children have been raised in the United States and so do not have the same language barriers as their parents may have, and so the playgroups create a situation for children of various countries to get to know each other.

There is also a Sunday school for the kids, organized mostly by female leaders. During the summer the school is extended to three or four days a week. The curriculum focuses on Arabic and sometimes Persian, as well as general knowledge about Islam, such as the reason for certain rituals, the correct way to perform them, and recitation and reading of the Quran.

Islamic Center of Portland has also been involved in numerous interfaith activities. It also participates in efforts made by the Portland Muslim community as a whole to promote political awareness among Portland Muslims and to advance Muslim civil rights.

Date Center Founded
1993

Religious Leader and Title
Muhsen Al-Dhalimy, Imam

Membership/Community Size
100-200 families

Ethnic Composition
Afghani, Iraqi, Iranian, South Asian, Arab, Euro-American and others

Prepared by Student Researcher
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