

Muslims hope mosque 'sheds light on Islam'

Islamic Center will be first in St. Joseph

By [Erin Wisdom](#)

Saturday, May 23, 2009

Shamsuddin Rager had never been a Muslim in a city without a mosque until he moved to St. Joseph two years ago.

Mr. Rager, who is originally from Boston, came here from Florida and before that lived in a city in Germany not much larger than St. Joseph - one with five mosques. It was there, almost five years ago, that he converted to Islam.

Of the places he's lived since, St. Joseph seems to be where Islam and its followers are least understood, he said. But he hopes that will change when the Islamic Center of Greater St. Joseph opens its first mosque later this year and St. Joseph's Muslim community becomes more visible.

"I hope it sheds light on Islam so people will learn they don't have to live in fear," he said. "They don't have to fear Islam; they don't have to worry we're going to blow something up."

Until recently, he added, there wasn't much of a Muslim community in St. Joseph, which he thinks may be why many people here seem not to have much of an understanding of Islam. A majority of his encounters with this misunderstanding come at Christmas time, when he tells people who wish him a merry Christmas that as a Muslim, he doesn't celebrate Christmas.

"There are mixed reactions," Mr. Rager said. "Quite a few negative, some surprised. The door kind of swings both ways."

And then there are the people who are curious about Islam. At the Islamic Center's open house May 16, only one or two of the 35 to 40 in attendance were Muslim, said Amro Nabil Masjid, the center's imam, or priest. Originally from Egypt, he moved to Kansas City in 1983 and lived there until coming to St. Joseph last July. He sees the Muslim presence here as similar to Kansas City's in the 1980s.

"In Kansas City in 1985, there was no mosque," he said. "But so many were built, and so many started coming."

Many people may not want to see St. Joseph's Muslim community and number of mosques grow as Kansas City's have. But the Rev. Chase Peebles, pastor of First Christian Church in St. Joseph, sees Islam's presence here as a positive thing, noting that religious diversity is good for a community and that he's grown as a Christian from having discussions with people of other faiths. He said, too, that in his interactions with Muslims, he's always been impressed by their devotion to prayer, their hospitality and their respect for others - which is something he wishes all Christians were showing them in return.

"I think Jesus spoke pretty clearly about loving our neighbor, and our neighbor may very well be someone of a different faith," he added. "In Northwest Missouri, Muslims are so much in the minority they probably have more to fear from Christians than Christians do from them."

Mr. Masjid hopes others will become more open to the Muslim community as well. He said the center is thinking about having monthly events similar to its open house, to offer people an opportunity to have questions about Islam answered. The center's weekly service - which takes place from 1 to 1:30 p.m. each Friday at 24th and Messanie streets and typically draws about 20 worshippers - also is open to anyone who wants to participate or just observe.

Mr. Masjid thinks that those who come might leave with a different impression of Islam and its followers than what they've had in the past.

"It's a peaceful religion," he said. "We're not very bad people, after all."

Erin Wisdom can be reached at ewisdom@npgco.com.

A name was incorrect in the May 23 story, "Muslims hope mosque sheds light on Islam," that appeared on Page A1, due to a reporter's error. The imam of the Islamic Center of Greater St. Joseph is Amro A. Nabil.

The News-Press apologizes for the error.

It is the policy of the News-Press to correct all errors as quickly as possible. To request a correction, call the City Desk at 271-8548 or 271-8533.