

HOLIDAYS OBSERVED BEHIND BARS

Prison helps inmates of different religions

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Imam Hussein Elkhansa wants prison inmates to know they are never alone. God is always with them.

When he finished his lecture in the Mount Olive prison chapel, the pews were moved. A man in a wheelchair wearing a black head scarf wheeled himself away from the group. He faced a blank wall, cupped his hands behind his ears and, in Arabic, called the others to prayer.

"Allahu Akbar."

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"God is great," he sang. Five other inmates heeded his call and gathered around two prayer rugs. They prayed toward the blank, white wall that faces east.

Elkhansa led the prayer for the first Friday of Ramadan. Mount Olive Correctional Complex officials have made arrangements to help their Muslim population observe the holiest of Muslim holidays, just as they make arrangements for inmates of other faiths to respectfully observe their holidays.

Steve Canterbury, director of the Regional Jail and Correctional Facility Authority, says the authority is "trying to do the right things by people of any faith."

Mount Olive food service Director Gary Blocker said, "You'd be surprised what requirements you can meet."

He said 18 out of 22 Muslims are observing Ramadan and its fast this year. According to Islamic belief, the month of Ramadan is when Allah revealed the Koran to the Prophet Mohammed. Muslims observe the month by fasting from a half hour before sunrise until half an hour after sunset. During the fast, Muslims are also to refrain from smoking, sex, and lying about the prophet.

Mount Olive Warden Howard Painter said inmates observing the holiday are served their meals before sunup and after sundown. He said arrangements also have been made for the inmates to celebrate the end of the Ramadan fast with a feast. Painter said the inmates are paying part of the costs for the extra food.

Blocker said the religious meal request he encounters the most is non-pork meals. "If we had bacon for breakfast, we would do them a beef patty," he said. Neither Jews nor Muslims eat pork.

Blocker said for Yom Kippur, the complex's three orthodox Jews requested three sticks of celery, three boiled eggs and "ginger root that they do a ceremony with."

Blocker said the complex is dealing with about 25 religions.

Elkhansa was just dealing with one. He stood in front of the inmates, encouraging them, chastising them, and reminding them.

"Stop from eating is the easiest thing about Ramadan. Stop from drinking is the easiest thing about Ramadan," he said.

"This month you are the guest of Allah. He is saying 'If you do this I will forgive you,' " Elkhansa said. If someone said, 'Do this for a month and you'd get out of here,' would you do it?" Elkhansa asked.

The inmates nodded.

Elkhansa said before his sermon that his emphasis with the inmates is "on deed and work -- human law, not so much into religion."

During the prayer service last week, a few of the inmates did have questions about the religion and the stringent guidelines for fasting, such as what if breakfast is late and they don't have time to finish before it is time to pray.

"Ramadan, for you guys, is to train yourself on the use of time," Elkhansa said. "Take a vacation from the outside and put yourself in training."

He said the inmates, most of whom converted to Islam while incarcerated, embrace their newfound spirituality. Some have learned Arabic. He said they study the Koran and come to him and ask, "Brother Hussein, what do you think about this?"

"Before you didn't have Islam. Now you have something to hold onto," he tells them.

"Life is so simple, guys. Don't make it sophisticated, complicated."

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