

Hamtramck Catholics get to know their Muslim neighbors

HAMTRAMCK — When Fr. Stanley Ulman arrived at St. Ladislaus Parish 25 years ago, getting to know his parish's Muslim neighbors wasn't at the top of his list of things to do.

In fact, finding Muslim neighbors might have been a difficult chore.

But not anymore. Now, what once was a community of Polish Catholics and Baptists has turned into a deeply diverse cultural cornucopia, and largely Islamic.

As a result, Fr. Ulman and his parishioners at St. Ladislaus have witnessed a debate that has drawn attention around the country. In

May, Al-Islah Jame Masjid Islamic Center, across Caniff Avenue from St. Ladislaus, started broadcasting its call to prayer, a public announcement done over loudspeakers declaring that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is his messenger.

And while some residents have created a stir against the mosque's call to prayer broadcasts, the people of St. Ladislaus have seen things differently.

"It's like a non-issue," said Fr. Ulman, who on July 1 will leave Hamtramck to become pastor of St. Mary of the Hills Parish, Rochester Hills. "It's almost as if (parishioners) are saying, 'OK, they're doing this — no problem.'"

Fr. Ulman said the Muslim call to prayer has given the once predominantly Catholic community an opportunity to reflect on the proper Christian response when neighbors have a vastly different perspective of God.

"The basic attitude we have to adopt is an attitude of charity," Fr. Ulman said. "We have to treat people as neighbors. We have to treat people with respect, regardless of what they believe. That's the starting point."

"We have to witness to being good Catholics. That means that our community has to come together."

In recent weeks, different cultures within Hamtramck have indeed come together. Through the local chapter of the National Conference for Community and Justice, people of various faiths including Christians, Jews and Muslims have come together in an effort to learn about one another.

Such dialogue has made the call to prayer more understandable to non-Muslims in Hamtramck, said Abdul Motlib, president of the Caniff Avenue mosque.

"We have had everybody agree with call to prayer, and it has not made a problem," said Motlib. "It has been almost three to four weeks, and nobody has made a complaint about it."

Motlib said cooperation from Fr. Ulman and St. Ladislaus Parish has been important to the mosque's call to prayer.

Story and photos by
JOE KOHN

"Fr. Ulman has been very, very kind to us," said Motlib. "He has been a very important person to us."

He is, however, concerned about what will happen in the future.

Already, though, Fr. Ulman said the NCCJ interfaith group has set some goals. They hope to start discussion groups including people from different religions; have scholars collect and make available more information about the various religions; educate youth about the different faiths; and, ultimately, have people from different faiths work on a project together, such as building a house through Habitat for Humanity.

The group includes representatives from the Islamic Center; St. Ladislaus Parish; Friendship House, a Christian neighborhood ministry; the Piast Institute, a Polish-American think tank; and others.

Last month, at an interfaith gathering in Hamtramck's Pope Park, above which stands a full-sized bronze statue of Pope John Paul II, the group gathered for prayer. Muslim leaders from out of state attended.

"We are going through a maturation process," said Kareem Irfan, chairman of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. "And what I would like to believe is that this is a part of that evolving process."

"We cannot accept the other's faith and customs without understanding them."

Thaddeus Radzilowski, president of the Piast Institute — who also is president emeritus of St. Mary's College in Orchard Lake — said the institute will do whatever it can to establish healthy relations between cultures.

"We hope what will come out of this is a permanent dialogue between our communities," Radzilowski said.

Fr. Ulman said that some of his parishioners have shown an interest in getting to know about the parish's Muslim neighbors. Wanda Heinrich, a long-time parishioner and member of the parish council, is one of them.

"I've always been curious as to what other religions have," said Heinrich.

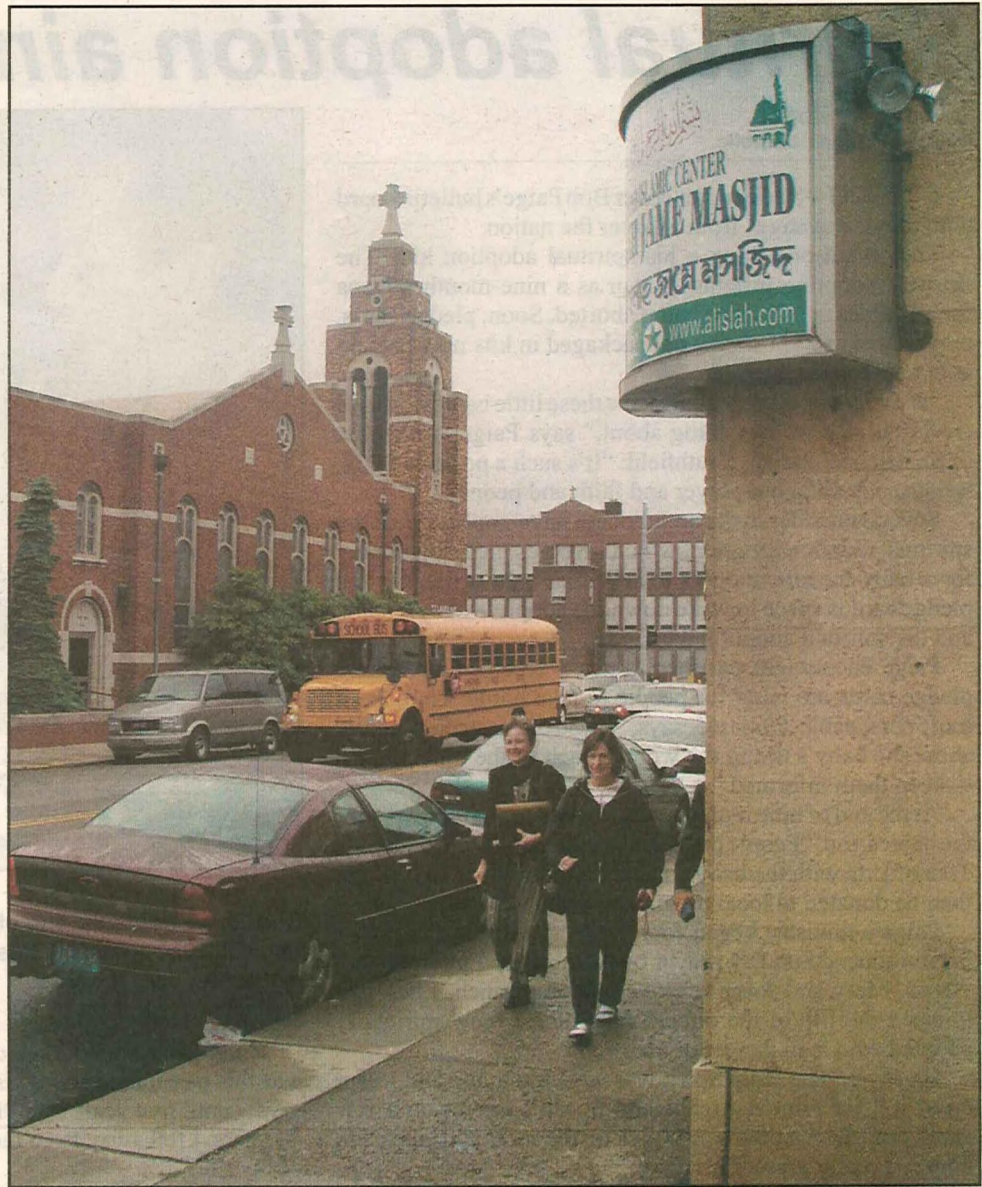
And by joining discussions with people of another faith, she said, Catholics can learn to understand and respect those who see God in a very different way.

"You understand people better," Heinrich said. "You understand why they are the way they are. I have a respect for all religions, because I feel we're all praying to the same God. We're just praying in a different way."

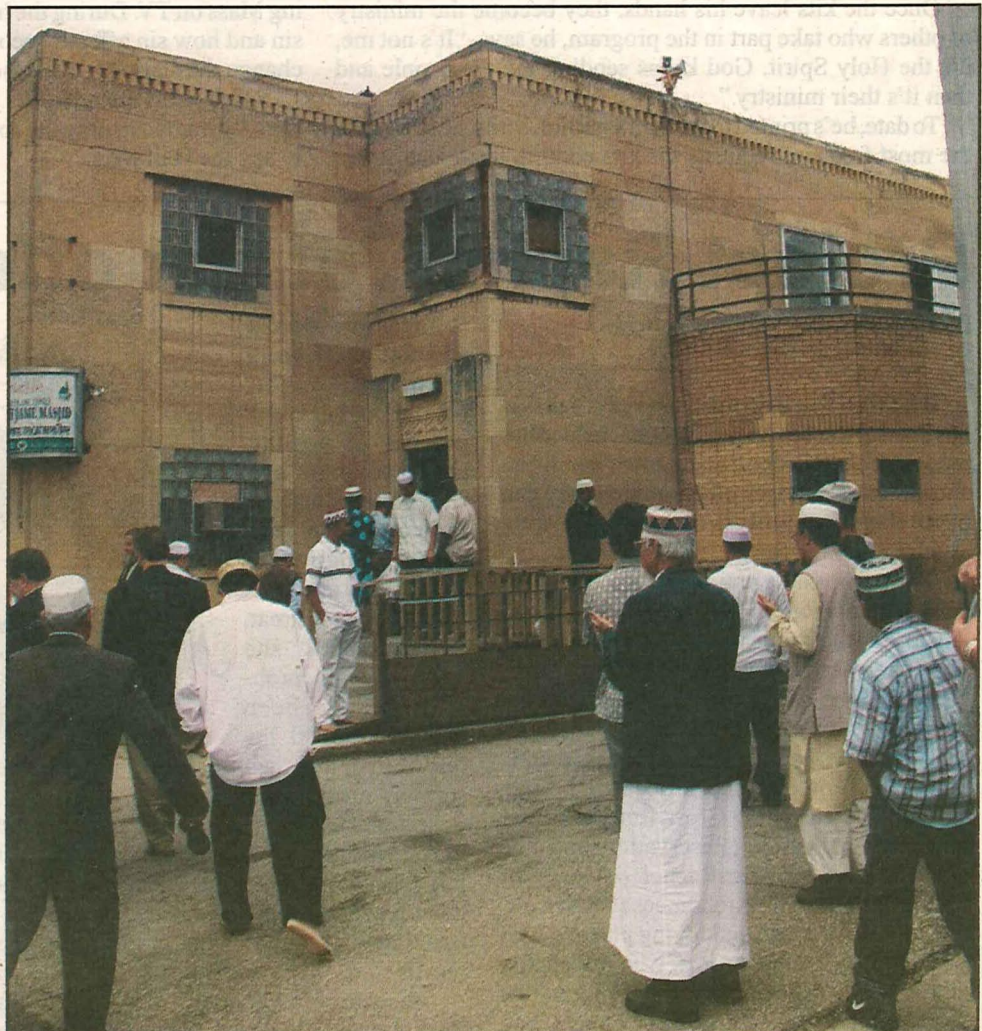


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— **Fr. Stanley Ulman**



The Hamtramck mosque that sparked debate nationwide because of its broadcast call to prayer stands just across the street from St. Ladislaus Church.



During the first broadcast call to prayer May 28, Muslims in Hamtramck approach the Islamic Center.