

Select Language ▼

Powered by Google Translate

# CHURCH OPENS DOORS TO MUSLIM STUDY GROUP

## Collaboration promotes inclusivity and appreciation of religious diversity

By Liz Skalka



Michael Cummo / Hearst Connecticut Media

The Rev. Mark Lingle, left, pastor at St. Francis Episcopal Church, and Dr. Kareem Adeeb, imam at the American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, speak about religion and open mindedness at St. Francis Episcopal Church. Lingle has invited Adeeb and the American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies to pray at the church on Sundays.

# FABRIC of the CITY



An occasional series about what gives Stamford its rich history and extensive range of cultural

diversity.



Michael Cummo / Hearst Connecticut Media

The Rev. Mark Lingle, left, pastor at St. Francis Episcopal Church, and Dr. Kareem Adeeb, imam at the American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, outside the church on Wednesday. Lingle has invited the imam and his group to pray at the church on Sundays.

STAMFORD — Dr. Kareem Adeeb is the imam of a Muslim study and prayer group that has never met at a mosque.

For the last three years, the American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies has gathered on Sunday afternoons at St. Francis Episcopal Church in North Stamford.

After the morning Episcopalian service, Adeeb's group meets for an afternoon of prayer, potluck and Quran study. Because Adeeb wants to expose his group to a variety of religious traditions, they have never met regularly at a mosque.

"Some (Muslims) would say, 'We won't come to a place where we meet in the church,'" Adeeb said. "Then I would say that, 'I don't want you.' "

Adeeb's collaboration with the church was forged by his relationship with its pastor, the Rev. Mark Lingle. The two met as members of the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut, a group of religious leaders who provide guidance on community issues.

The men said their collaboration has been embraced by their congregants.

"The community here at St. Francis is pretty open," Lingle said. "They are very curious about other religions."

One of the church's mottos is "Inclusive, because diversity was God's idea." This philosophy is embraced by Lingle and Adeeb, who believe being inclusive and open-minded will help religion thrive in a modern world that has questioned religious tradition.

"It's not that people aren't seeking meaning, purpose and value," Lingle said. "It's just that they're getting it in different ways. So what is it that we have to offer that would be of interest and how can we make that accessible to people and relevant?"

"The whole issue of tradition can be problematic because people ask, 'Why do we have to do it this way? ... They want to have a tradition that also makes sense in the modern world.'"

Lingle and his congregation of more than 200 have collaborated with the institute on a few occasions, but no one from St. Francis has joined Adeeb's group. Anyone from the congregation or community is invited.

"We haven't done a lot of stuff together," Lingle said. "There is a group of people who are very interested. They're curious about Islam and learning about other religious traditions."

The American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, which used to meet at North Stamford Congregational Church, is comprised of some 25 families from different ethnic backgrounds and professions. What they all have in common is a desire to

approach religion as scholars, Adeeb said.

"To me, cognitive faculties are a gift from God," he said. "The aim of our teaching is to make us conscious of what our faith is about. We practice spiritual and intellectual Islam, we don't practice robotic Islam."

Adeeb doesn't have much contact with other Stamford mosques, which he said are largely segregated by ethnicity. For example, Egyptian and Asian Muslims tend to belong to one mosque, while Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims belong to another, he said.

Adeeb, an engineer who lives in Fairfield, emigrated from Lebanon, where he attended a French Catholic school for 12 years.

"I would come home and read the Quran and say, 'They're similar, why do they hate each other?' " he said.

Despite his own acceptance of all religious backgrounds, Adeeb has faced discrimination as a Muslim. After the 9/11 attacks, a man hired to do work at his home made racist remarks not realizing Adeeb was Muslim. The man later apologized.

Adeeb said anyone is welcome to join his group as long as they're open-minded and eager to learn.

"Education is more important in our faith than prayer," he said. "In fact, there is a saying from the Prophet — if you spend one hour studying with an open mind, it's equal to 70 years of prayer."

St. Francis places a similar emphasis on study.

"The largest piece is how we approach text and how we approach tradition," Lingle said. "I think we have fairly similar ways of doing that. We want to be open, welcoming and hospitable, and we recognize there are a variety of ways to believe."