

The Pioneer

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The Friday noon prayer — Jummah, is very important in the Muslim faith. Comparable to the Christian Sabbath, it is a time for worship and the celebration of togetherness.

Church transforms to mosque

Story and Photos by Frank Moses

The House of Commandments-Masjid UL Islam, in Trenton, Ont., invites people of all faiths and backgrounds to a welcoming environment. For Abdullah, born Jordan Seifert, his conversion to Islam has been a rewarding journey to discover his own spirituality and sense of community.

In 2016, Imam Abu Talib and his wife were perusing internet real estate ads for a building to house a mosque for the growing Muslim population in Quinte West. By chance, their search led them to 100 King St. W., site of the former King Street United Church, which was established in 1876.

The church closed due to the 2015 amalgamation of three United Churches into one -- at 85 Dundas St. E. in Trenton.

For many reasons, church attendance is on the decline in Canada, and changing demographics mean an increase in the number of Muslims, both born and converted to the faith, looking for places to worship.

Twenty-eight-year-old Abdullah, born Jordan Seifert, is a recent convert to Islam. He was drawn to the faith because of his interaction with the Muslim community. He lived in Toronto for several years and worked in a funeral home. A mosque across the street frequently used the funeral home for burial services -- called Janazah in Arabic.

"I was encouraged to ingratiate myself with the community. I was at the mosque a lot. I started to learn more, to read more, and at the same time, I am actively engaged with academic Christian scholarship."

Abdullah has a very self-aware view of his association with Islam. Intelligent and well-read, he understands his conversion could be seen by many to be inexplicable. But over many years, his careful study of Islam and other Abrahamic faiths led him to conversion.

His secular reading, treating the Bible as a book like any other, had him comparing the Koran to Christian texts.

"I don't want to say anything insensitive. My mother is a Christian and my best friend is a Jew, but I felt like true academic research on the scriptures -- their meanings



King Street United Church has been converted to a mosque, The House of Commandments-Masjid UL Islam, in Trenton.

or characteristics -- aligned more with the practice of Islam."

While understanding the contentiousness of the issue, Abdullah doesn't believe Jesus proclaimed himself to be the son of God. He wrestles with this because his mother is a devout Christian and she was, at first, upset with his conversion. But now he says "She loves the mosque. She talks about the mosque all the time and she talks about the people from here."

Abdullah lives in nearby Bayside with his mother and works online from home doing transcription work for law offices. A room in their home is set aside for prayer, when he can't attend one of the five daily prayers that are the foundation of Muslim worship.

Muslim prayer is based on geography and the solar cycle. Fajr -- the dawn prayer,

Dhuhr -- the noon prayer, Asr -- the afternoon prayer, Maghrib -- the sunset prayer and Isha'a -- the night prayer.

The Friday prayer, performed at midday, replaces the Dhuhr prayer practised on the other six days of the week. Friday is comparable to the Christian Sabbath and is the day when congregants pray and then enjoy a meal and socialize.

For prayer, women and men at the Trenton mosque are separated by a four-foot wall that runs behind the men. Children stay with the women, and boys join the men only when they have reached an age when they understand the seriousness of prayer and can take part without distraction.

Living without a father -- having lost his in early childhood -- Abdullah acknowledges the importance of his mother in his

spiritual growth. He grew up in an environment of contrast.

"Going to a church that was highly conservative -- Pentecostal -- espousing views that my mother herself did not espouse, was confusing for me," he recounts. "My mother has always been a rock of faith... there is no escaping it. When she is mad at god, she turns to god. That carried on to me."

Islam was a huge decision for Abdullah. He states that it is not just something he is doing... It is something he is compelled to do. He was both intellectually and spiritually drawn to Islam.

"To engage with Islamic spirituality is to practise Islam. To read a text that says wash your hands *this way* is not particularly inspiring. But when you start to do it, you become god-focused: god-centred."

Through rituals, Abdullah says god is constantly on his mind. The community has obligations as well. He paraphrases Dawud Wharnsby, a Canadian Universalist Muslim singer-songwriter who spoke of community obligation. Many parents believe that it is their child and it is their business what to do with their child. Wharnsby asks, "Who gave you the right to do that?"

Abdullah believes in this sense of community. "In Islam, people have rights over one another. Your neighbour has to do certain things for you and you have to do certain things in return." He believes this sense of community is intensely spiritual. It is not something easily expressed through text. "Even though I was intellectually drawn to the concept in Islam... to practise it... that was where the change occurred."

Asked about intolerance, with Islamophobia reportedly on the rise in Canada, Abdullah has a universal view on the causes of such sentiments.

The terror attacks of 9/11 and the radicalization that led some Canadians to join ISIS/IS in Syria are a magnet for naysayers and the impetus for much anti-Muslim sentiment.

There appears to be no easy end to grievances displayed through violent actions. In Canada, recent mass killings have in fact been the work of non-Muslims.

Alexandre Bissonnette, who pleaded

guilty to six counts of first-degree in March after opening fire in a Quebec City mosque in January 2017, was targeting Muslims. Some social media posts immediately after the attack called it a false flag operation and blamed a conspiracy, by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to enforce Sharia Law in Canada.

"The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!" posted Alek Minassian to Facebook minutes before mowing down dozens and killing 10 pedestrians in a rented van in Toronto on April 23 of this year. His motivation appeared to be a sense of misogynistic grievance. He had difficulty in finding willing female sexual partners.

"Radicalization doesn't tend to be something that happens within a community environment. Over here, when people are radicalized, it tends to be online." Abdullah believes loners are attracted to extremist ideologies. "Oftentimes they are not particularly religious persons. We see examples wherein terrorists are leaving the country with copies of Islam for Dummies." He believes some live within the textual world of Islam as well. "They find motivation for violence through *jihad*, which means struggle.

"The more we understand about terrorist ideology and motivations, the more we find out is... well, people like me, that sit alone at home all day and then get involved with bad stuff. But instead of getting involved with bad stuff, I came to a mosque."

Mental illness, along with a sense of alienation or disaffection, are root causes for many acts of extreme violence. Abdullah believes radicals are drawn to Islam because of its reputation -- as an outlet for their violent leanings, not because they are devout.

He believes his community keeps itself in check. "We don't find a lot of examples of Muslims who are radicalized within mosques. We find people actually de-radicalized when they enter mosques and learn traditional forms of Islamic knowledge."

Muslims and all faiths are welcome at House of the Commandments-Masjid UL Islam. It is open from sunrise until after dark -- seven days a week. There is no special dress code.



(Left) Tenants of Islam and a list of prophets shared among the Abrahamic faiths adorn the wall in the basement of the House of the Commandments-Masjid UL Islam mosque in Trenton.

(Right) Imam Abu Talib closes his eyes in contemplation during a Friday noon prayer.



The sights and sounds of Christmas



(Top, left) Santa Claus greets children during the Santa Claus Parade in Belleville. The parade of lights travelled all the way up Front Street in the revitalizing Belleville downtown core.
Photo by Andrej Ivanov

(Top, middle) Members of Tawny's School of Dance participate in the annual Santa Claus parade that marched its way down Belleville's downtown.
Photo by Matthew Botha

(Top, right) Spectators enjoy the Christmas lighting display at Jane Forrester Park. Each Friday until Dec. 21, horse-drawn carriage rides and a meet and greet with Santa and Mrs. Claus happens at the display from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. All activities and snacks are free.
Photo by Taehyeong Kim



(Left) Lisa Terpstra stands with her horses Holly and Molly await passengers to board the horse-drawn carriage. The County Carriage Company offered free rides through downtown Belleville as a part of the Christmas tree lighting festivities.
Photo by Shelby Lisk



Peter McCabe leads the Acapella Quinte men's chorus group as they sing carols while the growing audience awaits the lighting of a large Christmas tree in front of Century Place in downtown Belleville.
Photo by Shelby Lisk



(Left) Lights shine brightly as floats delight spectators at the Belleville Santa Claus parade.
Photo by Taehyeong Kim

(Middle) Members of Happy Harmony Choir sing Christmas music at Jane Forrester Park in Belleville.
Photo by Taehyeong Kim

(Right) A young town crier marches at the head of the procession calling out for the children in the crowd to "have their letters ready for Santa" during the opening of the Santa Claus Parade in Belleville.
Photo by Sasha Seltzer

