

Muslim branch sets down Naperville roots

New worship center opens on city's north side

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Tina Jagshi doesn't have such a long commute to make when it's time for religious services these days. Her old house of worship was in Northlake. Her new one is in Naperville, just off Route 59 near Diehl Road.

"It's five minutes from my house," said Jagshi, a neighbor of state Rep. Darlene Senger, R-Naperville.

Senger and an array of other local dignitaries helped a group of area Muslims celebrate the opening of their new meeting place Thursday. Perched on LaSalle Avenue, the Ismaili Jamatkhana hosts activities every day for its members, most of whom are of Indian descent. The Shia branch of Islam follows the spiritual leader His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, 49th hereditary descendant of Prophet Muhammad.

Covering some 11,500 square feet, the airy facility includes office space, classrooms, meeting areas and a vast room for worship anchored by lush saffron yellow carpeting.

The building was designed to harmonize with the surrounding businesses while celebrating its Ismaili roots.

"We didn't want necessarily to stand out, but we didn't want to hide ourselves, either," said community member Nizar Jiwani, pointing out the geometric shapes, symmetry and balance that are elements of traditional Islamic architecture.

Built to accommodate up to 500 worshippers, the center is not yet running at capacity, but its rooms see plenty of use.

Classrooms equipped with desks, video screens and white boards give students of all ages in the Friday evening and Saturday school classes a place to learn about their faith and heritage. One room, filled with educational toys for young children, provides space for newly arrived parents to acclimate to Western culture and its unfamiliar ways. The classrooms also accommodate the first few enrollees in the Jamatkhana's early learning center, which concentrates on paving the way for intellectual success in very young children.

Worship takes place twice a day, at 5:15 a.m. and again at 7:30 p.m. weekdays and 7 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. The faithful sometimes arrive as early as 3:30 a.m. to work on spiritual renewal with the help of tasbih -- strings of beads that are similar to the Roman Catholic rosary.

Beyond the walls of the worship center, the Ismailis engage in outreach through the Aka Khan Development Network, which funds schools, hospitals and clinics all over the world.

The members, particularly those who live in and around Naperville, are pleased to have relocated here.

"Naperville has always been one of the very best places to raise a family," said Murad Bhardani, center president.

For more information, go to www.theismaili.org.