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Peoria converts to Islam talk about their new choice

BY MICHAEL MILLER

PEORIA - (Peoria) Journal Star Islam's reputation took a hit in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Spokesmen spent hours defending the faith against claims that it was a violent religion. Concerns were raised that Muslims would be attacked here out of a sense of revenge.

But out of sight of the media, some life-changing decisions were being made. People were converting to Islam in spite of attacks -- or possibly because of all the attention given to the faith in their wake.

Dustin Boggs, for instance, had long had some "serious, fundamental questions" about certain teachings of Christianity.

"I couldn't find any satisfactory answers to these questions (about) the Trinity, original sin, where certain holiday traditions come from," the self-employed construction worker said.

"You are taught these things and accept them, and that's it. I wasn't really satisfied," he explained.

After listening to a conversation between a Christian and a Muslim in 2002, his interest in Islam was piqued.

He began checking out books on Islam from a library, something which was noticed by a Muslim librarian. The man offered him literature on the faith and invited him to visit the Islamic Center of Peoria.

Now known as Ahmed Shafeeq, the Peoria man converted to Islam by the end of 2002, joining nearly a dozen other Peoria residents who have embraced the religion since the 2001 attacks.

Dr. Muhammad F. "Fayaz" Malik, spokesman for Peoria's Islamic organizations, said many of the converts had already been studying Islam. "Some people who might have been straddling the fence made a choice," Malik said.

National Islamic organizations and analysts said there is a lot of anecdotal evidence of increased conversions, but no hard statistics.

All that it takes to convert to Islam is profession of the creed "There is no God but The God (Allah) and Muhammad is his messenger."

Malik said that expression of faith, known as the person's shahada, must be made in the presence of another person. That witness should verify that the professing person understands what the Quran is and who the prophet Muhammad was. That witness then takes on the

obligation to help the new Muslim learn.

Chris Caras, a 19-year-old sophomore at Knox College in Galesburg, said he wanted to find out more about the faith shortly after the attacks, so he went to the Peoria Heights Public Library and started reading the Quran.

After about 50 pages, he was convinced Islam was the true faith, he said, and became a believer.

"It was a pretty fast decision," he acknowledged.

At first, he said, his parents -- his father is Greek Orthodox and his mother a Lutheran -- took it lightly, but "they're cool with it now."

More than two years later, he is still learning about Islam, he said.

"It's been a gradual process," Caras said.

"I've always been a spiritual person, so in that sense it hasn't changed too much," he said. "It's allowed me to hone in on my spiritual life more."

Islam allowed Sarah Wagner to focus on emotional healing.

The 23-year-old Peoria woman said she had studied Islam a bit in the wake of the terrorist attacks but didn't begin intensive study until she became the victim of a sexual assault. She came upon the Quran in a public library and "used it to guide me and to heal me."

She converted in 2002, "and I've never been happier."

"I'm a much more peaceful person," Wagner said. "I've found my center. That center is, of course, God."

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