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Coronavirus: 'The mosque is our home.' Ramadan will be different this year for Muslims

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It's been over a month now that imam Hossam Musa of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati has led sermons to an empty mosque in West Chester.

It's difficult, he said. Nobody is physically there. Just a camera.

He knows an empty mosque is what is best as the community battles the spread of the novel coronavirus. Musa said the mosque closed a few days prior to Gov. Mike DeWine's stay-at-home order.

But still, he said, it's difficult emotionally, psychologically and at times spiritually to continue without shaking people's hands, giving hugs or having community dinners with his congregation. Fatima Abouelalla, 24, has grown up in this community. A graduate of the International Academy of Cincinnati, adjacent to the mosque, Abouelalla says she holds the center "close to her heart." She misses her friends.

"The mosque is our home," Musa said. "We gather at the mosque, we pray at the mosque, we break fast at the mosque, we celebrate at the mosque."

That sentiment is especially true during Ramadan, the month-long holiday in which Muslims read the Qur'an, come together in communal prayer and fast. It is a period of "intense spiritual rejuvenation" and a time for Muslims to be especially charitable, [according to the Islamic Networks Group \(https://ing.org/ramadan-information-sheet/\)](https://ing.org/ramadan-information-sheet/). Ramadan is a social month, Musa said.

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This year, Muslims will begin observing Ramadan on Thursday evening.

"It's a huge month for us. We celebrate by coming together for dinners at the mosque and we usually have daily prayers in the evening, (with) families and children and all of that. And all of that won't be taking place this year," Musa said.

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Instead, Musa and others will continue to lead prayers through [online streaming services \(http://web-extract.constantcontact.com/v1/social_annotation_v2?permalink_uri=https%3A%2F%2Fmyemail.constantcontact.com%2FRamadan-2020---ICGC-Community-\)](http://web-extract.constantcontact.com/v1/social_annotation_v2?permalink_uri=https%3A%2F%2Fmyemail.constantcontact.com%2FRamadan-2020---ICGC-Community-)

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[Message.html%3Fsoid%3D111871550000%26aid%3D84cto6XckNQ&image_url=https%3A%2F%2Fimgssl.constantcontact.com%2Fui%2Fsmm%2Fspui%2Femail-3-lrg-fb.jpg&fbclid=IwAR1mUHk7qf9sqExR1k-4Sblqz5MmZnKOjLucf4DRU-yGvRLXrsgAhmk4vj4](https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/04/23/coronavirus-the-mosque-our-home-ramadan-prayers-streamed-online/3005265001/)). All of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati's activities, including Sunday school, classes, weekly lectures and Friday sermons have been moved online.

Abouelalla says Ramadan is the holiest month to Muslims. The mosque is at the center of this holiday; it is where the community goes to experience "the most spiritual time of the year."

"I think all of us will take this opportunity to reflect and recognize what's really important in life. And appreciate the small blessings that we often overlooked, in the past, I think," Abouelalla said.

Listening to the sermons from the TV in her living room, Abouelalla says she misses being with her loved ones at the mosque. But it has given her an opportunity to appreciate her family, who she feels blessed to be quarantined with at this time. Life's normalcies being taken away, she said, has given her an incentive to pray and give back.

"I'm really proud to be a part of this community at this time," Abouelalla said.

The Center is reviewing new information as it comes in, Musa said. He is not sure when the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati will reopen.

Giving back

Local Islamic organizations are encouraging Muslims to give to charity in the month of Ramadan.

The Ohio Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) posted on their website promoting the "Ramadan 2020 Gift Matching Challenge."

"Thanks to generous donors, EVERY donation made to CAIR-Ohio during Ramadan 2020 will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$160,000," the [website](https://donorbox.org/ramadan-2020-160-000-matching-challenge?fbclid=IwAR1-VnwkRpwWjEwLPU1NmYi8YpSdY0OhpJAdXvBAhExSMiKcfokLskKiHxk) (<https://donorbox.org/ramadan-2020-160-000-matching-challenge?fbclid=IwAR1-VnwkRpwWjEwLPU1NmYi8YpSdY0OhpJAdXvBAhExSMiKcfokLskKiHxk>) states.

The proceeds will go to CAIR, a national Muslim civil right and advocacy group.

The Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati is focusing on COVID-19 relief efforts.

Mosque members began sewing masks for local hospitals in March, Musa said. The mosque has distributed over 1,000 masks to hospitals in Greater Cincinnati and West Chester, and is also participating in food drives to distribute groceries to those in need while practicing proper social distancing protocols.

Musa said that aside from food and masks, the mosque is also offering daily prayers to healthcare providers, senior home employees, firefighters, police and others working on the front lines of the pandemic, as well as the families of those who have died due to COVID-19.

"Our prayers go out to everyone that's afflicted by this locally, nationally and throughout the entire world," Musa said.

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