

In West Warwick, Islamic school goes to church

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Sister Reem Manla teaches a kindergarten class with Emaz Khan, Ahmed Al-Alami and Mohamed Al-Majzoub at the Islamic School of Rhode Island's temporary home in the Full Life Christian Fellowship Church building. The Providence Journal / Bob Breidenbach

WEST WARWICK — By all accounts, Rose Achabi is a shy person.

But as she sat through Easter service at the Full Life Christian Fellowship Church, she could no longer hold her tongue.

At the Islamic School of Rhode Island at 840 Providence St., where she is a teacher's assistant, floodwaters had risen more than four feet, seeping into the pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade classrooms on the first floor, damaging students' books, computers, desks, chairs and teachers' lesson plans. Everything on that floor had to be thrown away.

When the service was over, she approached her pastor, Brian Regan, hesitating a little given it was Easter, but felt the church family she had known since she was a teenager would come through. She asked Regan if the Islamic School could use the church's building, which had once served as a Catholic school that belonged to Our Lady of Good Counsel, for classes

"The pastor didn't hesitate," said Achabi, a Christian who is married to a Muslim and has three children attending the Islamic School. School members met with Regan Sunday night after he had Easter dinner. "I know they felt funny about meeting on Easter, but they were really worried about finding a place to have their school," Regan said.

Video

On Thursday, the Islamic School reopened at the Full Life Christian Fellowship Church not far down the road at 59 Pleasant St.

Regan, who visited the school Thursday, said he consulted his board of directors first, and then jumped at the chance to fill the building with children. The church uses it for church service and Sunday school.

“I usually feel bad. All week long, the building is empty. We have a really large building. I thought ‘What a great opportunity to fill the space,’ ” Regan said.

No one said anything about letting a Muslim school into a Christian church, he said. “There was a need, and we were lucky enough to be able to help. A firefighter doesn’t ask a person what their faith is when he is rescuing them.”

The classrooms in the former school came alive once again Thursday as teachers resumed their lessons in the Sunday school classrooms with tall windows that let in a lot of light. Regan said the church bought the building about four or five years ago but it was bigger than they needed. The church is trying to sell it.

In one classroom, children talked as they readied for a pre-test before they learned new spelling words. Their teacher, Jameelah Madyun, said the flood wiped out their paper supplies and writing instruments, so the school was asking students to bring some from home.

The school has 131 students who come mostly from Rhode Island, with one or two from Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Habis Obyat, a math and science teacher for the third and fourth grades, said many of his students’ workbooks, textbooks and some of their backpacks were on a supply shelf that was covered with water. Luckily, he had his lesson plans saved on a USB drive. “It will take one or two months to get the workbooks and textbooks,” he said.

In another class, seventh graders were learning a chapter from the Koran, reciting verses in Arabic.

Principal Basima Al-Jallad said she was grateful to the church for giving the school a temporary home. She said it would take about four weeks for the building to be cleaned up and for repairs to be made. The boiler has to be replaced and so does the gymnasium floor. She estimated the cost of repairs would be more than \$400,000 and said that the nonprofit school did not qualify for Federal Emergency Management Agency funding, so will have to raise the money.

Regan is not charging the school for using the building and people who wish to help the school can log on to ricma.org to make a donation.

Achabi said the Islamic School and Christian Fellowship Church working together can set an example. “I hope it will inspire people to come together,” she said.