

1e – Breaking New Ground

The first Muslim families in Quincy, Mass., settled there in the 1930s. The local congregation established a mosque in the early 1960s and grew over the next 30 years to include more than 500 members. The joyous process of planning a new, larger worship center in Milton, Mass., took a somber turn in 1991 when local residents altered zoning provisions and parking restrictions and used other legal maneuvers to block purchase of the building site.

*After filing a civil rights lawsuit, the Muslim community decided to change its strategy and focus on the future. Almost immediately, a couple from Sharon, a predominantly Jewish town nearby, extended an offer to sell the group their farm. The Sharon clergy association soon added its voice to the welcome. What had become an experience of discouragement and discrimination was transformed once again - into an affirmation of religious diversity. The following article covering the groundbreaking ceremony for the new mosque appeared in *The Boston Globe* on April 3, 1993.*

Dr. Mian Ashraf, president of the Islamic Center of New England, scanned the makeshift tent protecting the crowd from a frigid, steady drizzle.

He saw a Greek Orthodox bishop and a Catholic bishop, Jesuit priests and Protestant ministers. He saw enough rabbis to field a basketball team. He saw Talal Eid, imam of his congregation, and a host of other Muslim ministers. And he had to smile.

"I thought all these religious leaders might be able to arrange some better weather than this," said Ashraf, beaming like a proud father.

Pillars of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities came together for yesterday's groundbreaking of the Islamic Center's new Sharon headquarters. The buzzwords of the day were harmony, unity, peace, strength, mutual respect, common ground. And the mood was positively giddy.

"Welcome to Sharon: the New Jerusalem," Eid crowed.

For Ashraf, Eid and the rest of their 500-member congregation, the ceremony marked a triumphant milestone in a long search for a new home. The congregation has outgrown its Quincy Point headquarters and now intends to build a new school for religious instruction, a social hall and eventually a mosque on its 55-acre Sharon property, a former horse farm off Chase Drive. But there were times not long ago when center officials wondered if this day would ever come.

Last year, they thought they had reached a deal with the Assumptionist Fathers, a Roman Catholic order, to buy a 7 1/2-acre property on Adams Street in Milton. The deal fell through at the last minute when five local opponents of the center bought the property themselves, leading the center to file a discrimination suit.

But congregation leaders dropped the suit, preferring to continue their search for a community where they were welcome. They found that welcome in Sharon, a quiet suburb with a sizeable Christian community and an even larger Jewish population.

"We've had a wonderful reception in Sharon," Ashraf said. "Our new neighbors have welcomed us with open arms. That doesn't happen very often."

Yesterday afternoon, speaker after speaker stood upon a wobbly chair to salute Ashraf and praise his vision of interfaith harmony. Holy men, politicians, diplomats, youth workers, professors - even the center's cook said a few words. They quoted the

Koran, the Torah and the New Testament. The metaphors varied, but the message stayed the same.

"We are truly breaking ground today," said Rabbi Barry Starr of Sharon. "We're breaking new ground for a new community."



The completed Islamic Center of New England in Sharon, MA

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