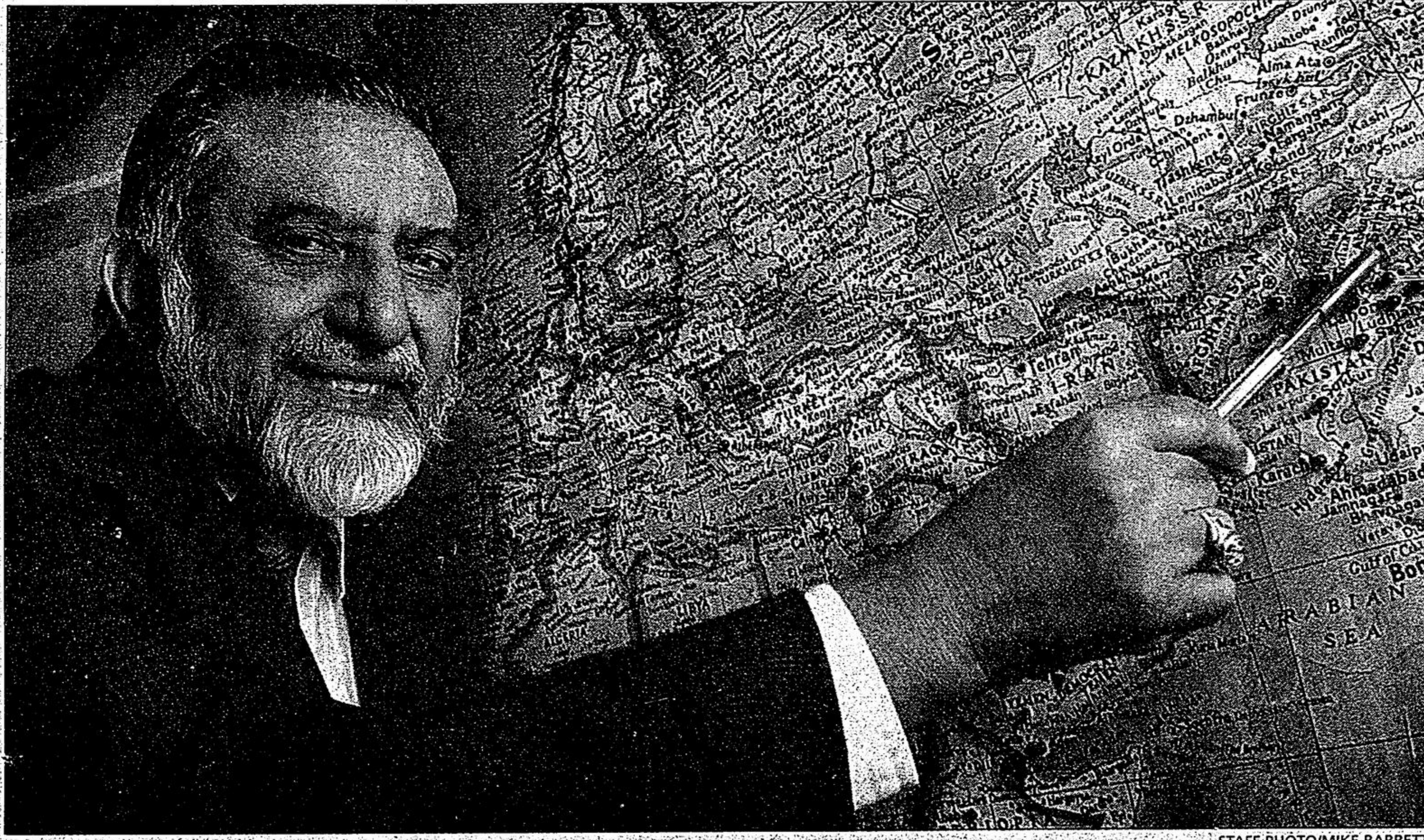


Economist & Sun • Stouffville Tribune

FAITH

Missionaries lead life of ...



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Irshad Ahmad, one of the few missionaries in York Region, points to the place where Islam's Ahmadiyya movement originated.

Soul searching

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or touched. They must be felt with the heart.

Looking at Irshad Ahmad, it takes only a few moments to realize there is something about the man that separates him from the vast majority of men.

His eyes are a curious blue-green and contrast starkly with his brown skin.

But more than their striking physical appearance, they draw observers into his peaceful demeanour and compelling warmth.

If eyes are windows to the soul, a cursory glance reveals the 61-year-old is prepared for a mission that would scare the toughest men half his age: visiting a Third World country and forsaking the comforts of modern life to share the truths of Islam.

"I want to serve the Lord and spread the word of God. From my childhood, that was the aim of my life," he said inside Maple's Ahmadiyya Mosque.

Mr. Ahmad is one of only a few missionaries who live, study or work in York Region.

No matter their religious denomination, they all hold to the same unwavering conviction: the greatest fulfilment comes in experiencing God's love through service to others.

Their geographical destinations often differ, but all missionaries share the goals of helping needy people through educational, health or infrastructure projects and disseminating the truths of their religious faiths.

Though he has yet to embark on a major trip, Mr. Ahmad has the makings of a strong missionary leader.

His preference is to visit a Third World nation, but he said he's prepared for a mission to any country his superiors choose.

He has studied in the mosque for nearly a year after studying many years in Saskatchewan, where he gave up the comforts of North American society.

Mr. Ahmad has lived an austere lifestyle, renouncing secular

diversions that might take his mind off Allah, to prepare for the trip.

"In spite of living 35 years in Canada, I've kept my life very simple for that reason," he said.

The religious minister helping Mr. Ahmad prepare joked about the ease with which the missionary-in-training renounced the behaviours many assume are inevitable in North America.

"He considers them amenities," Afzal Mirza said in reference to various temptations, explaining they are simply pleasant diversions that can be cast aside when one is devoted to what is important.

The renouncing of worldly val-

See MISSIONARIES, page 15.



Ron Csillag

Boomers shall lead them

We baby boomers have been blamed for a lot of things — urban sprawl, crowded schools, depleted pension funds — but not for single-handedly rescuing religion.

Until now. Sort of.

I qualify that because boomers — the eight million richest, best-educated Canadians born between 1946 and 1964, while a spiritually restless lot, ever searching, wondering and brooding on their own mortality — are, nevertheless, shunning "established" religions in favour of that amorphous term, "spirituality."

For them, spirituality isn't happening in the mainstream churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. The numbers speak to that: In 1945, 60 per cent of Canadians claimed weekly attendance at a house of worship and 82 per cent professed membership in one of the "mainstream" faiths. By 1990, only 23 per cent attended regularly and 29 per cent claimed to follow an accepted religion (just 16 per cent of boomers are weekly attenders at United and Anglican churches).

An Angus-Reid poll in 2000 found 84 per cent of Canadians believe in God, with almost that many saying their personal beliefs are more important than the official teachings of their faith. Church seems to get in the way of worship.

But fear not, for boomers are leading the way, in a different direction, perhaps.

While most boomers are staying away from houses of worship in droves, fully 65 per cent of them say spirituality is important to them. That forms the basis for a piercing new look at shifting religious trends in Canada: Divine Hunger: Canadians on Spiritual Walkabout by Peter C. Emberley, who argues, with some wryness, that spiritu-

See SEEKING, page 15.

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