

REIMAGINING
**MUSLIM
SPACES**

Understanding Effective Civic Engagement

THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA:

A CASE STUDY



REIMAGINING MUSLIM SPACES

Dear Colleagues:

The goal of our “Reimagining Muslim Spaces” project is to produce research-driven recommendations to enable the development of a mosque that is:

1. Welcoming: Inclusive and engaging
2. Well Governed: Effective and transparent
3. A Hub for Hope: A source of community service

To illustrate how mosques can serve as hubs for hope, ISPU identified four real life examples of American Muslim Institutions doing just that. Rather than simply providing theoretical advice, our researchers interviewed the very people who built these programs and institutions to identify the secret to their success and the wisdom gained from their struggles. Our case studies cover:

1. A **“Third Space”** with MakeSpace in Washington, DC
2. A **Free Medical Clinic** with the HUDA Clinic in Detroit, MI
3. A **Jobs Center** with the SHARE Center in Lexington, KY
4. A **Civic Engagement Program** with the Muslim Community Association in Santa Clara, CA

We hope these case studies will inspire and instruct others working to develop institutions that serve and uplift.

Warmly,



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Executive Summary

The Muslim Community Association (MCA), located in Santa Clara, California, is one of the largest mosques^a in the United States. Established in 1981, MCA has consistently led efforts to promote civic engagement in the American Muslim community. MCA, on its own or in partnership with organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), regularly hosts events and activities focused on involving Muslims in the civic life of America, including sponsoring candidate forums and educational programs to inform the Muslim community of their rights and responsibilities as active American citizens.

In this report, using MCA as a case study, the following lessons can be derived for communities hoping to launch similar initiatives:

- 1. To deliver effective results, civic engagement must be a high priority for the mosque and must be ingrained in the organizational culture.** Very early in its establishment, MCA identified civic engagement as a core element of its mission. Despite setbacks along the way, this organizational awareness and prioritization has produced consistent messaging, which has encouraged civic engagement and allowed many successful partnerships and initiatives to blossom.
- 2. Understand the limitations of a mosque, and build effective partnerships to fulfill goals that are better realized by other organizations.** MCA consciously incubated and supported other Muslim organizations and individuals to focus on civic engagement issues, realizing that mosques cannot do everything. MCA understood that certain aspects of the civic engagement agenda were best served by groups that devoted their full attention to fulfilling the mission of civic engagement.
- 3. Presence of a clear vision for civic engagement is more important than a big budget.** MCA leaders have effectively identified clear, manageable goals for civic engagement in light of the needs of their community and their organizational and financial limitations. In 1995, MCA leaders set as their grand vision the election of a Muslim mayor of San Francisco by 2020. Today, however, MCA leaders are choosing to take small, consistent steps toward guiding the next generation of Muslims to run for local office. The focus is on education and encouragement for civic engagement. There is no large budget for these efforts, and major events are held only once every quarter. Yet community interest and participation are steadily increasing.
- 4. Have a “big tent” philosophy to maximize participation.** MCA enjoys growing support for civic engagement efforts because it works to accommodate a wide spectrum of Islamic views, as long as they are within the parameters of mainstream Islam. An inclusive approach to Islamic principles positively affects community participation in other socially and civically focused initiatives. However, in MCA’s case, at present, this philosophy is not fully realized with regards to the participation of women in leadership roles. Much more remains to be done.
- 5. Empower and utilize the community as a resource.** MCA is keenly aware of the diverse and highly talented support base it enjoys. It takes effective measures to harness the talent and drive of its members by providing platforms and encouraging entrepreneurship. At the same time, MCA seeks to meet the high expectations of its members.

^a Mosque: A Muslim place of worship.

Understanding Effective Civic Engagement

American Muslim leaders have long stressed the urgent need for stronger civic engagement among the Muslim community. In recent years, with every election cycle, the Muslim community witnesses rising Islamophobic rhetoric from political candidates. As Islamophobic language and acts become more common in American society, there is a clear understanding among Muslim leaders that to address this threat, the Muslim community must proactively participate in the American civic and political arenas. A good example of a mosque that has embraced the concept of civic engagement is the Muslim Community Association (MCA) of Santa Clara, California. In this report, using MCA as a case study, we examine how a mosque can implement policies to encourage civic engagement in its local Muslim community.

The manifestations of civic engagement are varied, but the following can be used as a broad description:

Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of one's community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and nonpolitical processes.¹

In the context of this case study, civic engagement can mean any steps taken by a mosque to encourage or facilitate the Muslim community's participation in civic life, including political involvement, issue-based activism, community service, and involvement in anti-defamation activities to combat Islamophobia and misinformation. This may also include workshops, lectures, and seminars aimed at making the community more civically, socially, and politically aware.

Any program or event, whether activist or educational in nature, that seeks an enhanced participation of Muslims in the wider American society can be understood as encouraging civic engagement.

In this broad sense of the term, MCA has, since its inception, placed a strong emphasis on civic engagement.

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MCA: The Beginning

Located in the heart of Silicon Valley in Santa Clara, California, MCA was established as a nonprofit religious organization in 1981. It began as a small prayer space known as Masjid^b un-Noor, which grew and acquired the current MCA building in 1994. Since then, it has grown exponentially in both physical and congregational size. The current MCA building is approximately 90,000 square feet and includes a large banquet hall. The weekly Friday or *Juma'ah*^c prayers are attended by more than 3,000 people. MCA is open for the five daily prayers and provides a full-time Islamic school, a weekend Islamic school, Islamic counseling, adult education, youth programs, women's services, *dawah*,^d and social services such as financial assistance and free legal advice.

The mission of MCA is to “Live our faith as a congregation, inspired by the teachings of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)^e as individuals and as a collective body, and to foster a mission of peace, justice and compassion for all within our Mosque, our community and the world.”² Since its inception, MCA has placed a strong emphasis on the need for the mosque to play an increasing role in civic engagement among its congregation and the Muslim community. This is reflected in the goals listed on the MCA website, which include “to teach Islamic beliefs and values in the context of deepening spirituality and *community involvement*” and “to inspire leaders for *stewardship in community service*” (emphasis added).³

Within a few years of being formed, MCA's founding leaders had identified civic engagement as a key area of focus. Around 1995, MCA engaged in strategic planning with the help of professional management consultants. At the end of the planning, the leaders of MCA identified an organizational vision that later became known as “Vision 2020,” the aim of which was to have a Muslim mayor of San Francisco by the year 2020. Although that aim continues to be a challenge for the Bay Area Muslim community at present, this early vision is a clear indication of organizational priorities and focus at MCA.

An Organizational Vision for Civic Engagement

What set MCA apart from most American mosques was an early awareness for the need for increased Muslim civic engagement, at a time when most American mosques were internally focused on establishing Muslim institutions, not externally focused on civic or political integration. Civic engagement has been ingrained in the culture at MCA, where it has been encased in the message that *We are American Muslims, fully Muslim and*

^b Masjid: A Muslim place of worship.

^c Juma'ah: Friday Noon Prayer.

^d Dawah: Inviting people to Islam; outreach/education on Islam.

^e PBUH: Peace Be Upon Him - A prayer said by Muslims after saying the Prophet's name out of reverence.

fully American. Civic engagement, therefore, started first with the consistent message at Juma'ah prayers and lectures that Muslims should be involved in American society to contribute to improving America. Second, at an early stage, MCA prioritized reaching out to its neighbors in the form of open houses during *Ramadan* and *Hajj*^f seasons. Third, MCA was on friendly terms with public officials, congressmen, senators, state assembly members, city council members, and members of the broader community, and regularly invited them to events where speakers talked about Islam and why Muslims seek social and political integration in the American fabric of society.

Another conscious strategy MCA used in its early years was to serve as a catalyst and supporter for the creation of other Muslim organizations to pursue the agenda of civic engagement. The logic was that MCA should not try to do everything and thereby not do anything well. In the thinking of MCA leaders, certain societal matters can be better served by groups that devote their full time and energy to them. In this regard the founding of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)-California was led by MCA leaders. Also, the establishment of chapters of the Muslim American Society and the Islamic Circle of North America were viewed as complementary to MCA's interests in civic engagement.

One prominent MCA leader who has focused on political involvement is Dr. Muhammad Nadeem. Dr. Nadeem served MCA for more than 15 years, first as a committee volunteer, next as a member of the Board of Directors, then as Vice President, and finally as President. Starting in 2012, Dr. Nadeem joined the local city

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^f Ramadan: Month of fasting, when the Quran was first revealed; Hajj: Pilgrimage to Mecca.

council as a Civil Services Commissioner. Dr. Nadeem ran for Santa Clara City Council in 2010, 2012, and 2014, but was unable to win a seat. Dr. Nadeem continues to be involved with MCA, serving as an adviser, helping with fundraising, and hosting elected officials who are invited to speak at MCA events. According to Dr. Nadeem, in recent years, the Muslim community around MCA has become increasingly active in civic engagement. There is now a greater focus on and interest in programs such as voter registration drives and interacting with elected public officials. This greater interest, according to Dr. Nadeem, can be linked to the founding culture at MCA and the years of efforts that have helped build relationships with the community and MCA's neighbors.

At present, the MCA vision for civic engagement is not as ambitious as Vision 2020 was. For Nilamudeen Shaihu, who leads civic engagement efforts on the MCA Board of Directors, the reasons the Muslim community is still not able to field a candidate to run for mayor of San Francisco is that the MCA leadership, after identifying it as a goal, did not take significant steps to achieve it. As a result, the idea remained entrenched in MCA culture, but without much targeted practical implementation. Today, although MCA has been in the Santa Clara community for nearly 30 years, there has never been a Muslim elected official in the city or state government.

MCA wants to instill a passion for public life and public service among the entire Muslim community, but especially young adults.

This is not entirely surprising when one considers that although the San Francisco Bay Area hosts one of the largest Muslim populations in the United States, Muslims still make up just 3.5 percent of the area's total population.⁴

MCA aims to change this lack of representation by taking small but focused steps. For Nilamudeen Shaihu, the solution lies with the next generation:

That is what I think is important: We have to actually engage our next generation, our hope in the world. I [talked with] Dr. Nadeem about how he can help us out. Maybe they (the next generation) can listen (and learn) how they can get involved, how they can participate, how they can become a mayor, become a city counselor. So if not this year, maybe down the line, in the near future.⁵

Thus at present, MCA's vision for civic engagement in the political arena aims to guide and encourage the next generation of Muslims to run for local office. For Dr. Nadeem, there has been a shift in attitudes toward political involvement among younger American Muslims, but Muslims aged 25 to 30 are still not adequately engaged with local governance and city programs. MCA wants to instill a passion for public life and public service among the entire Muslim community, but especially young adults. There is still a prevalent apathy, rooted in the idea that Muslim representation at the local

government level is unlikely to change much for Muslims. It is these attitudes that MCA seeks to change. According to Dr. Nadeem:

I think to get to that point (Vision 2020), we have a lot of work to do. It's not going to be easy, because elections are hard. It requires a lot of preparation, money, and community support. And so becoming a mayor is a wonderful dream, you know, assembly member and congressman, also. But as a community, we have to get there, and it's going to take some time for preparation and building to get there.⁶

But Dr. Nadeem is still optimistic, even with his three unsuccessful attempts to run for local city office:

I think [a Muslim mayor in San Francisco] will happen sooner or later. It is not unachievable. I really think we are within striking distance, provided that we pay attention to local issues and get involved.⁷

How MCA Operates

MCA is headed by a president and vice president; other board members include a treasurer, a general secretary, and secretaries to head specific programming areas. These include a dawah secretary, social secretary, youth secretary, and a women's representative.

The topic of women in leadership positions at MCA has been a problematic

one. Under the original MCA Constitution drafted in the 1990s, the only board position open to women was that of a women's representative. This rule was changed in 2016. Under the new rules, women can now run for any of the board positions, but they are still not permitted to hold the position of president.

After a year of deliberation and consultation with the MCA Legal Committee, the Constitutional Committee suggested removing the restrictions on women from participating in the governance of MCA.

In 2015, MCA formed a Constitutional Committee and tasked it with reviewing and suggesting amendments to the MCA Constitution. After a year of deliberation and consultation with the MCA Legal Committee, the Constitutional Committee suggested removing the restrictions on women from participating in the governance of MCA. It was suggested that all board positions, including the position of president, be open to women. These suggestions were then taken to the wider MCA community for a vote. The community voted to accept the suggestion of all board positions being opened to women, but rejected the suggestion that women be allowed to run for president. Note,

however, that not all MCA attendees were eligible to vote on the issue; voting rights are conferred only to those MCA members who pay an annual membership fee. This leaves the possibility that the vote on the constitutional amendments was not representative of the views of the broader community.

Civic engagement initiatives are spread out in various units of MCA, but most civic engagement initiatives fall under the purview of the Social Secretary, Nilamudeen Shaihu (although there is overlap with other committees as well). That civic engagement does not fall under any unit within MCA's organizational structure is a clear weakness. However, Shaihu, who is in his third year as a board member and leader of the Social Committee, has embraced a renewed focus on civic engagement.

Civic Engagement Programs Organized by MCA

Civic engagement programs at MCA fall into one of three broad categories:



Electoral politics, which include events aimed at encouraging community interaction with individuals holding or seeking to hold elected office;



Neighborhood outreach, which includes open houses and other activities aimed at improving relationships with neighbors; and...



Promotion within the MCA community of civic engagement values and skills, which includes messaging and programs such as MCA Toastmasters.

Engaging Public Officials

MCA regularly holds candidate forums at which it invites candidates running for office at the city and state level to meet with MCA community members. The frequency of these events is aligned with local and state election cycles. In 2015, MCA held two such events. The first was a local district election candidate forum, in which nine city officials participated. It was attended by more than 200 community members, a full house. The second was a congressional candidate forum in which seven candidates participated. Again, more than 200 community members attended. At both events there was a strong showing from the candidates and the community, and the forums were followed by lively discussions among audience members, a majority of whom were MCA members.

Other similar events include visits to MCA by public officials. Earlier in 2015, MCA was visited by a high-ranking agent from the Drug Enforcement Administration who gave a lecture that was attended by more than 300 community members, and had a breakfast meeting with 50 to 60 community leaders.

Engaging Neighbors

MCA regularly organizes open houses for neighbors and visitors. Every Ramadan, MCA hosts a large open house event at which non-Muslim neighbors and organizations are invited. Each year, 400 to 500 neighbors take part in a 3-hour-long program. The event consists of an *iftar*,⁸ a tour of the MCA premises, speeches and an open question and answer session. This event is very popular with MCA's non-Muslim neighbors; those who are invited once often ask to be invited again.

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In December 2015, MCA organized its first-ever community bake sale. The event invited all nonprofit organizations from the local neighborhood to set up stalls with baked goods to raise funds. Invitations were not limited to Muslim nonprofits; rather, an effort was made to include all nonprofit organizations that work for the good of the wider community and neighborhood. The response to the bake sale was extremely positive, and MCA plans to make this a recurring event.

MCA saw the positive results of these community engagement efforts in the aftermath of the San Bernadino shooting, which was carried out by two Muslims who killed 14 people and injured 22.⁸ Although the attacks led to a sharp rise in Islamophobic attacks against Muslims around the country with many mosques being vandalized, the story at MCA was starkly different.⁹ MCA received numerous letters and messages from non-Muslim neighbors showing their support for MCA and all its Muslim community members. At one point, about 20 people arrived at MCA, holding signs with messages of encouragement and friendship. Nilamuddin recalls the time and says that everyone at MCA was overwhelmed by the love they received from their non-Muslim friends in that difficult time. He recalls one woman in particular who not only wrote a highly sympathetic message but also donated \$100 to show her support for the Muslim community.

⁸ Iftar: A meal eaten by Muslims breaking their fast after sunset during the month of Ramadan.

Promoting Civic Engagement: Messaging

Through sermons and lectures, Muslims hear the message that they should embrace their American Muslim identity and become involved in American society. The Social Committee hosts a monthly social/educational event, and approximately once every four months the evening topic focuses on civic engagement. Additionally, there is a regular lecture on Martin Luther King Day that focuses on encouraging involvement in social justice issues.

Developing Life Skills for Civic Engagement

MCA hosts a variety of programs to assist Muslims with integrating into American society. For example, MCA hosts a Toastmasters Club, which is part of Toastmasters International. In its weekly meetings, the club seeks to improve the communication and leadership skills of its members.

Life skills classes are also held weekly, focusing on numerous issues including time management, anger management, and other issues.

A legal clinic with free consultation services is held once a week.

Civic Engagement Programs Organized by Key Partners

MCA's success with civic engagement efforts can be linked to its development of key partnerships with organizations devoted to aspects of the civic engagement agenda. Perhaps the most important among these is the long-time MCA partnership with CAIR. MCA also regularly partners with other Muslim organizations such as the Islamic Circle of North America and the Muslim American Society.

The Muslim American Society has a wide variety of career services, including career counseling, job preparation, job search assistance, and mentorship. A support group meets every Saturday and focuses on networking and job preparation.

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Council on American-Islamic Relations

The CAIR regional office is intentionally located directly across the street from MCA. MCA has served as a catalyst and strong supporter of CAIR. CAIR's mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower

American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.¹⁰ This mission aligns well with the MCA vision of educating and encouraging Muslims to become more civically engaged and empowered. Thus for years, MCA and CAIR have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship based on mutual respect and interests.

Many civic engagement events at MCA are held in partnership with CAIR. According to Sameena Usman, Government Relations Coordinator for CAIR in the San Francisco Bay Area, MCA leadership and members understand the importance of civic engagement for American Muslims, and CAIR relies on MCA to raise public awareness and interest.

I remember before, people were not interested in [civic engagement]. But now I feel like people recognize that we do need to be involved. There's an importance to that, in terms of how that translates into action. I feel as though we [Muslims] need to be more involved with the greater community...¹¹

When planning large events such as the candidate forums, often CAIR representatives will propose an event, and MCA will decide whether it can host it. The MCA building includes a large banquet hall that MCA then rents to CAIR at a subsidized rate. MCA provides the venue, refreshments, and publicity for the event, while CAIR takes care of the rest of the logistics of the event. CAIR provides most of the volunteers for the events, but MCA offers assistance as needed. In this way, CAIR and MCA have been hosting joint candidate forums and other events since 2005.

MCA and mosques in general allow CAIR access to the community that is particularly effective for encouraging civic engagement. According to Zahra Billoo, the Executive Director of CAIR in the San Francisco Bay Area:

The pulpit, the khutbah^h has been—I would say the most influential tactic. [...] [Mosques] opening up their doors to advocacy and mobilization organizations has been really helpful because they're really the ones with the message. So for example, there are masjids in the Bay Area that every week host thousands of Muslims. That's not something that Muslim advocacy organizations otherwise do. And so being receptive and open to bridging that has worked well in our case. [...] When a mosque is supportive and onboard with a candidate forum, voter educational event or registration drive or a letter writing campaign, we can mobilize hundreds, if not thousands more contacts and connections than if we were to host it at the park down the street.¹²

^h Khutbah: Sermon given during the Friday Noon Prayer.

CAIR, with its organizational focus on government and civil rights, maintains strong relationships with elected officials. CAIR also has the organizational ability to provide more focused educational materials for these events. For example, for candidate forums, CAIR provides voter guides that let community members know how the candidates have voted on certain bills in Congress. CAIR analyzes each candidate's stance on various issues and gives the candidate a score. However, CAIR is not able to promote any candidates or political party because of its own and the MCA's 501(c)(3) statuses, which restrict nonprofit organizations from engaging in partisan politics.

CAIR organizes two major programs to educate Muslims about civic engagement. The first is the annual Muslim Day at the Capital, which brings Muslims to Sacramento to hear briefings on issues, learn how to interact with media and government, and then meet with their representatives. Another major program is the Muslim Youth Leadership Program, which brings Muslim high school students to Sacramento for a four-day retreat to introduce them to media and government. MCA is a main supporter of these programs.

Other MCA activities held in collaboration with CAIR include the Know Your Rights workshop series in which CAIR provides most of the speakers. CAIR also regularly hosts a voter registration booth at MCA and collects signatures for petitions. For example, a CAIR petition in response to the Gaza War in 2014 gained hundreds of signatures from the MCA community. In addition, CAIR members regularly visit MCA for outreach purposes and to promote events and initiatives at CAIR. Sameena Usman estimates that CAIR hosts a table at MCA approximately twice every month.

Usman estimates that up to 70 percent of civic engagement events at MCA are co-sponsored by CAIR. It is clear that both organizations benefit each other immensely, and that the partnership will continue to flourish.

Community Service Partnerships

MCA partners with many different organizations to engage in community service activities. Every week MCA volunteers work with another local mosque to provide sandwiches to homeless/poor people in downtown San Jose. Every month MCA volunteers go to the major food bank in the area to help sort and package food.

Chapters of both the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) and Muslim American Society have offices around the corner from MCA, drawing MCA participants in their many programs. ICNA has a robust program for feeding the hungry, including preparing meals and distributing them in Oakland and San Francisco. The Muslim American Society organizes community service programs such as a Back to School Backpack Drive, Habitat for Humanity home construction, neighborhood cleanups, city tree plantings, and various walkathons and runs.

MCA's Big Tent Approach

MCA members come from 50 different nations, and the congregation is one of the largest in the country. A typical Juma'ah prayer hosts 3,000 attendees, and this number rises to more than 10,000 for *Eid al-Fitr*ⁱ prayers. Located in Silicon Valley, MCA attracts highly educated and skilled Muslims from around the United States and the world. Fouad Khatib, the current President of MCA, counts the demographic diversity around MCA as one of the biggest factors of its success. Because of the large numbers of highly educated Muslims and the vast diversity in ethnicities and nationalities, MCA has strongly embraced a “big tent” philosophy of inclusion. According to President Fouad Khatib:

We have a large population group, and because of the Silicon Valley employment base, it's a demographic group that is well educated, etc. So, we have tons of talent, so that makes it easy. What actually facilitated [civic engagement] over the years, I would say, is our “big tent” philosophy, whereby we accommodate all views. We do not let any particular view or ideology dominate the masjid in this. I don't mean to say we do not let—not with a negative connotation. I would say we accommodate a wide variety of views, as long as they are within the parameters of Islam, universally accepted Islam. So, this general middle-path approach that accommodates and tolerates various views, I think has enabled us also to engage in civic engagement type of activities. There is no such segment that is disinterested in such activities. We have all kinds of population groups. By and large, everyone adheres to this “big tent” policy.¹³

Thus the large, diverse, and well-educated Muslim community with its high expectations from the mosque acts as another impetus for MCA to not only embrace an ideological policy of inclusion but also to host high-quality events and initiatives that respond to the needs of the American Muslim community today. However, the view expressed by President Khatib must be contrasted with women's engagement in the governance of MCA. As noted earlier, until 2016, women were barred from holding all but one seat on the MCA Board of Directors, and to date, women are not allowed to hold the position of president. This lack of women's involvement in governance goes contrary to the “big tent” philosophy claimed to be embraced by MCA

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ⁱ Eid al-Fitr: The Holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting.

leadership and the community. Women’s engagement in the governance of MCA remains dismal. Whereas under the old rules a women’s representative had an automatic seat on the board, with the removal of this position there are currently no women on the MCA Board, despite the fact that all other positions are open for women. According to Nilamuddin Shaihu, after the changes, it was hoped that with all board positions made available to women, more women would step forward to take a leadership role in the organization, but this did not happen. No women stepped forward for any of the board positions. The wider MCA community may indeed be as diverse and tolerant as claimed by President Khatib, but the fact remains that this diversity, tolerance, and “big tent” philosophy is not reflected in the MCA Constitution or in MCA’s ability to encourage women’s engagement in mosque leadership.

As part of its “big tent” approach, MCA provides a platform to other organizations to engage with the community and by doing so encourages entrepreneurship. According to Junaid Shaikh, the Board’s General Secretary:

We’re one of the most active masjids in—not just in California, but throughout the nation. What makes us active are these people actually that are part of the community. We have a number of socially and politically oriented individuals who actually think about this, and come up with ideas and take ownership of certain things that they can do, and then they do it. We provide what help we can to them within our jurisdiction as a non-profit.¹⁴

Thus MCA harnesses the vibrancy and diversity of the community to amplify its own effectiveness. According to Junaid Shaikh:

There are many organizations that have come into existence because of the platform that MCA provides. Because [MCA] is like a melting pot. We have a great resource within the community. The infrastructure is there, and people actually use that infrastructure too, because the environment that MCA provides, it actually fosters many ideas. We don’t necessarily come up with ideas, but then people actually come up with ideas and because of the infrastructure and the facilities and resources that are within the MCA, it just comes into being.¹⁵

Because [MCA] is like a melting pot. We have a great resource within the community. The infrastructure is there, and people actually use that infrastructure too, because the environment that MCA provides, it actually fosters many ideas.

By all accounts, it would appear that MCA is delivering on the high expectations of its members: feedback on civic engagement initiatives has been very positive in the community, and interest is steadily growing.¹⁶ It remains unclear, however, why there is such a stark contrast in the community's expectations and demands from MCA on issues of civic engagement and the issues of women's engagement in the governance of the mosque.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

As with any organization, MCA continues to face challenges and has learned some valuable lessons along the way from which other organizations can benefit.

Room for Improvement

Women at the MCA

On one hand, the MCA leadership struggled to amend the mosque's constitution to be more inclusive of women by opening membership on the Board of Directors beyond the silo of a women's representative. Although MCA leaders recognized that such a restrictive approach to the role of women in the mosque is outdated and ineffective, the members of MCA voted down the proposed amendment to allow women to serve as president of MCA. Although the rules were modified in 2016 to make women eligible to hold any position on the board, no women have stepped forward to run for a seat. The result is that women remain dismally absent from MCA leadership. These constitutional changes are very new and may take some time for the effects to emerge. Yet when women have been excluded from MCA leadership roles for more than two decades and continue to be barred from the possibility of becoming president, it should come as no surprise that despite some progress on the rules, women show no great enthusiasm in becoming involved in the leadership. MCA has a lot of work to do in order to fulfill its goal of being a truly diverse and inclusive mosque, one that equally engages and welcomes all members of the community.

Lack of a Committee for Civic Engagement

At present, MCA does not have in its organizational structure a unit that focuses on civic engagement. Civic engagement is not a defined area of focus at MCA and falls broadly under the Social Committee. Although the Social Secretary, Nilamudeen Shaihu, has a clear personal vision of civic engagement and incorporates civic engagement in Social Committee programs, it is not officially part of any unit within the organizational

structure. Other committees, such as the Youth, Women, and Dawah Committees all have well-defined, written mandates that lay out the committee's vision. Civic engagement efforts at MCA could benefit greatly from a similar structure and well-defined focus.¹⁷

More Outreach and Engagement

Similarly, civic engagement efforts can be further strengthened by a robust outreach strategy that seeks greater interfaith engagement and participation in the wider community. This entails encouraging Muslims to become involved in their communities beyond

the mosque by participating in local governments and urging Muslim parents to volunteer in their children's school programs. MCA can do a better job of promoting and facilitating a wider range of civic engagement activities and programs.

Similarly, civic engagement efforts can be further strengthened by a robust outreach strategy that seeks greater interfaith engagement and participation in the wider community.

Dr. Nadeem passionately feels that it is time that American Muslims set their goals beyond just the quest for a good education and a good job. He feels that MCA must continue to instill in the community the idea that collectively, they have a role to play in society as well-informed Muslims. Such Muslims are the best ambassadors of Islam to counter negative stereotypes. MCA can facilitate this change by promoting and informing MCA members about activities and opportunities outside the Muslim community, such as advertising an opening in the Parks and Recreation Department at the Santa Clara City Council. Dr. Nadeem believes that if such efforts have a response rate of even 5 percent it will be a huge step toward improved civic engagement.

Better Promotion of Existing Initiatives

MCA currently has numerous regular activities that fall under the definition of civic engagement. The President of MCA, Fouad Khatib, strongly believes that if there is a greater effort to enumerate and advertise existing MCA and partner initiatives and services, such as educational seminars and workshops, participation will increase.

Lessons Learned From This Report

- 1. To deliver effective results, civic engagement must be a high priority for the mosque and must be ingrained in the organizational culture.** Very early in its establishment, MCA identified civic engagement as a core element of its mission. Despite setbacks along the way, this organizational awareness and prioritization has produced consistent messaging, which has encouraged civic engagement and allowed many successful partnerships and initiatives to blossom.
- 2. Understand the limitations of a mosque, and build effective partnerships to fulfill goals that are better realized by other organizations.** MCA consciously incubated and supported other Muslim organizations and individuals to focus on civic engagement issues, realizing that mosques cannot do everything. MCA understood that certain aspects of the civic engagement agenda were best served by groups that devoted their full attention to fulfilling the mission of civic engagement.
- 3. Presence of a clear vision for civic engagement is more important than a big budget.** MCA leaders have effectively identified clear, manageable goals for civic engagement in light of the needs of their community and their organizational and financial limitations. In 1995, MCA leaders set as their grand vision the election of a Muslim mayor of San Francisco by 2020. Today, however, MCA leaders are choosing to take small, consistent steps toward guiding the next generation of Muslims to run for local office. The focus is on education and encouragement for civic engagement. There is no large budget for these efforts, and major events are held only once every quarter. Yet community interest and participation are steadily increasing.
- 4. Have a “big tent” philosophy to maximize participation.** MCA enjoys growing support for civic engagement efforts because it works to accommodate a wide spectrum of Islamic views, as long as they are within the parameters of mainstream Islam. An inclusive approach to Islamic principles positively affects community participation in other socially and civically focused initiatives. However, in MCA’s case, at present, this philosophy is not fully realized with regards to the participation of women in leadership roles. Much more remains to be done.
- 5. Empower and utilize the community as a resource.** MCA is keenly aware of the diverse and highly talented support base it enjoys. It takes effective measures to harness the talent and drive of its members by providing platforms and encouraging entrepreneurship. At the same time, MCA seeks to meet the high expectations of its members.

Endnotes

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- 2 <https://www.mcabayarea.org/about-us>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See “The Bay Area Muslim Study: Establishing Identity and Community:” <http://www.ispu.org/portal/82/ourpage.aspx>
- 5 Nilamudeen Shaihu, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, July 31, 2015.
- 6 Dr. Muhammad Nadeem, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, August 15, 2015.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 For details, see: <http://www.cnn.com/specials/san-bernardino-shooting>
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- 10 <http://www.cair.com/about-us/vision-mission-core-principles.html>
- 11 Sameena Usman, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, August 23, 2015.
- 12 Zahra Billoo, telephone interview with Leila Alawa, August 4, 2015.
- 13 Fouad Khatib, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, September 2, 2015.
- 14 Junaid Shaikh, telephone interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, August 16, 2015.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Interview with Fouad Khatib.
- 17 Interview with Junaid Shaikh.

Acknowledgements

“MCA by night” cover image by Mohamed Morsy, see: https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/muslim-community-association-santa-clara-4?select=ORvhn08n4Jq9I3nW7z17Aw



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