

REIMAGINING  
**MUSLIM  
SPACES**

# Understanding Inclusivity Practices at “Third Spaces”

MakeSpace: 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:

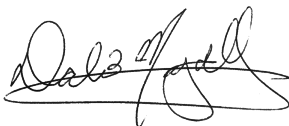
1. Welcoming: Inclusive and engaging
2. Well Governed: Effective and transparent
3. A Hub for Hope: A source of community service

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,



Dalia Mogahed  
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# Executive Summary

In recent years, the American Muslim community has witnessed the growth of a budding new religious and social institution: the Third Space. It is a phenomenon that is difficult to define in precise terms, yet its continuing rapid growth merits deeper examination. In this report, using MakeSpace as a case study, we examine how a Third Space is different from a traditional American *mosque*<sup>a</sup> and what attracts participants to Third Spaces. Specifically, we examine how Third Spaces establish inclusivity practices that are considered to be an improvement on traditional mosques. In studying inclusivity practices, we focus on three key demographics: women, youth, and converts/new Muslims.

An examination of MakeSpace offers the following lessons for Muslim spaces hoping to enhance their inclusivity practices.

1.

**Building a culture of inclusion goes beyond events and programming.** While programs aimed at youth, women, and converts are essential to keep them engaged, real results are delivered when the values of inclusion and diversity are ingrained and espoused at all levels of the organization.

- Thus while there is no committee at MakeSpace specifically devoted to women's issues, women across the board (whether as participants at events or as volunteers) report feeling welcomed and valued. Community youth organize and manage a significant segment of the youth program. For MakeSpace, the culture of inclusivity is established by (1) maintaining deeply held values, mission, and vision that are communicated clearly and consistently at all levels of the organization (through the Content Committee); (2) thoroughly vetting and assembling a group of diverse individuals who share similar values of inclusion and diversity; and (3) consistently soliciting feedback and authentically listening to all individuals involved, whether congregants, volunteers, or leaders.<sup>1</sup>

2.

**A “welcoming” atmosphere is essential for engaging and retaining youth, young adults, women, and converts.** This is closely tied to the organizational culture and will vary for different organizations. At MakeSpace, multiple steps are taken to ensure a welcoming atmosphere:

- The Content Committee ensures that all *khutbas*, *halaqas*,<sup>b</sup> and lectures reflect MakeSpace's vision of an inclusive and diverse community. Although care is taken to ensure guest speakers are chosen from a diverse ethnic and religious background, a line is drawn on the issue of inclusivity. MakeSpace refuses to invite speakers who disagree with MakeSpace's vision of inclusivity and oppose measures such as equal prayer spaces for women in mosques. MakeSpace bylaws state that “MakeSpace shall provide a platform for all members whose viewpoints are in accordance with the

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<sup>a</sup> Mosque: A Muslim place of worship.

<sup>b</sup> Khutbah: Sermon given during the Friday Noon Prayer; Halaqa: A religious study circle.

*Quran*<sup>c</sup> and *Sunnah*<sup>d</sup> and shall be inclusive to all of the American Muslim community such that it brings the community together and helps the community put behind divisive sectarian, ethnic and political divisions and focus on that which brings the communities together.”<sup>2</sup>

- For all events, an effort is made to have volunteers greeting attendees at the door. Volunteers in MakeSpace T-shirts are available to usher or otherwise help attendees. Multiple community members reported that this step made them feel valued and gave them a sense of belonging to the organization.
- Women are not required to wear *hijab*,<sup>e</sup> and participants at events are not criticized on how they are dressed.

**3. Youth and convert engagement and assimilation depends on opportunities for making social bonds.** An emphasis on youth- and convert-specific social activities is essential, as is providing ample opportunities to volunteer, to facilitate interaction with the wider community. For converts, it is important to ensure that they have at least one social contact in the community and to have special arrangements for holiday events so that they can share in the feeling of family and community.

**4. Women’s inclusion is more effective when it is not compartmentalized.** Participation by women must be solicited at all levels of the organization, not just on “women’s committees” and for women-specific programming. This can be achieved by ensuring an equal voice for women on the Board of Directors and in decision-making processes, and by creating an organizational culture in which women’s participation and input is genuinely valued. For members/congregants, inclusion can mean an equal access to the prayer space and the *imam*.<sup>f</sup>

**5. Young American Muslims value content that is relevant to life in America.** A majority (72.2 percent) of MakeSpace *Ramadan taraweeh*<sup>g</sup> attendees said they are attracted to MakeSpace because the programming and content is relevant to Islam and their life in America. MakeSpace broadly defines “relevant content” as material that resonates with the needs, struggles, and values of American Muslims (specifically, youth and young professionals). As the needs of the community change (often in response to dynamic social and political climates), MakeSpace iterates the definition of “relevant” in response. Ultimately, the aim is to offer content that integrates Islam and society in a way that empowers the community to grow spiritually, intellectually, and professionally. For example, in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks in late 2015, in addition to interfaith outreach, MakeSpace held a halaqa examining how the community could respond. MakeSpace has also held numerous events relevant to recent and upcoming elections, including dialogues with candidates and delegates.

**6. An effective use of marketing, social media, and technology can potentially increase attendance and participation.** Attendance at events is facilitated by technology initiatives such as *Juma’ah Rides*,<sup>h</sup> and a MakeSpace “brand” of inclusion and diversity is effectively marketed to young audiences using social media platforms.

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<sup>c</sup> Quran: Central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God.

<sup>d</sup> Sunnah: The “path” or “example” of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>e</sup> Hijab: A covering; usually used to mean a woman’s head scarf.

<sup>f</sup> Imam: A Muslim prayer leader.

<sup>g</sup> Ramadan: Month of fasting, when the Quran was first revealed; Taraweeh: Extra prayers in Ramadan after the Isha (night) prayer.

<sup>h</sup> Juma’ah: Friday Noon Prayer.

# What Is a Third Space?

Since most Third Spaces are founded to meet the unique needs of a specific community, the definition of a Third Space will often vary from one community to another. According to Tannaz Haddadi, one of the founders of Next Wave Muslim Initiative (NWMI) in Washington, DC, a Third Space must be understood as an institution that is not trying to replace the traditional mosque; rather it seeks to fill the gaps where the traditional mosque is unable to meet a community's particular needs. Third Spaces place a greater focus on meeting a community's social and spiritual needs. A Third Space, broadly speaking, seeks to provide participants with a safe space "for people to come as they are," in terms of their religious understanding and leanings.<sup>3</sup>

In general, Third Spaces place a strong emphasis on ideas of inclusivity and diversity, producing content and programming that is relevant to Islam in America and strengthening social bonds within the Muslim community. For NWMI, organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) or the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) provide a good model. According to Sarah Albani, a member of the Board of Directors at MakeSpace, a Washington, DC-based Third Space, the intention is to provide services that go well beyond just worship and pastoral care:

*A Third Space, then, may be understood as a religious institution that seeks to strengthen social and spiritual bonds within a community while also imparting religious knowledge and understanding that is applicable and relevant to Islam in the United States.*

*The aim is to create an Islamic community center where people come to recharge their Islam and grow spiritually. But that spirituality extends beyond knowledge; our deen<sup>i</sup> is the springboard that should motivate us to get involved civically and to be involved in our communities and to achieve excellence in our health and in our professions. What differentiates us from the mosque is offering a plethora of other services, and an outlet for people's holistic needs, aside from just their spiritual and religious needs.<sup>4</sup>*

A Third Space, then, may be understood as a religious institution that seeks to strengthen social and spiritual bonds within a community while also imparting religious knowledge and understanding that is applicable and relevant to Islam in the United States.

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<sup>i</sup> Deen: Arabic word for Religion or Faith.

# MakeSpace: A Thriving Third Space

Based in the Washington, DC, area, MakeSpace was formed by Imam Zia Makhdoom and his wife, Fatimah Popal, in 2012. The name of the organization comes from a verse of Surah Mujadillah in the Quran: “O you who have believed, when you are told, ‘Space yourselves’ in assemblies, then make space; Allah will make space for you.”<sup>5</sup> Taking inspiration from the verse, MakeSpace “aspire[s] to serve as a multigenerational, non-judgmental community hub of American Muslims.”<sup>6</sup> The stated mission of MakeSpace is to “serve as an inclusive, relevant and transparently managed hub for the Washington Metropolitan area Muslim community, with a strong focus on youth and young professionals.”<sup>7</sup>

MakeSpace started out by hosting events at Dunya Banquet Hall in Alexandria, Virginia. Since then, attendance numbers at Juma’ah prayers, bimonthly halaqas, and other events have grown exponentially and continue to increase steadily. Funding, all of which comes from donations, doubled between 2013 and 2014, and by summer 2015, had grown by another 25 percent. At present, MakeSpace does not own a physical location; venues are rented for each event. While Juma’ah prayers and Ramadan taraweeh prayers are regularly held at Dunya Banquet Hall, other events are held in different locations in Virginia and Washington, DC. By 2015, MakeSpace had grown rapidly enough to necessitate the ownership of its own premises. In the summer of 2015, MakeSpace began to raise funds to purchase its own building.

Before launching MakeSpace, Imam Zia served as the imam of another local mosque for more than a decade. For Imam Zia, the idea for MakeSpace was born out of years of dissatisfaction with how most traditional mosques in America function. The biggest challenge for Imam Zia was inclusivity and the cultural gap between the older and the younger generations. Moreover, at the leadership level, most mosques have a dominant ethnicity that wields a lot of influence in decision-making at the exclusion of other groups, especially the youth. According to Imam Zia:

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*As an imam at a local masjid<sup>j</sup> for over a decade, I saw that the masjid, [its] direction and vision, everything was controlled by one ethnic group. And the funding and support for the masjid came from very diverse groups, from every segment of the attendees, young and old, different ethnicities. . . . Not only was it unfair, more than that, it went against the idea of a masjid from the Islamic point of view.*

<sup>j</sup> Masjid: A Muslim place of worship.

For Imam Zia, the ideas of inclusivity are intrinsic to a mosque that truly follows the Islamic tradition; if those ideas are not practiced by the very institution tasked with promoting inclusivity, the community faces fragmentation. For instance, limiting women's access to the main prayer space or creating a culture in which parents feel uncomfortable bringing their children to the mosque go contrary to the spirit of inclusivity. According to Imam Zia, he did his best to stress Islam's message of inclusivity from the pulpit, but had little success with getting the masjid leadership to embrace the same ideals in a meaningful way.

## From Inception to Realization

Imam Zia strongly felt that the solution lay in starting a new institution, one that better reflected Islam's message of inclusivity and diversity. The idea faced a lot of pushback because many people saw it as an abandonment of the existing institution of the American mosque. He was advised to instead direct his efforts to fixing the problems from within. However, for Imam Zia, that option was no longer feasible:

*For me, the clock had run out. I had served in a masjid for more than a decade and I thought if we haven't made any progress in that long period of time, there is something wrong systemically that needs to be addressed. So I appreciate those who work within the system—and they do a lot of good in the masjid, I'm not taking that away . . . [But] it was my personal decision to quit the masjid, the imam position, and to work with different people.*

Because of the strong resistance from the community, in the beginning, the biggest challenge Imam Zia faced was convincing people with experience to join his team. Even like-minded people who agreed with his grievances with existing mosque practices were wary of joining the effort to create a new institution. But Imam Zia continued his efforts. The initial team consisted mostly of high school and college students who had no previous experience running an organization but who agreed with Imam Zia's vision. Despite this, within a year, the team had successfully organized and promoted MakeSpace using personal networks and social media. In June 2013, MakeSpace had its first-ever fundraiser; it was a resounding success, raising more than \$66,000 through donations.<sup>8</sup>

As MakeSpace continues on its upward trajectory, Imam Zia no longer sees attracting experienced talent as a challenge:

*[In the beginning] people with credibility were very difficult to convince. But that changed later on when the idea caught on and everyone saw that this is something different, it's really working, and people are getting attracted to it. Alhamdulillah,<sup>k</sup>*

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<sup>k</sup> Alhamdulillah: Thank God.



*now we have a lot of people with caliber that are involved in the leadership. . . . That pushback has now gone because they [mosque leadership] saw that we were not here to destroy, we're here to build—we complement their work and we are doing some of the things that they are unable to do, or we are maybe helping them incorporate some of the things that they should be incorporating into their programming and practices.<sup>9</sup>*

## How MakeSpace Operates

The concepts of inclusivity and diversity form the bedrock tenets of MakeSpace as an organization, and they go to the heart of all content and programming.

MakeSpace defines its mission as follows:

*The concepts of inclusivity and diversity form the bedrock tenets of MakeSpace as an organization, and they go to the heart of all content and programming.*

*To serve as an inclusive, welcoming hub for the Washington Metropolitan area Muslim community, with a strong focus on youth and young professionals. We aim to help our members grow spiritually, intellectually and professionally. We further aim to help the community develop an American Muslim identity rooted in the values of balance and compassion through educational programs, civic engagement initiatives, community service projects and recreational activities.<sup>10</sup>*

This idea of inclusion is held to mean an avoidance of topics of sectarianism and unnecessary and counter-productive focus on controversial issues. Instead, the focus is on aspiring “to serve as a multigenerational, non-judgmental community hub of American Muslims where we can grow, learn, care and deepen our connection to Allah and to one another.”<sup>11</sup>

### A Vision in Practice

What stands out about MakeSpace is that its mission and vision are internalized and echoed by not only MakeSpace board members, committee members, and volunteers, but also the congregants and participants at MakeSpace events, as demonstrated by an opinion survey conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU). In the opinion survey conducted in June 2015, when participants of a taraweeh congregation were asked what makes MakeSpace different from a traditional mosque, every single respondent pointed to either its inclusivity practices, the relevance of its teachings to modern day American Muslims, or both. Respondents referred to inclusivity and a welcoming culture in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere at

congregational and other events; a diversity of social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds among participants; the accessibility of the imam to women (equivalent to that of men); and a general focus on youth, young professionals, and women.

The same pattern appeared when interviewers spoke with volunteers at MakeSpace. For instance, for Umar Farooq, an 18-year-old high school graduate and volunteer on the MakeSpace youth committee:

*[At MakeSpace] I don't have to worry about how good of a Muslim I am. With a lot of the mosques ... I have to always be constantly watching myself, whereas at MakeSpace, I feel more welcomed and I'm able to practice Islam how I want to practice Islam. Because no one's telling me you can't do this, this is how you pray, this is how you don't pray, this [is] how you make wudu,<sup>1</sup> this is how you read, and this is how you read the Quran correctly. When you walk in, everyone is always smiling; no one's ever putting you down for something.<sup>12</sup>*

Sajida, a 24-year-old former youth volunteer and current member of the Board of Directors, voiced a similar opinion:

*I think that women specifically in masjids are perhaps more criticized, especially when it comes to what they're wearing. I've had that experience personally. Even if you have the niyah<sup>m</sup> of doing something for the sake of Allah, that goes away because of the negative energy and the feeling of being invalid or insufficient, which is something that really should be between a person and God. For youth specifically, [who] are naturally self-conscious and insecure, when you enter a space that is critical of how you're worshipping, something as intimate as that, it can be crushing. It can be traumatizing. [At] MakeSpace whenever you go to prayer, whether it's Friday prayer or taraweeh, people are smiling and they're happy and you feel adequate. You feel like you belong in that space. You don't have people actively judging you.<sup>13</sup>*

For Antonio, a convert to Islam and a MakeSpace volunteer, the biggest value lay in the social bonds MakeSpace actively seeks to build among its participant community:

*Even though I've been a convert for years, [at my old mosque] I could go and pray and I could see some brothers and we could talk, but I never felt like "I'm going to call this guy up and we're going to go and get dinner." And so MakeSpace really opened a whole door up for me.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Wudu: Ritual washing performed in preparation for prayer and worship.

<sup>m</sup> Niyah: Explicit intention made before an act.

## The Organizational Structure

The current organizational structure at MakeSpace is similar to that of many mosques. Currently, there are no paid employees; all management and services are provided by volunteers. A Board of Directors works in conjunction with a variety of different committees. While the board's focus is on implementing the mission and vision of the organization and determining its direction, the committees provide services and develop programs. Each committee is headed by a leader who works in tandem with a liaison from the board, the idea being to provide committees autonomy while allowing the board to oversee and advise.

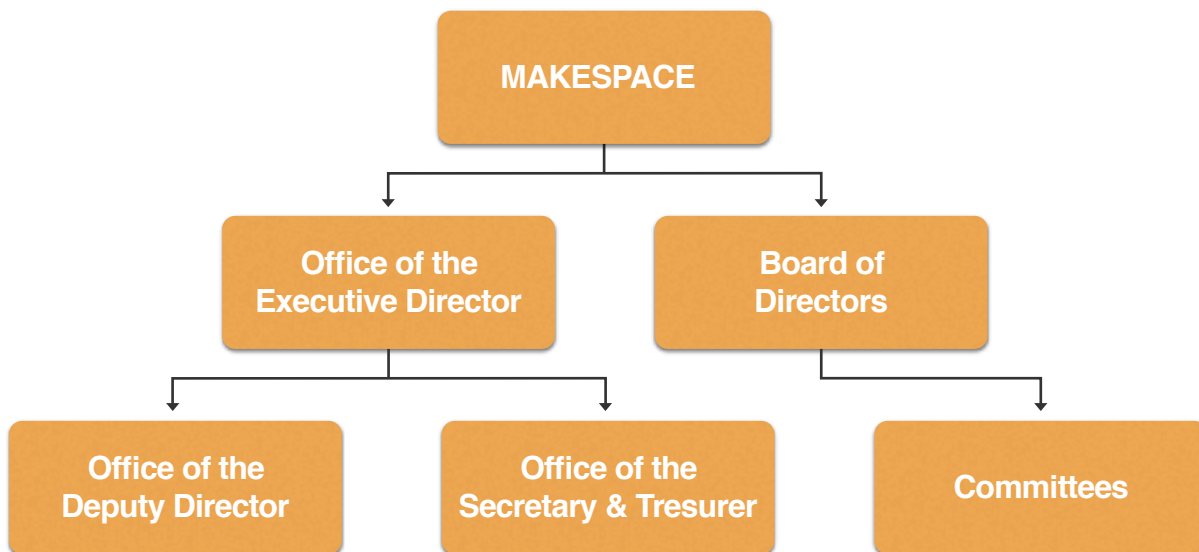


Figure 1: Organizational structure of MakeSpace<sup>15</sup>

There is a strong organizational emphasis on ensuring an internal diversity of ideas and inclusivity, and keeping all interested parties in the loop as much as possible. However, the rapid growth in the number of volunteers and attendees at prayers and social events has made the current organizational structure untenable.<sup>16</sup> For example, between 2012 and 2015, the average number of congregants at Juma'ah prayers has jumped from 60 to 200. The increasing numbers have been accompanied by an increase in committees and an expansion in programming and services being offered.

On the management side, a number of core principles undergird all operations. The most demonstrable of these principles is a strong focus on inclusion of women, youth, and young adults (including converts), and an emphasis on financial transparency. MakeSpace bylaws spell this out as a commitment to the core values of “*Transparency*, fostering an environment that is *Relevant*, *Inclusive*, and *Balanced* so that we may attain *Excellence* together as a community (“TRIBE”).”<sup>17</sup>

## Strong Growth as a Challenge

When MakeSpace opened its doors in October 2012, the average number of congregants at Juma'ah prayers was 60. As stated above, that number has now risen to 200. Similarly, between 2013 and 2015, the average number of congregants at Ramadan taraweeh prayers grew from 300 to between 500 and 1,000. For the same time period, the average number of attendees at the monthly halaqas rose from 25 to between 50 and 70. There has been a similar relative growth in the number of community members volunteering to join the MakeSpace team.<sup>18</sup>

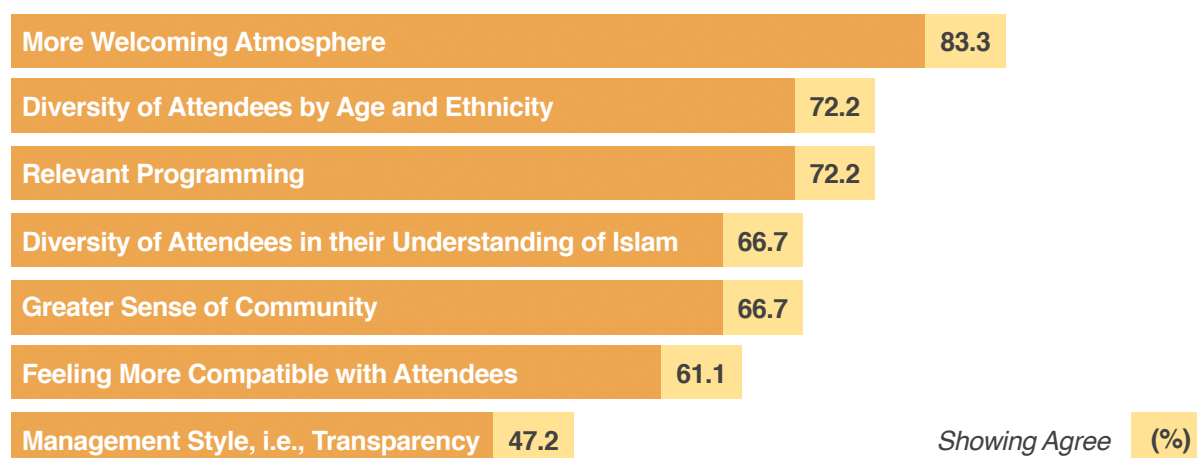
Balancing the imperatives of internal inclusivity and diversity with rapid growth has become a big challenge, and there is currently an internal debate over how best to resolve the issue. While the present organizational structure is still in place, further growth in committees and programming has been put on hold until a suitable solution for restructuring is agreed upon.

## Congregational Demographics and Motivations

An opinion survey conducted by ISPU between June and July 2015 (during Ramadan) shed some light on the demographics and motivations of MakeSpace participants. A sample of 36 survey respondents were nearly evenly divided by gender (47.2 percent men, 52.7 percent women). Similarly, respondents were equally divided by age (47.2 percent were between 15 and 25 years old, and 47.2 percent were older than 25). More than half of the respondents (58.3 percent) were born in the United States, and 80.95 percent of respondents were children of immigrants.

A vast majority (94.4 percent) of respondents were raised in or belonged to the *Sunni* tradition. Converts formed 11.1 percent of the sample. When asked what attracted participants to MakeSpace, respondents provided a variety of reasons (see table).

### What are the major factors that attract you to MakeSpace?



Detailed results of the survey can be found the Appendix.

# Inclusivity, Diversity, and Transparency

## A Strong Focus on Youth and Young Professionals<sup>19</sup>

Imam Zia actively mentored youth in his community before MakeSpace was launched. While at his old mosque, Imam Zia led the Virginia High School Muslim Student Association (MSA) Council (VHMC). The aim of VHMC was “to connect the Muslim Student Associations of every High School in Virginia to build a strong and unified community.”<sup>20</sup> Once MakeSpace was formed, VHMC was renamed as MakeSpace Torchbearers.

### *MakeSpace Torchbearers*

The Torchbearers program conducts regular retreats and workshops where local MSA members attend events and lectures, and have the opportunity to network with other high school MSA members in the region. The underlying aim of the events is to educate youth about Islam and to foster collaboration among local MSAs. The largest annual event held by Torchbearers is the ILMathon, a daylong Jeopardy-style scholastic competition at which high school MSA students compete to answer questions on the Quran, *hadith*,<sup>n</sup> and current events. MakeSpace provides study guides for students to prepare for the competition, and winners receive cash prizes.

Many other volunteer opportunities provided by MakeSpace that are not geared specifically at youth nevertheless have high participation rates among youth and young professionals. The Make Meals program is one such example: since 2013, MakeSpace has been collaborating with various campus organizations and a group known as Project Downtown DC, which supports the city’s homeless population, to prepare meals for homeless people. MakeSpace also recruits volunteers for the Capital Area Food Bank, where volunteers prepare food boxes for different homeless shelters in the Washington, DC, area. MakeSpace has also adopted a highway; the highway clean-up activity is attended by many youth and young professionals.

### *MakeSpace Youth Committee*

The youth committee at MakeSpace was born out of Imam Zia’s earlier role in VHMC (now Torchbearers). A number of local high school students approached the imam with a request for social programs geared toward high school and college students, and they had some ideas. Imam Zia and the Board of Directors decided to have the students

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<sup>n</sup> Hadith: A collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad that, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunnah), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.

organize a youth committee that conducts its own programming but relies on the board for logistical support. According to members of the Board of Directors, the youth committee is much more proactive and adept at assessing the needs of their peers than a youth committee run by members of an older generation.

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Officially formed in March 2015, the current youth committee consists of six high school and college students between the ages of 18 and 24. There are no designated roles; team members fill in as needed for the event being planned. Before the youth committee was formed, MakeSpace organized youth-oriented events, but the focus was scholastic. The youth committee wanted its focus to be on social activities for a key demographic of 15- to 25-year-olds. Since March 2015, the youth committee has organized one social event per month, including bowling, mini-golf, hiking, a trip to a driving range, and a Ramadan *qiyaam*<sup>o</sup> night for youth. Attendees at events are split evenly by gender, and their numbers are soaring: whereas the first social event in March 2015 was attended by 10 people, close to 200 community youth attended the Ramadan *qiyaam* night for youth in July 2015.

The goal of the social activities is to socially involve Muslim youth who may not feel comfortable going to a mosque or a religious lecture. The aim of such social interaction is to help previously disengaged youth form friendships and social connections so that they become regular participants at events. These social connections then form the bridge for an intellectual engagement with the teachings of Islam. That is not to say the social events are devoid of any religious or spiritual engagement; rather, it occurs in a more relaxed and fluid manner. According to Sajida Swadek:

*At our events now, we try to have conversations about real things that are affecting us—whether they're happening in the society at large or specifically toward Muslim youth. We don't have a specific lecture; we have discussions, real conversations with people.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>o</sup> Qiyaam: Late night voluntary prayer performed in Ramadan.

## *Young Professionals and Make Strides Program*

Programs focused specifically toward young professionals are managed by the Make Strides program. The professional networking wing of MakeSpace, Make Strides aims to facilitate the professional development and advancement of Muslim students and professionals in the DMV (Washington, DC, Maryland, Virginia) area by establishing and leveraging a structured network of professionals and resources. Make Strides seeks to distinguish itself from other Muslim professional network organizations by having a focus on field-specific development and broader community engagement. The Make Strides website hosts member networks in fields as varied as architecture, fashion, journalism, and real estate.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most popular recurring events hosted by Make Strides is Salaam Thursdays, a monthly networking dinner held at different restaurants in the Washington, DC, area. The dinners feature an informal talk by different community members on topics ranging from career development to the role Muslim professionals can play in addressing issues facing the Muslim community. Attendance is not limited to young professionals; all community members can join.

## **Women at MakeSpace**

MakeSpace has a very clear vision for the role of women in the organization. According to Imam Zia:

*We view women's empowerment as essential given the historic misogyny and male chauvinism cloaked in "Islamic" orthodoxy that American Muslim women have had to deal with. More importantly, women have proven to be better leaders and servants of the community despite the odds, so it just makes sense to leverage their passion and commitment. We differ from others in that we empower our sisters at every level and still abide by our traditions, exactly as was envisioned and practiced by the Prophet (PBUH).<sup>p</sup> So we don't tread into the area of sensationalist controversies of women leading prayers, etc. However, at MakeSpace women lead, lecture and organize and we hope by treating men and women as just humans and important members of the community, we will eventually render the man vs. woman question irrelevant.<sup>23</sup>*

*[W]e hope by treating men and women as just humans and important members of the community, we will eventually render the man vs. woman question irrelevant.*

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<sup>p</sup> PBUH: Peace be upon him - A prayer said by Muslims after saying the Prophet's name out of reverence.

Almost all the women interviewed for this report expressed the view that they felt welcomed and valued at MakeSpace. According to Ghada, a volunteer on the MakeSpace Content Committee, the vision of the role of women is reflected at all levels of the organization:

*I personally feel like our opinion is valued, in terms of how we make decisions [on committees] and how we solve different issues. Everyone is always included, and there is a lot of transparency.<sup>24</sup>*

From the perspective of members of the congregation (at Ramadan taraweeh prayers), similar opinions were voiced when asked what, in their opinion, differentiates MakeSpace from a traditional mosque. In the words of one female member:

*The imam is very open-minded and doesn't treat [women] any different than men. [Women] feel encouraged to approach the imam with questions without feeling that they will be neglected and have questions unanswered.<sup>25</sup>*

According to another male congregant:

*[MakeSpace] is more dignifying. I like that it is women-friendly and that it empowers sisters.<sup>26</sup>*

### ***Programs for Women***

The recurring programming on offer does not differ drastically from other mosques in the area: there is a bimonthly halaqa and women's-only fitness classes (yoga and zumba). The halaqa initially began as a women's-only event, with a separate halaqa for men. However, starting in December 2013, the two halaqas were merged after it was agreed that discussions would benefit if the events were held for all members of the community together. The halaqa is led by a different community member each time and is run more as a discussion, rather than a lecture.

The inclusivity practices for women are less apparent in specific programming but are visible in the organizational culture. For instance, during Ramadan, the *khatira*, or short lecture between taraweeh prayers, was often given by women who spoke to the entire congregation, not just to other women. The prayer space at Dunya Banquet Hall is shared equally between men and women. The men and women pray in two adjacent but separate sections behind the imam. There are no strict dress code requirements; women are not required to wear a hijab when coming to MakeSpace events. During Ramadan, a women-only qiyaam night was also held.

On a visit to the prayer service during Ramadan, attendees were evenly divided by gender.<sup>27</sup> This was corroborated by Imam Zia and board members. MakeSpace



volunteers helping and ushering congregants were similarly evenly divided by gender. A similar gender dynamic is at play at the leadership level as well: the current MakeSpace Board of Directors has five women and five men.

On the committee level, most committees have either an even ratio of male and female volunteers, or women outnumber the men.<sup>28</sup>

*[T]he current MakeSpace Board of Directors has five women and five men.*

To sum up, it appears that what creates an environment of inclusivity for women is related less to events and programming, and more to an organizational culture that prizes a genuine involvement of women at all levels of leadership, an equal access to the prayer space, and an imam who does not impose strict rules about women's dress. MakeSpace is able to successfully involve women in leadership roles by regularly soliciting feedback and demonstrably valuing their input. The role of women in MakeSpace is not compartmentalized (i.e., there is no committee that specifically focuses on women); rather, there is a foundational focus on uniformly integrating women on the board, committees, and at events.

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## New Muslims at MakeSpace

Research has consistently shown that the key to engaging newcomers in any given congregation is the establishment of social bonds between new converts and members of the congregation.<sup>29</sup> This idea appears to have been wholeheartedly embraced at MakeSpace where the new Muslim program is named Make Bonds (Building, Opening, and Nurturing Diversity). The program is designed for converts, individuals who were raised in Muslim households but are not active practitioners of Islam, and non-Muslims. There is a strong focus on setting up internal systems of support for when individuals express an interest in learning more about Islam or embrace Islam.

### ***Make Bonds***

When an individual takes the *shahaddah*<sup>q</sup> at MakeSpace, the Make Bonds committee

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<sup>q</sup> Shahaddah: The testimony of faith: La ilaha illa Allah (There is no god but Allah. Muhammed is the messenger of God.)

gives them the option to pair up with a buddy, a MakeSpace volunteer with whom the new convert can connect and socialize and have as an anchor social connection to the larger MakeSpace community. In addition, each newcomer is given a “convert kit” that contains a Quran, a prayer rug, videos on how to pray, and a list of local *halal*<sup>r</sup> restaurants. Most importantly, however, there is a concerted effort to integrate new Muslims into social activities at MakeSpace. For Antonio, a convert and Make Bonds volunteer, this was the critical element that drew him to MakeSpace and helped him assimilate. Although he has been attending prayers at mosques regularly for many years since he converted to Islam, he didn’t feel a sense of belonging to the Muslim community. An attorney by profession, Antonio wanted to volunteer at his old mosque but found few to no opportunities to do so. Moreover, he found the atmosphere at traditional mosques not conducive to creating friendships. He said:

*[At MakeSpace] you can talk and socialize. When you’re in a musallah<sup>s</sup> everyone is like sshhhh! You’re either reading or you’re praying and there’s not really an avenue for you to sit and socially get to know someone in an informal setting. And that’s what a person needs to really build a bond and build some trust.*

At MakeSpace, Antonio found that opportunity to form social bonds. His engagement began when a friend asked him to provide some legal help with MakeSpace contracts and bylaws. Impressed with the MakeSpace vision and mission, Antonio began volunteering on different projects on a regular basis, and has been deeply engaged with MakeSpace for the last two years.

The Make Bonds project makes a specific effort to ensure that new Muslims are not alone on holidays, both Muslim and Christian. According to Antonio:

*You know, everybody says a Muslim who is alone is like a sheep for Shaitan.<sup>t</sup> So for Christmas [new Muslims] maybe want to go spend some time with their family, but if they didn’t want to, we want them to have Muslims for them to be around. So we [planned] to [go to] the movies and get something to eat and hang out, build up a good core network of friends during that time so that [new Muslims] don’t feel so alone.<sup>30</sup>*

For Christmas, planned activities in the past have included a trip to the movies and a soccer game. In 2014, the holiday movie event was attended by 10 to 15 people. Similarly, a potluck was organized for *Eid al-Fitr*<sup>u</sup> in 2015. A similar potluck was planned for Thanksgiving 2015.

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<sup>r</sup> Halal: Lawful, permitted, good, beneficial, praiseworthy, honorable in Islam.

<sup>s</sup> Musallah: Designated place of prayer.

<sup>t</sup> Shaitan: The Arabic word for Satan, the Devil.

<sup>u</sup> Eid al-Fitr: The Holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting.

Many initiatives that have been successful at engaging and assimilating converts grew organically. For instance, during Ramadan 2015, one of the new converts in the MakeSpace community was struggling with fasting. This led to the creation of a group for converts and new Muslims on WhatsApp, a free text messaging smart phone application. This served as a very informal platform for individuals to ask Ramadan-related questions and to provide group support. Because of the success of the idea, the WhatsApp convert group has remained in operation since Ramadan.

*A smart phone application, Juma'ah Rides allows users to ask for and offer car rides to attend Juma'ah prayers, halaqas, and other events. Not only does this collaborative system allow more people to access MakeSpace events, but sharing a ride also often serves as a natural way for new community members to meet people and make friends.*

There is also a strong focus on facilitating convert attendance (and that of other members) at other events and activities that do not fall under the Make Bonds committee. One initiative that has effectively done so is “Juma’ah Rides.” A smart phone application, Juma’ah Rides allows users to ask for and offer car rides to attend Juma’ah prayers, halaqas, and other events. Not only does this collaborative system allow more people to access MakeSpace events, but sharing a ride also often serves as a natural way for new community members to meet people and make friends.<sup>31</sup>

Many other events organized by other committees provide opportunities for new Muslims to make friends in the community. Salaam Thursdays, a monthly networking event organized by Make Strides aimed at connecting young Muslim professionals, has been especially effective in attracting and connecting converts. Similarly, volunteer activities such as Make Meals and social activities such as barbecues and hikes have been successful at attracting converts, which in turn enables them to form friendships with other Muslims.

From the perspective of converts, this ability to socialize with other Muslims is a crucial precondition to meaningful engagement. And at MakeSpace, seeking out and facilitating convert engagement at a social level is ingrained into the organizational culture. Given the wide range of social activities and volunteering opportunities, many other converts are likely to follow the same path of engagement as Antonio.

## Financial Transparency and Growth

Financial transparency is one of the cornerstones of the MakeSpace mission. While not directly linked to the engagement of key demographics in the community, the financial transparency practiced at MakeSpace has served to attract and retain many members. In the opinion survey conducted by ISPU, when asked what attracted members to MakeSpace, 47.2 percent of the respondents mentioned the transparency of the management.

*[T]he financial transparency practiced at MakeSpace has served to attract and retain many members.*

All MakeSpace financial records are available on the organization's website.<sup>32</sup> Monthly financial records include details of all income and expenditures. In addition, since MakeSpace generates approximately 60 percent of its annual budget through fundraising during Ramadan, separate detailed accounts of donations received during Ramadan are also available on the website.<sup>33</sup> For instance, in 2015, MakeSpace had a total budget of approximately \$303,500. Currently, MakeSpace's entire funding comes from community donations through the following channels: (1) donations during MakeSpace events such as Juma'ah, halaqas, etc.; (2) fundraising that occurs mostly during Ramadan; and (3) monthly recurring donations from the MakeSpace Thrive campaign.<sup>34</sup> For the current scale of events and activities at MakeSpace, the revenue generated by these streams has consistently been sufficient to meet budgetary needs.<sup>35</sup>

However, in light of the continuing growth MakeSpace is experiencing, the leadership is now seeking to purchase its own property. To this end, MakeSpace Thrive is a fundraising effort aimed at gathering recurring monthly support from donors. This is intended to meet requirements by banks to indicate a guaranteed monthly income. Although MakeSpace has enough money on hand, it has little guaranteed recurring income. The MakeSpace Thrive program aims to channel one-time donations into recurring monthly income to facilitate the planned property purchase and to establish a reliable financial base from which to draw on a monthly basis.

MakeSpace is continuing to grow financially at a healthy pace. In 2014, MakeSpace doubled its 2013 donations, and by August 2015, it had grown by about 25 percent. MakeSpace Thrive donations are currently near \$8,000 per month, close to the financial team's target of \$10,000 per month.

Overall funding is currently allocated to committees on an as-needed basis, typically when events or programs are scheduled. Generally, there are four categories to which

funding is allocated: *Sadaqa*, *Zakat al-Fitr*, *Zakat al-Maal*,<sup>v</sup> and general donations. Funds are drawn from the latter two categories to help pay for any events and programming hosted by MakeSpace. The only funds reserved are zakat, for building/property acquisition (if specified when the donation is received) and the Make Meals program.

## A New and Improved Place of Faith?

The success and rate of growth at MakeSpace has taken many members of the organization by surprise. There is an understanding within MakeSpace (and many other Third Spaces) that its members are meeting a critical unmet community need, and that the rising numbers speak of the thirst for such an institution in the Muslim community. Others, however, wonder how MakeSpace (or any other Third Space) can be differentiated from a traditional American mosque, especially since MakeSpace is seeking to have its own property. Will it sooner or later become indistinguishable from any other mosque?

For every person interviewed for this project, the answer is an emphatic No. According to Imam Zia:

*We didn't set out to say that we were different because we don't have a space. Space is a necessity. I think when we have the space we will be able to highlight even better how an institution should be run. Our space ideally would have a prayer area with no barriers. Our space would not put restrictions on people, someone coming in not wearing a hijab, for example, will not be turned away. Anyone will be welcome. People of other faiths will be welcome. And the youth will be welcome and we would accept the challenges that they bring.*

*We didn't set out to say that we were different because we don't have a space. Space is a necessity. I think when we have the space we will be able to highlight even better how an institution should be run. . . . Our space would not put restrictions on people. . . . Anyone will be welcome.*

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<sup>v</sup> Sadaqa: Charity, voluntary alms above the amount for zakat; Zakat: Alms or tithe as a Muslim duty; Zakat al-Fitr: Obligatory charity given at the end of Ramadan; Zakat al-Maal: Alms or tithe as a Muslim duty.

The leadership had not initially planned to purchase a building, but the rapid growth has meant that event planning for each individual event has become a major logistical endeavor. The physical space is meant to streamline the logistical planning while creating a permanent base to better establish and showcase the MakeSpace organizational culture. Where the strength of an event lies in not being tethered to one location, it will not be hosted at MakeSpace. For instance, the Salam Thursday networking dinner is held in a different restaurant every month, and this will continue. But an event such as the halaqa or Friday prayers would benefit immensely from not having to be logistically planned every time it is held.

## Challenges Ahead

### *Exponential Growth*

Although member growth is a positive sign, the rapid pace of growth has tested the internal systems at MakeSpace. The current organizational structure is no longer deemed sustainable, and there is an ongoing internal debate whether to hire a professional team to advise MakeSpace on how it might restructure in the face of this growth. In the meantime, since June 2015, there has been a pause on all programming except for Friday prayers.

*What is unclear is how this [strong, welcoming organizational] culture might be passed on from one generation to another.*

Similarly, most fundraising efforts are being diverted to establishing a fund that will enable MakeSpace to purchase its own property and establish a reliable financial base.

### *Communications*

Internal diversity of opinion and inclusion is a strongly held value at MakeSpace; however, it often poses a challenge to smooth communications. In the words of one member of the Board of Directors, this often leads to a bystander effect, one in which everyone is in charge, so no one is in charge. As MakeSpace continues to grow and expand its programs, the team will have to efficiently balance principles of internal diversity and inclusion with streamlined operations.

### *Future Uncertainty*

It is clear that the major strength of MakeSpace lies in a strong organizational culture that successfully creates a welcoming environment for all members. What is unclear is how this culture might be passed on from one generation to another. For example, although the board leadership is now evenly divided by gender, the current bylaws contain no requirements that describe leadership positions and gender. The present

leaders hold the view that the culture can be preserved by having a clearly communicated mission and vision, and by having strong and stringent vetting procedures in place before taking on new team members.

## Lessons Learned From This Report

1. **Building a culture of inclusion goes beyond events and programming.** While programs aimed at youth, women, and converts are essential to keep them engaged, real results are delivered when the values of inclusion and diversity are ingrained and espoused at all levels of the organization.
  - Thus while there is no committee at MakeSpace specifically devoted to women’s issues, women across the board (whether as participants at events or as volunteers) report feeling welcomed and valued. Community youth organize and manage a significant segment of the youth program. For MakeSpace, the culture of inclusivity is established by (1) maintaining deeply held values, mission, and vision that are communicated clearly and consistently at all levels of the organization (through the Content Committee); (2) thoroughly vetting and assembling a group of diverse individuals who share similar values of inclusion and diversity; and (3) consistently soliciting feedback and authentically listening to all individuals involved, whether congregants, volunteers, or leaders.<sup>36</sup>
2. **A “welcoming” atmosphere is essential for engaging and retaining youth, young adults, women, and converts.** This is closely tied to the organizational culture and will vary for different organizations. At MakeSpace, multiple steps are taken to ensure a welcoming atmosphere:
  - The Content Committee ensures that all khutbas, halaqas, and lectures reflect MakeSpace’s vision of an inclusive and diverse community. Although care is taken to ensure guest speakers are chosen from a diverse ethnic and religious background, a line is drawn on the issue of inclusivity. MakeSpace refuses to invite speakers who disagree with MakeSpace’s vision of inclusivity and oppose measures such as equal prayer spaces for women in mosques. MakeSpace bylaws state that “MakeSpace shall provide a platform for all members whose viewpoints are in accordance with the Quran and Sunnah and shall be inclusive to all of the American Muslim community such that it brings the community together and helps the community put behind divisive sectarian, ethnic and political divisions and focus on that which brings the communities together.”<sup>37</sup>
  - For all events, an effort is made to have volunteers greeting attendees at the door. Volunteers in MakeSpace T-shirts are available to usher or otherwise help attendees. Multiple community members reported that this step made them feel valued and gave them a sense of belonging to the organization.
  - Women are not required to wear hijab, and participants at events are not criticized on how they are dressed.
3. **Youth and convert engagement and assimilation depends on opportunities for making social bonds.** An emphasis on youth- and convert-specific social activities is essential, as is providing ample opportunities to volunteer, to facilitate interaction with the wider community. For converts, it is important to ensure that they have at least one social contact in the community and to have special arrangements for holiday events so that they can share in the feeling of family and community.

4.

**Women's inclusion is more effective when it is not compartmentalized.** Participation by women must be solicited at all levels of the organization, not just on “women’s committees” and for women-specific programming. This can be achieved by ensuring an equal voice for women on the Board of Directors and in decision-making processes, and by creating an organizational culture in which women’s participation and input is genuinely valued. For members/congregants, inclusion can mean an equal access to the prayer space and the imam.

5.

**Young American Muslims value content that is relevant to life in America.** A majority (72.2 percent) of MakeSpace Ramadan taraweeh attendees said they are attracted to MakeSpace because the programming and content is relevant to Islam and their life in America. MakeSpace broadly defines “relevant content” as material that resonates with the needs, struggles, and values of American Muslims (specifically, youth and young professionals). As the needs of the community change (often in response to dynamic social and political climates), MakeSpace iterates the definition of “relevant” in response. Ultimately, the aim is to offer content that integrates Islam and society in a way that empowers the community to grow spiritually, intellectually, and professionally. For example, in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks in late 2015, in addition to interfaith outreach, MakeSpace held a halaqa examining how the community could respond. MakeSpace has also held numerous events relevant to recent and upcoming elections, including dialogues with candidates and delegates.

6.

**An effective use of marketing, social media, and technology can potentially increase attendance and participation.** Attendance at events is facilitated by technology initiatives such as Juma’ah Rides, and a MakeSpace “brand” of inclusion and diversity is effectively marketed to young audiences using social media platforms.



## Appendix: ISPU Opinion Survey Results

### Highest Level of Education

Middle/High School: 16.66%  
College: 52.78%  
Graduate: 30.56%

### Country of Birth

USA: 58.33%  
Outside the USA: 41.67%  
    Sierra Leone: 2.78%  
    Bangladesh: 8.33%  
    Syria: 2.78%  
    Ethiopia: 2.78%  
    Saudi Arabia: 5.56%  
    Pakistan: 16.67%  
    Morocco: 2.78%

### Father's Country of Birth

USA: 11.11%  
Outside the USA: 88.89%

### Mother's Country of Birth

USA: 13.89%  
Outside the USA: 86.11%

### Children of Immigrants (% of US Born with Non-US-Born Parents)

80.95% respondents born in the USA are children of immigrants (17 out of 21)

### Marital Status

Single: 69.44%  
Married: 27.78%  
Divorced: 2.78%

### Have Children?

Yes: 13.89%  
No: 86.11%

## Appendix: ISPU Opinion Survey Results

### How Important Is Islam in Your Life?

Very Important: 97.22%  
Somewhat Important: 2.78%  
Not Too Important: 0.0%

### Performing Daily *Salah*?<sup>w</sup>

Make All Five Daily *Salah*: 72.22%  
Make Some of the Daily *Salah*: 25%  
Make *Salah* Occasionally: 0%  
Never Make Daily *Salah*: 2.78%

### Regularly Attend *Juma'ah*?

Every Week: 44.44%  
Once or Twice a Month: 27.78%  
Few Times a Year: 22.22%  
Never: 5.56%

### Pray *Juma'ah* at MakeSpace?

Yes: 44.44%  
No: 55.56%

### How Often Do You Attend MakeSpace Friday *Halaqas* or Wednesday *Tafseers*?<sup>x</sup>

Very Often: 9.09%  
Often: 9.09%  
Sometimes: 21.21%  
Rarely: 60.61%

### How Often Do You Attend Prayer or Activities at a Mosque?

Very Often: 14.29%  
Often: 28.57%  
Sometimes: 40%  
Rarely: 17.14%

### In the Past, Did You Attend a Mosque?

Yes, Frequently: 48.57%  
Yes, Occasionally: 40%  
No: 11.43%

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<sup>w</sup> *Salah*: The Arabic word for prayer, usually referring to the five daily prayers required of all Muslims as one of the pillars of Islam.

<sup>x</sup> *Tafseer*: The Arabic word for Quranic exegesis or interpretation.

# Endnotes

- 1 At MakeSpace, the Content Committee is charged with conducting regular opinion surveys to evaluate impact and to assess community needs.
- 2 By-Laws of MakeSpace, Inc., 2014, 6.
- 3 Tannaz Haddadi, interview with Afif Rahman, Washington, DC, September 18, 2015.
- 4 Sarah Albani, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, Washington, DC, July 3, 2015.
- 5 Quran, 58:11
- 6 <http://www.imakespace.com/about-us/>
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 <http://www.muslimlinkpaper.com/community-news/community-news/3387-out-of-place-at-area-masajid-nova-youth-create-their-own-space.html>
- 9 Imam Zia, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, Washington, DC, June 25, 2015.
- 10 <http://www.imakespace.com/about-us/>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Umar Farooq, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, Washington, DC, August 20, 2015.
- 13 Sajida Swadek, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, Washington, DC, August 20, 2015.
- 14 Antonio Glen, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, Washington, DC, August 7, 2015.
- 15 By-Laws of MakeSpace, Inc., 2014, 7.
- 16 Interview with Sarah Albani.
- 17 By-Laws of MakeSpace, Inc., 2014, 6.
- 18 Imam Zia, personal correspondence with Faiqa Mahmood, August 6, 2015.
- 19 From MakeSpace mission statement, <http://www.imakespace.com/about-us/>
- 20 <http://highschool.imakespace.com/>
- 21 Interview with Sajida Swadek.
- 22 <http://www.make-strides.org/connect/>
- 23 Imam Zia, personal correspondence with Faiqa Mahmood, August 6, 2015.
- 24 Ghada Khan, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, August 10, 2015.
- 25 ISPU opinion survey, anonymous female.
- 26 ISPU opinion survey, anonymous male.
- 27 MakeSpace/Dunya Banquet Hall visited on June 25, 2015.
- 28 Interview with Ghada Khan.
- 29 See, for example, Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations* (B&H Publishing Group, 1999); and LiErin Probasco, *Congregational Engagement of Young Adults: A Review of the Literature* (Faith Communities Today, 2011).
- 30 Antonio Glen, interview with Faiqa Mahmood, Washington, DC, August 7, 2015.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 <http://www.imakespace.com/donate/financial-transparency/>
- 33 <http://www.imakespace.com/donate/financial-transparency/ramadan-finances/>
- 34 Raheel Baig, MakeSpace Finance Committee member, personal correspondence, August 14, 2015.
- 35 Interviews with Imam Zia and Sarah Albani.
- 36 At MakeSpace, the Content Committee is charged with conducting regular opinion surveys to evaluate impact and assess community needs.
- 37 By-Laws of MakeSpace, Inc., 2014, 6.



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