

REIMAGINING MUSLIM SPACES

Creating a Welcoming, Inclusive, Dynamic Mosque



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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:

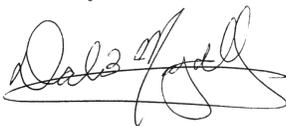
1. Welcoming: Inclusive and engaging
2. Well Governed: Effective and transparent
3. A Hub for Hope: A source of community service

To stimulate and support mosques to be more welcoming and dynamic places for all their congregants, especially women, converts and young people, we set out to discover what this kind of a masjid looked and felt like. First, we conducted multiple focus groups across the country with a diverse group of congregants and mosque leaders. Rather than try to “isolate all the problems” with existing institutions, we asked leaders and members alike to tell us about the most positive experience they’ve ever had and how this experience could be reproduced again and again in the future. What we heard surprised and inspired us.

Second, we combed through all available survey data on mosques and Muslim attitudes. We turned reams of data and hours and hours of focus group research into a set of practical recommendations that mosques can implement right away.

We hope these proposed solutions will enable Muslim communities across the country to build inviting, resilient and relevant institutions.

Warmly:



Dalia Mogahed
Director of Research
Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

Research Staff



Dr. Ihsan Bagby
RMS Principal
Investigator & Author



Faiga Mahmood
Case Study Principal
Investigator & Author



Nashwah Akhtar
Research Assistant



Afif Rahman
Research Assistant
& Data Analyst

ISPU Staff



Dalia Mogahed
Director of Research



Sarrah Buageila
Project Manager



Stephen McGrath
Senior Communications
Manager

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- **Haytham and Banan Obeid**

Advisory Team:

Marwa Aly

Filmmaker, “Unmosqued” documentary

Shahed Amanullah

Co-Founder and Director,
Affinis Labs

Hazem Bata

Secretary General, Islamic Society of North
America

Patrick Cates

Managing Director, DREAM of Detroit

Ahmed Eid

Filmmaker, “Unmosqued” documentary

Maryam Eskandari

Founder, MIIM Designs

Tannaz Haddadi

Founder and President of the Board, Next
Wave Muslim Initiative

Butheina Hamdah

Development Associate, Institute for Social
Policy and Understanding

Dr. Altaf Husain

Vice President, Islamic Society of North
America

Iffa Kazi

Operations and Special Projects Manager,
El-Hibri Foundation

Saleem Khalid

Executive Director, Muslim Enrichment
Project

Farhan Latif

President, El-Hibri Foundation

Atif Mahmud

Filmmaker, “Unmosqued” documentary

Hind Makki

Curator and Founder, Side Entrance Blog

Meira Neggaz

Executive Director, Institute for Social
Policy and Understanding

Sarah Sayeed

Former Board Member, Women in Islam,
Inc.

*For more information about the study,
please visit:*

↪ <http://www.ispu.org/RMS>



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Executive Summary

The 2014 documentary *UnMosqued* focused attention on the widely accepted problem that many young adult Muslims are deeply dissatisfied with most American mosques, which are in their view inhospitable and irrelevant to their lives. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) chose to engage this issue of the “unmosqued” by initiating a research project to understand the phenomena, and more importantly, to seek answers to how *mosques*^a can be more attractive to young adults, women, and converts. ISPU set out to do this by conducting extensive focus group interviews that included 86 participants in three metropolitan areas—Washington, Detroit, and the San Francisco Bay area. The research also included a review of nationally representative surveys.

The review of national surveys made clear that the vast majority of American Muslim young adults, women, and converts are not alienated from Islam or the American mosque. Whatever dissatisfaction these individuals might have with mosques, it has not reached the level at which they have entirely given up on the mosque. The focus group interviews revealed a consistent refrain that young adults, women, and converts are enthused about mosques that are welcoming, inclusive, and dynamic.

ISPU research produced several specific recommendations as detailed below to create more engaging, vibrant mosques for all.

The focus group interviews revealed a consistent refrain that young adults, women, and converts are enthused about mosques that are welcoming, inclusive, and dynamic.

Recommendations for Creating a Welcoming Mosque

1. **Form a welcoming committee (i.e., a *Tasleem*^b Squad).** Recruit a group of volunteers whose responsibility it is to meet and greet people as they enter the mosque.
2. **Create a welcoming culture in the mosque.** The job of giving *salaam*^c and welcoming people is not the job of a few greeters—it is the responsibility of all mosque participants.

Editor's note: Unless otherwise stated, all footnotes are derived from Arabic words.

^a Mosque: A Muslim place of worship.

^b Tasleem: Greeting.

^c Salaam: Greeting of peace.

3. **Nurture a nonjudgmental culture and a safe environment.** One of the biggest turnoffs for young adults, women, and converts is to be criticized, frowned upon, or rudely corrected when attending a mosque activity.
4. **Organize *Ta'arruf*^d activities at which people can get to know one another.** Mosques have to be purposeful in using every opportunity to help attendees get to know each other.
5. **Provide welcoming packets for newcomers.** Information for newcomers should be made available both in paper form and on the mosque's website.
6. **Create opportunities and spaces for socializing and developing friendships.** Many focus group participants mentioned that their most valued experience at a mosque was the joy of socializing and forming friendships.
7. **Install good signage.** One of the first indicators of a welcoming mosque is signage. The mosque should have a respectable sign on the outside that explicitly welcomes people.
8. **Organize a wellness committee.** The wellness committee should distribute all health-related news in the community, including announcements of births, illnesses, and deaths.

Recommendations for Creating an Inclusive Mosque

1. **Embrace diversity.** Every aspect of the mosque should reflect the diversity of attendees. In particular, young adults, women, and converts need to be represented in all aspects of the mosque, including on the board and committees, and in mosque activities.
2. **Improve communication.** Attendees who have a sense that information, especially inside information, is being rationed may also feel excluded. Mosques must be open, transparent, and aggressive in communicating with members.
3. **Listen to the community.** A sense of inclusivity is engendered when community members feel that mosque leaders care about their opinions and listen to them.

^d Ta'arruf: Getting acquainted.

Recommendations for Creating a Dynamic Mosque.

1. **Empower attendees.** Young adults, women, and converts want a mosque that is open to using their skills and willing to consider new ideas.
2. **Recruit volunteers by appointing a volunteer coordinator.** When young adults, women, and converts are involved in the life of the mosque, their estimation of the mosque grows.
3. **Form small groups.** Focus group participants said they most often formed friendships in small group settings such as a study group, an interest group, or a demographic group such as for young mothers.
4. **Organize relevant and inspiring programs.** Probably the first task of a mosque is arranging *khutbahs*,^e speakers, and other programs at which attendees leave feeling rejuvenated and uplifted by an inspiring and/or relevant event.
5. **Be a community center.** The most valued mosques are those that offer people various reasons to visit the mosque other than just for prayer.
6. **Engage in outreach activities.** Young adults want a mosque that is engaged, relevant, and active in the world.
7. **Beautify the mosque.** Many focus group participants mentioned the rewarding experience of attending a mosque that is clean, well-kept, beautiful, and peaceful.
8. **Give priority to major mosque events.** Mosques must recognize that they will be graded by how well they handle major events such as the *Eids*, *Ramadan*, conferences, or a major crisis.^f

Specific Recommendations

Using the guidelines of being a welcoming, inclusive, dynamic mosque, we propose several specific recommendations for each group—young adults, women, and converts.

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

^f Eid: A Muslim Holiday; Ramadan: Month of fasting, when the Quran was first revealed.

Specific Recommendations to Support Young Adults

1. **Organize a young adult group.** The purpose of such a group is to give young adults the opportunity and space to organize their own activities that will build bonds of friendship and enhance their Islam.
2. **Encourage young adults to be represented in leadership positions.** Most young adults will not be attracted to a mosque if they are not present as active members and leaders. This can occur by finding and nurturing young adults who can present khutbahs and serve in leadership positions.
3. **Be a family-friendly mosque.** Young adults with young children often are interested in increasing their engagement with the mosque and community. A family-friendly mosque means in large part that young children and new mothers are welcomed and accommodated. This includes creating spaces for children to play and for parents to worship comfortably.
4. **Organize professional support activities.** Many young adults are beginning a career and appreciate support from the mosque through professional networking and mentoring opportunities.
5. **Facilitate marriages.** More than half of young adults are unmarried. Young adults in focus group discussions agreed that specialized marriage events are not attractive; rather, they seek activities organized by themselves, at which young adults can come together and get to know one another in a more natural and informal setting.

Specific Recommendations to Support Women

1. **Invite women to serve on the board.** The presence of women on the mosque board and in other leadership positions is a strong statement that women and their contributions are welcomed. An article in the mosque's constitution should ensure that women are represented on the mosque board and executive committee.
2. **Organize a women's committee.** In addition to women serving on the board, a women's committee, which is not controlled by the board, is needed to ensure that women have an independent voice. It should function to support the women on the board, facilitate the organization of activities for women, and provide a vehicle for alternative voices from women who might not be represented on the board.

3. **Beautify the women’s area.** Another clear sign that women are welcomed at a mosque is a women’s area that is pleasant and appealing, meaning that the space is adequate, clean, tastefully decorated, and well furnished.
4. **Ensure the main *musalla*^g is available to women.** Women should have the choice to pray in the main musalla or in a separate area, and mosque leaders should make it clear that women are welcome in the main musalla.
5. **Match resources and space allocation for women.** Data (ISPU 2016, Gallup 2011) show that women and men attend the mosque in nearly equal rates despite the obstacles that women often face; thus, mosque resource allocation should reflect this reality.
6. **Encourage the *imam*^h to be accessible.** In many cases the face of the mosque and the source of Islamic knowledge is the imam, and if the imam is cut off from women, it gives the distinct impression that women are marginalized. Imams should be accessible to women and hold sessions specifically for women only.
7. **Address the issues that women face.** Mosque *halaqas*ⁱ and khutbahs, which are aimed at men and women, should address issues that are relevant to women, including the treatment of women in marriage and the place of women in the mosque, signaling to all who attend that the mosque takes seriously the concerns of women.
8. **Support women’s activities.** The mosque should enthusiastically support women’s activities by means of finances, publicity, and staff assistance.

Specific Recommendations to Support Converts

1. **Organize a convert-care committee.** A convert-care committee oversees the integration of converts into Islam and the community. Converts should be well represented on the committee.
2. **Develop a mentoring program.** Mentors should be trained to shepherd new converts through the initial phase of conversion. The most important responsibility of a mentor is to socialize with new converts—sharing meals, doing activities together, and supporting the convert in various ways.

^g Musalla: A designated place of prayer.

^h Imam: A Muslim prayer leader.

ⁱ Halaqa: A religious study circle.

3. **Establish a convert support group.** A support group for converts establishes a forum at which issues can be discussed that converts might be facing. It also serves as a vehicle for socializing and an avenue for exploring Islamic knowledge.
4. **Distribute basic educational material.** A packet of basic Islamic educational material should be made available to every convert that includes videos, books, and links to appropriate educational websites.
5. **Organize educational programs.** Educational programs for new Muslims should present the basics of Islam in a systematic fashion.
6. **Hold social events.** Social events for new converts help promote the development of friendships within the mosque and are one of the most important factors in maintaining a convert's connection with the mosque.
7. **Organize convert family events.** Invite the families of new converts to the mosque to expose them to Islam and the Muslim community.

Introduction

In an iconic scene in the 2014 documentary *UnMosqued* a young, white, female convert, who is wearing a *hijab*,^j comes to the front door of an urban mosque. An older man, who is undoubtedly a first-generation immigrant, dressed in traditional South Asian clothes, approaches her and matter-of-factly informs her that she cannot enter the mosque, and that the women's prayer area is across the street. Flustered and incredulous, the woman turns and leaves.

This scene is a concise characterization of a particular view that Muslim young adults, women, and converts are frustrated with—an American mosque that is conservative, stuck in recreating the mosque back home and therefore irrelevant to young adults, is closed or unwelcoming to women, and clueless about converts. Mosques in most of the Muslim world are in fact largely just places of prayer, established and administered by the government or a wealthy patron. Mosques in most countries do not constitute communities or congregations. Also, overseas mosques are, in most instances, the domain of men, where women are excluded. The argument of the documentary *UnMosqued* is that Muslim men and women raised in America and Muslim converts feel alienated from this type of old-world mosque.

The reality is that few American mosques replicate the practices one might find in an old-world mosque, but at the same time, most mosques have not completely stepped away from the old-world model to create a mosque that is a welcoming, inclusive community, engaged in relevant outreach to the general community. American mosques, unlike overseas mosques, are in fact congregations, meaning that they are governed by people who attend the mosque. But most mosques still marginalize women and young adults in various ways: men and women are typically separated in the prayer area by a barrier (two-thirds of mosques have such a barrier), few mosques have programs for young adults, and only a handful of mosques have a culture of consciously and consistently welcoming new Muslim converts to their community.

Why Mosques Matter

The relationship between a mosque and its young adult members is vital. Frequent mosque attendance is also linked with greater civic engagement. According to the 2016 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) poll of American religious communities, those who attend a mosque once a week or more are more likely to volunteer, be registered to vote, and intend to vote in the upcoming election (ISPU 2016).

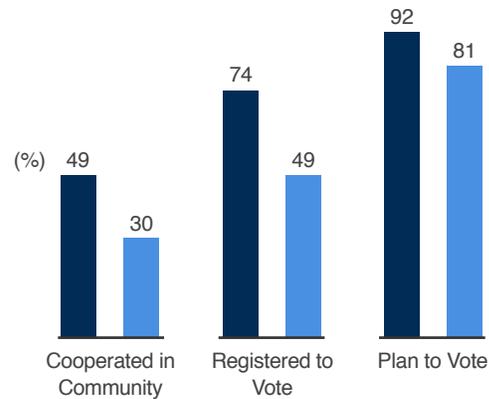
^j Hijab: A covering; usually used to mean a woman's head scarf.

Frequent Mosque Attendance Linked to Greater Civic Engagement

Figure 1: *In the past 12 months, have you worked with other people from your neighborhood to fix a problem or improve a condition in your community or elsewhere? (% Yes shown); Are you registered to vote at your present address or not? (% Yes shown); Do you plan to vote in the 2016 presidential election? (% Yes shown)*

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), "American Muslim Poll: Participation, Priorities and Facing Prejudice in the 2016 Elections," March 2016.

● Frequent ● Occasional



Frequent mosque attendance is also linked to more positive mental health outcomes, including lower reports of stress and anger (Gallup 2011). Mosques are good for society as a whole because they help integrate Muslim Americans into the democratic process and are linked with better mental health outcomes.

Moreover, from the perspective of the Muslim community, the future of the American Muslim community will be imperiled if the next generation of young adult men and women are alienated from the mosque and therefore stop attending and supporting the mosque. The mosque serves as the nexus of the American Muslim community—the primary place for connecting participants to God and with one another; the primary place to pass on the legacy of Islam to children and youth. If the mosque is not vibrant and healthy, the American Muslim community will suffer, and the long-term future of Islam in America will be in doubt. It is crucial, therefore, for mosque communities in America to recognize these challenges and seek pathways of change.

The mosque is not the only Muslim space in America. The growth of Third Space organizations, women’s groups, and young adult forums demonstrate the vitality of Muslim activities outside the mosque. These nonmosque spaces supply a needed avenue for enhancing spiritual growth and communal bonds, and therefore should be welcomed as an essential part of the America Muslim community. However, these nonmosque efforts cannot substitute for mosques and the vital role that mosques play in serving as the traditional center of the Muslim community and being the main vehicle for acculturating children and youth to Islam.

Purpose

Motivated by the documentary and the discussion surrounding the unmosqued phenomena, this community brief will explore the relationship between American mosques and young adults, women, and converts for the express purpose of producing

recommendations for mosques.

One of the producers of *UnMosqued*, Ahmed Eid, wrote that the goal of his film was “to spark a conversation that will allow us to course correct our future and retain our Muslim youth” (Eid 2013). This community brief can be viewed as being part of that conversation of course correction, striving to envision how to improve and strengthen American mosques by making them more inclusive and vibrant.

Research Methods

Two methods—quantitative data analysis and focus groups—were used in realizing our goals of understanding the relationship of the mosque to young adults, women, and converts, and most importantly, identifying recommendations to improve mosques.

Quantitative data analysis entails using statistics to help understand this phenomena. The Pew Research Center provided the majority of our statistics, in particular the 2011 study of American Muslims (Pew Research Center 2011) and a more recent religious landscape study (Pew Research Center 2015). Having access to the raw data for the 2011 study also provided an opportunity to probe the wealth of information about Muslims that included young adults, women, and converts. Other studies that were used include ISPU’s *American Muslim Poll: Participation, Priorities and Facing Prejudice 2016* and Gallup’s 2009 study, *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait*.

Focus groups, however, were the main research tool for this report. Focus groups allowed us to hear first-hand the many diverse voices of American Muslims. We conducted a total of 13 focus groups in three different cities—the Washington, DC, area, Detroit, and the San Francisco Bay area in California. In each area, separate focus groups were organized for young adults, women, converts, and Muslim leaders. In Detroit we also held a focus group with African Americans only. A total of 86 Muslims participated in the focus groups, generating 539 pages of transcripts.

The conversation in the focus groups was shaped by the theoretical approach of “Appreciative Inquiry,” which was developed by David L. Cooperrider in the 1980s. Appreciative Inquiry seeks to avoid the problem-solving approach of focusing on weaknesses and problems and instead directs the discussion to envisioning the positive, exploring what works in an organization, what gives life, and what catalyzes meaning. Thus, our focus groups did not dwell on what is wrong with mosques, which could have devolved into an energy-sapping gripe session. As Rich Krivanka, a proponent of Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church, stated, “Negative thinking takes away the capacity to create new vision and new images of a vibrant future.” Following this approach, our focus groups centered their discussions on how and when mosques

inspired and excited them; then, the groups developed their own vision of an ideal mosque that fulfilled their best hope of what a mosque should be.

Largely based on the discussion of the focus groups, this community brief presents a list of recommendations for mosques to attract and maintain the participation of young adults, women, and converts.

Background and Context

Millennials in the General Population

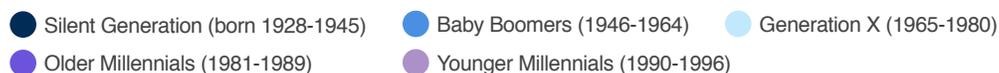
The background landscape to the issue of Muslim young adults is the accepted notion that millennials in the general American population are leaving religion and the church in record numbers. A manifestation of this phenomenon is that the average age of church attendees is now older than 50, and church attendance is steadily declining. Are Muslim millennials following the same trajectory, and are mosques in the same danger?

Sensational headlines about millennials turning away from the church and religion were generated as a result of the 2014 Pew Research Center study that stated that 36 percent of younger millennials (born 1990–1996/ages 18–24) are religiously unaffiliated (Fig. 2); 34 percent of older millennials (ages 25–33) are also unaffiliated (Pew Research Center 2015, p. 12).

Millennials Most Likely to Be Unaffiliated

Figure 2: *What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular? (% Nothing in particular shown)*

Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, "America's Changing Religious Landscape."



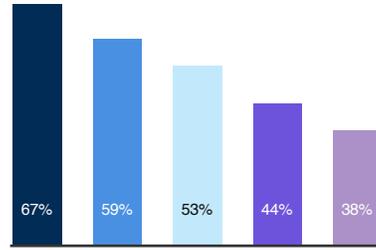
The high percentage of unaffiliated millennials translates into extremely low church attendance for millennials. Only 28 percent of younger millennials and 27 percent of older millennials attend a religious service at least weekly, compared with older Americans, who attend more frequently (Pew Research Center 2010, p. 91).

Undoubtedly driving this alienation from religion and the church is the finding that religion is less important to millennials than it is to older generations. Only 38 percent of younger millennials and 44 percent of older millennials said that “religion is very important” in their lives, as opposed, for example, to 59 percent of baby boomers (Pew Research Center 2010, p. 94).

Millennials Least Likely to Say Religion Is Very Important

Figure 3: How important is religion in your life? Very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important. (% Very important shown)

Pew Research Center, February 2010, "Millennials: A Portrait of a Generation."



- Silent Generation (born 1928-1945)
- Baby Boomers (1946-1964)
- Generation X (1965-1980)
- Older Millennials (1981-1989)
- Younger Millennials (1990-1996)

Muslim Millennials

The Pew 2011 study of American Muslims and ISPU’s 2016 poll of American Muslims show that Muslim millennials are not following the pattern of millennials in the general population. Overall, these studies reveal that Muslim millennials are just as religious as other Muslim age groups—and much more religious than millennials in the general population. In general, therefore, Muslim millennials are not “unmosqued.” Many might be unhappy with mosques in America, but overall, they have not given up on their Islam or the American mosque.

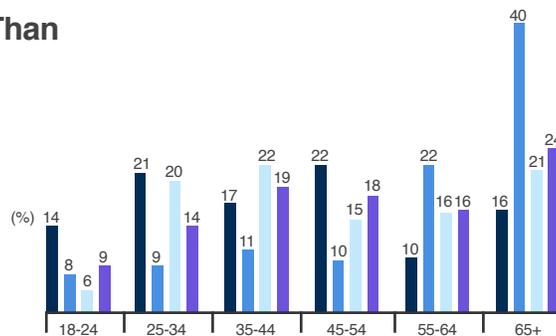
All the studies describe an American Muslim community that is very young compared with the general population. According to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (2016), almost 52 percent of American Muslims are younger than age 45. About 35 percent of American Muslims are within the age range of 18 to 34, which is the age of millennials.

American Muslims Younger Than Other Faith Groups

Figure 4: What is your age?

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), "American Muslim Poll: Participation, Priorities and Facing Prejudice in the 2016 Elections," March 2016.

- Muslims
- Jews
- Catholics
- Protestants



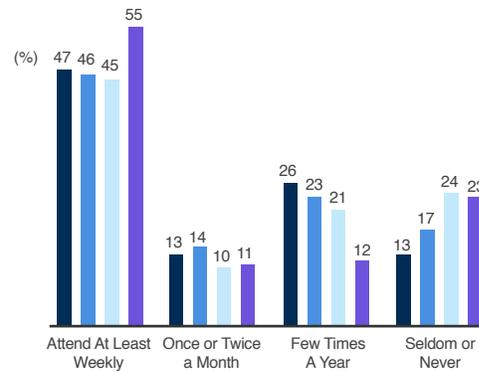
Far from being unmosqued, Muslim millennials attend mosques approximately at the same rate as other Muslims. Based on the data of the 2011 Pew Research Center study, among Muslims aged 18–29, 47 percent attend a mosque at least every week, and among Muslims aged 30–39, 46 percent attend at least every week. This rate of attendance is much higher than that of millennials in the general public, among whom 28 percent of younger millennials and 27 percent of older millennials attend a religious service at least weekly (Pew Research Center 2011).

Young Muslims Attend Mosques as Frequently as Older Muslims

Figure 5: *Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services... more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never?*

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism."

● 18-29 ● 30-39 ● 40-54 ● 55+



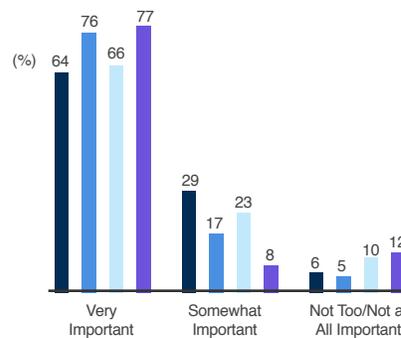
Muslim millennials and older Muslims are also virtually the same in viewing religion as being very important in their lives. Although 64 percent of Muslims aged 18–29 say that religion is very important, 76 percent of older Muslim millennials aged 30–39 rank religion as being very important. These rates are comparable to those of other Muslim age groups (Pew Research Center 2011).

Muslims Consider Religion Important Across All Age Groups

Figure 6: *How important is religion in your life—very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?*

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism."

● 18-29 ● 30-39 ● 40-54 ● 55+

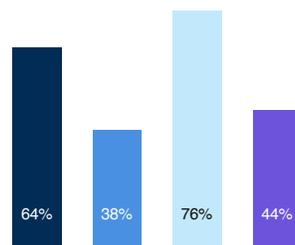


Compared with other millennials in the general population, Muslim millennials value religion much more. For example, 64 percent of Muslim young millennials state that religion is very important to them, compared with 38 percent of millennials in the general population.

Muslim Millennials Value Religion

Figure 7: How important is religion to you—very important, not too important, or not at all important? (% Very Important shown)

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism."



- Muslim Young Millennials
- General Public Young Millennials
- Muslim Old Millennials
- General Public Old Millennials

In a closer examination of Muslim millennials, the Pew Research Center (2011) added a variable that divided Muslim millennials between those born in America and those born outside America. One speculation might be that Muslim millennials born in America are more alienated from Islam and the mosque than those born outside America. The fact that 52 percent of all Muslim younger millennials (aged 18–29) were born outside America heightens the potential impact of this variable. However, in reviewing the statistics, no major difference emerges between millennials born in America and those who were not. In terms of mosque attendance in fact, millennials born in America scored higher than those born outside: 53 percent of younger Muslim millennials born in America prayed at least once a week in a mosque compared with 41 percent of millennials who were born outside America. The same results occur for older millennials—Muslim millennials born in America are more committed to attending the mosque for prayer than millennials born outside America (Pew Research Center 2011).

Other variables such as educational level, income, and race among Muslim millennials did not expose any significant differences in terms of levels of religiosity. The high rate of religiosity among Muslim millennials cuts across all variables.

It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that these statistics show that there is no problem in the relationship between Muslim millennials and the mosque. The best conclusion is that a vast number of Muslim millennials have retained an attachment to Islam as a religion and the mosque as a place to fulfill their obligatory prayer. The alienation that many Muslim young adults have expressed toward the mosque does

not mean that they have turned away from religion and congregational religious practice—unlike millennials in the general population. Although researchers who have studied the drift from church and religion among millennials in the general public speculate whether the tie between millennials and the church is permanently broken, the resilient tie between Muslim millennials and Islam and the mosque provides hope that a “course correction” is possible.

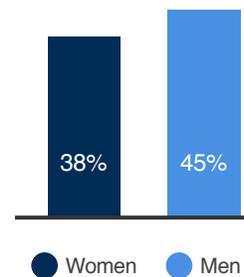
Muslim Women

Like Muslim millennials, Muslim women overall do not show marked signs of alienation from Islam or the mosque. The Pew, ISPU, and Gallup surveys all report that Muslim women attend mosques at a relatively high rate—37 percent (Pew Research Center 2011), 38 percent (ISPU 2016), and 40 percent (Gallup 2011) of women attend a mosque at least weekly. In the ISPU and Gallup surveys, this rate is in fact virtually the same as the attendance rate of men—45 percent of men attend a mosque at least weekly.

Muslim Women Mosque Attendance Similar to Men

Figure 8: *Aside from weddings and funerals how often do you attend religious services? (% Once a week or more shown)*

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), “American Muslim Poll: Participation, Priorities and Facing Prejudice in the 2016 Elections,” March 2016.



Although it is clear that women do not attend weekly *Juma’ah*^k Prayer services at the same rate as men, women do go to the mosque in significant numbers for other activities and events. The obvious implication is that women might attend *Juma’ah* in greater numbers if their presence was more welcomed in mosques.

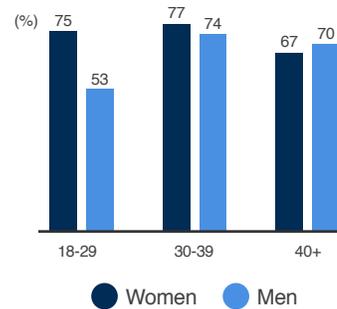
Another sign of the absence of alienation is the Pew Research Center survey results showing that more than three-fourths of female Muslim millennials state that religion is very important to them. This is significantly higher than male Muslim millennials, especially younger male millennials—75 percent for women aged 18–29 view religion as very important compared with 53 percent for men aged 18–29. The fact that Muslim women value religion more than men reflects a general norm for all religions that women are more religious than men.

^k *Juma’ah*: Friday noon prayer.

Muslim Women Value Religion More Than Men

Figure 9: How important is religion to you—very important, somewhat important, not too important, not at all important? (% Very Important shown)

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism."



The data show that women older than 40 show signs of alienation. For example, 34 percent of women over 40 seldom or never attend a mosque compared with 16 percent and 19 percent of younger and older millennials, respectively (Pew Research Center 2011). The same pattern appears in response to the question of the importance of religion. Among women over 40, 67 percent say that religion is very important compared with 75 percent of women aged 18–29 and 77 percent of women aged 30–39 (Pew Research Center 2011). Although these figures indicate alienation from the mosque and Islam, the numbers are still significantly higher than comparable figures for the general public. The reasons for this difference between women over 40 and those under 40 might be that older women are burned out from the mosque, but it also might reflect that their children are grown up and they are thus less motivated to attend the mosque.

Barriers in the Mosque

One of the loudest complaints in the documentary *UnMosqued* is that in most mosques women pray behind a barrier in the prayer area or in a separate room, and therefore they cannot directly see the imam. Even in mosques that have a balcony for women, women complain that the imam is visible only from the first row of seating. In a 2011 study of mosques in the United States, 66 percent of all mosques indicated that women pray “behind a curtain or partition or in another room” (balconies were included in this category) (Sayeed et al. 2011, p. 7). This percentage has remained the same over the last decade, indicating the difficulty of this issue.

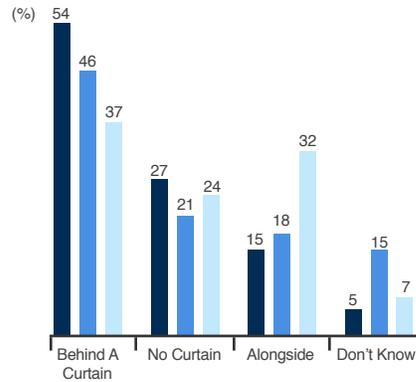
The study of Muslim Americans by the Pew Research Center published in 2011 asked respondents whether women should (1) pray behind a curtain, (2) pray behind men without a curtain, or (3) pray alongside men. About 50 percent of both Muslim men and women said they believed that women should pray behind a curtain, and 50 percent did not want a barrier (Pew Research Center 2011, p. 30). When women are divided by age, those older than 40 demonstrate the greatest rejection of the curtain. Millennial women are almost evenly divided between preferring a barrier and rejecting the barrier (Pew Research Center 2011).

Women Over 40 More Likely Not to Prefer a Prayer Barrier

Figure 10: In your opinion, when men and women pray in the mosque, do you think that women should be separate from men, in another area of the mosque or behind a curtain [OR] women should pray behind men, with no curtain [OR] women should pray in an area alongside men, with no curtain?

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism."

● 18-29 ● 30-39 ● 40+



Converts

The last segment of our study concerns converts, which in our analysis of the Pew Research Center data, includes only African American, white American, and Hispanic converts. Converts also exist among other ethnic groups, but their numbers are too small for analysis in this data set.

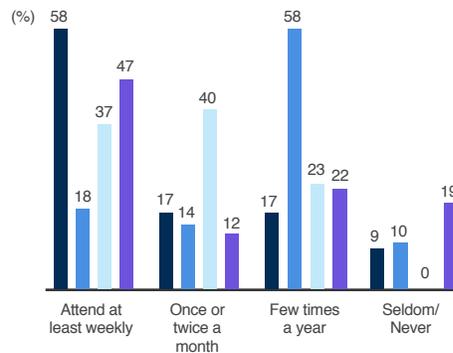
In terms of mosque attendance, white converts have a significantly lower average in mosque attendance than other American Muslims. Only 18 percent of white converts attend a mosque at least weekly, as opposed to 58 percent of African American converts and 37 percent of Hispanic converts. A full 58 percent of white converts attend a mosque only "a few times a year especially for Eid" (Pew Research Center 2011).

African American Converts Attend the Mosque Most Regularly

Figure 11: On average, how often do you attend the mosque or Islamic Center for Salah and Juma'ah Prayer? More than once a week, Once a week for Juma'ah Prayer, Once or twice a month, A few times a year especially for the Eid, Seldom, Never.

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, "Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism."

● African American ● White ● Hispanic ● All Muslims

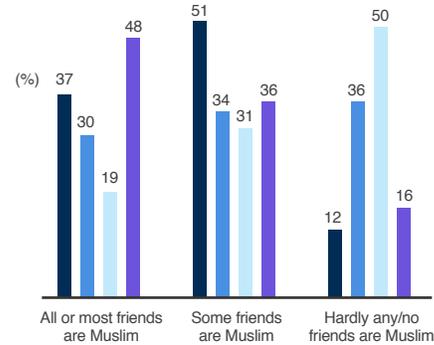
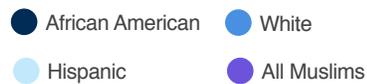


This apparent disconnect between white converts and Hispanic converts and the mosque is possibly explained by the fact that they have few close Muslim friends: 36 percent of white converts and 50 percent of Hispanic converts have “hardly any or no close Muslim friends.” Fewer white and Hispanic converts have a strong Muslim network of friends (Pew Research Center 2011). The development of Muslim friendships is very possibly a key element in integrating converts into the mosque.

African American Converts Have the Most Muslim Friends

Figure 12: *How many of your close friends are Muslims? Would you say: All of them, Most of them, Some of them, or Hardly any of them?*

Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2011, “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism.”



Focus Group Discoveries

Using the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, each focus group began with a request for participants to reflect on two questions. The first question was “Recall the best moment or moments that you had at a mosque; a time that was most fulfilling; when you felt the most excited, enthused and positive about being there.” After responses to this question were noted, participants were asked a second question, “What do you value most about a mosque?” Both questions were intended to set the tone and direction of the conversation by focusing on the positive stories and experiences that made the mosque experience fulfilling and rewarding. Of course, the negative side of the mosque experience did manifest, but it never dominated the discussion.

The themes that emerged from these two questions are detailed below. The themes that were identified can be grouped under four larger categories:

1. Community Culture

2. Programming

3. Leadership

4. Physical Space

The number of times that a particular theme was mentioned coincides with the order of these categories. In other words, the themes under community culture were mentioned the most times as being a fulfilling, positive mosque experience. Next and close behind community culture in frequency were themes related to programming. The themes of leadership and physical space were next in frequency, but they were mentioned much less often than the first two themes.

That community culture was cited most frequently as the best moment and the most valued aspect of the mosque demonstrates that for young adults, women, and converts the sense of community, the feeling of belonging, and the warmth of friendship are the most important ingredients of an attractive mosque. Second, programming that inspires, educates, and engages attendees are the next-most important elements for young adults, women, and converts. Finally, leadership that exemplifies concern and compassion for all mosque attendees and a building space and architecture that make attendees feel comfortable and at peace are all characteristics of an attractive mosque.

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Themes Related to Community Culture—A Sense of Community

Feeling Welcomed

When focus group participants were asked what their best moment was at a mosque and what they most valued about the mosque, the most common response, especially from women and converts, was an experience that gave them a sense of being welcomed. Participants described mosque experiences at which they felt the warm and exhilarating feeling of belonging, being at home, being accepted, being among friends, and being among caring people. The welcoming spirit and culture of a mosque had the deepest impression on most participants.

“When you enter ... people are immediately smiling at you.”

“The thing I most love [about the mosque] is the sense of generosity and hospitality; the sense of belonging.”

“Automatically I was welcomed. The smiles, the warmth, the salaams... And just a sense of it doesn’t matter if you’re new or you’re not one of us, you are one of us because you’re here.”

“[The most valued mosque is] a place where everyone can come and really feel at home, and feel accepted and feel ownership.”

Feeling Welcomed, from a Convert to Islam

“I think it was Ramadan 2010. I hated the women’s section of my mosque...[but] I took a leap of faith, and I saw these aunties go through these double doors at the front of the women’s section. I was like, Okay, I’m going to do it. I sat next to [an auntie]. She looked at me. She said something and I just kind of smiled and nodded. She was like, ‘poor thing. She has no idea what we’re doing.’ So like she and another auntie prayed next to me the entire Ramadan that year... And it was the best experience that I’ve ever had at a masjid,¹ because the sense of community I had with those aunties was really tight, and they always made sure that we were drinking water. And they always made sure that I was okay. To this day I go and visit her on Eid. That’s probably one of my best experiences that Ramadan that year, spending it with the aunties in the little auntie section.”

¹ Masjid: A Muslim place of worship.

Feeling of Togetherness in Social Occasions

Probably the second most-cited fulfilling, valued experience in a mosque, as reported by focus group participants, had to do with social occasions when participants had a strong feeling of togetherness—having fun and enjoying the companionship of other Muslims.

The mosque that is most valued is a gathering place where in casual encounters relationships can grow; friendships can blossom; and the mosque has a family-friendly environment where people can pray, play, and hang out. Focus group participants mentioned many types of occasions: women talking while their children played, socializing around Ramadan and Eid, playing basketball, talking after *salah*,^m participating in a Mother's Day event, and sharing meals after Juma'ah.

The mosque that is most valued is a gathering place where in casual encounters relationships can grow; friendships blossom; and the mosque has a family-friendly environment where people can pray, play, and hang out.

“Seeing everybody get together after Juma’ah and sitting around and talking and enjoying themselves. The feeling of community was beautiful.”

“That’s kind of why I like Ramadan so much because it’s like a period where like, when you all get together and you’re hanging out and spending time together and breaking fast together.”

“When the experience in a mosque is ... really great is when I make a friend. So that’s like stellar ... so I don’t feel socially uncomfortable and awkward where I’m trying to like maybe make social talk with people.”

Experiencing Togetherness, from a Young Adult

“It [the mosque] was sort of this hub where all the kids would meet up to hang out with their friends to play basketball in the parking lot. And then Maghribⁿ comes in and then you play soccer after that outside. I just have very fond memories of the whole community as a result of the fact that when my parents were going to the masjid, we would see it like it’s a fun association... It was a very welcoming atmosphere. And we played with the kids from the surrounding neighborhood as well, so it was a very warm—like the fact that it’s the nexus of any social interaction. Like if I wanted to hang out with my friends we would just meet up at the masjid. So that was a very positive experience.”

^m Salah: A prayer; usually referring to the five daily prayers required of all Muslims as one of the pillars of Islam.

ⁿ Maghrib: One of the five daily prayers held at sunset.

Working Together Leading to Friendships and a Sense of Accomplishment

Many focus group participants recalled their best moment at a mosque was when they were working with others on a project or activity that resulted in feel-good emotions, including the friendships that grew out of working together and the sense of accomplishment in getting a job done. The key element is that the participants volunteered for a project or activity—they stepped up to become involved, and that involvement led to a fulfilling experience. The activities varied greatly, from building a playground, organizing a dinner, arranging a lecture series, serving hot lunches, and performing community service. In particular, many young adults mentioned helping organize youth activities as their most fulfilling time at a mosque.

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“We got together and we built that plaza ... to this day, my child is 23 years old, they remember putting mulch on that playground. Those kind of community/family kind of things, I think is what really sticks with our kids and with our families.”

“We planned a women’s conference. I was involved in the planning and I was very excited at that time, and that was a positive memory for me. The opportunity to connect with other women. You know that feeling that you can make a difference and I feel very connected.”

“Our greatest friendships are from [working for the school]. You’re in the PTA. You’re serving hot lunches... You’re actually involved in your faith as opposed to learning about it.”

Uniting Around a Cause or Effort

The experience of uniting around a cause or effort is similar to working together, but it is not associated with the person volunteering in an effort. The fulfilling experience is the joy of witnessing the mosque come together for some purpose or goal—it is the pride in the mosque for living up to its Islamic ideals. Often the pride is in the community uniting despite great differences in cultures, languages, colors, and economic status—it is a pride in a diverse community that lives up to the Islamic ideal of unity. Some of the instances involved tragic deaths and the overwhelming generous response of the entire

mosque, but other experiences concerned small things such as organizing a dinner, performing community service, or helping young people. The key is that the mosque demonstrated that it can be a success in uniting and promoting the concept of working together to live up to the ideals of Islam.

“She basically said, ‘In eight weeks we got to raise \$60,000 to feed homeless people.’ So anyway we did it and the way that the masjid got behind [the project] and really I’m proud of that.”

“And the food was late, everything was running late... And you just got to see the community rally ... you just got to see the whole community be so invested in a cause... It just made me feel so good.”

“When he died, the whole community came with his family and children and wife. The masjid at the time of his janazah^o was full of people and you just felt the love really. You feel that you do have a family here... So it is very exciting, even though it is a sad situation, you get that much support.”

Coming Together, from A Mosque Leader

I have a somewhat melancholy, a very positive reflection, because it has to do with a funeral. I’m very proud... We have a very affluent community.... But we are adjacent to [a poor area].... And we had a brother who passed away ... and long story, in and out of prison, living in a halfway house, having a hard time just making it. And he used to come hang out at the masjid, participate in the activities.... Didn’t have any Muslim family.... And he died.... The reason this is difficult for me to talk about is I can really relate to this because before I was married, if I had died, I would have been in the same exact position.... I got a call from the *Sheikh*^p one night saying, ‘Can you come in and sign a check [as treasurer] because we have to take care of something?’ And I was like ‘Sure, what is it?’ He’s like, ‘Well, we have to pay the funeral home to bury [the brother].’ One of the nicest things that this community did, was after the [washing] we prayed on him and we welcomed the few family he had that showed up to come participate. And the fact that, one, we fulfilled our community obligation to look after this brother who had no one else to bury [him]. And two, that we were conscientious enough to try and accommodate his non-Muslim family who were completely unaware of any ritual.... For me ... that’s definitely my proudest moment. Definitely.

^o Janazah: Islamic funeral service.

^p Sheikh: A religious leader.

Themes Related to Programming

Many focus group participants said they felt most excited and fulfilled at a mosque when they participated in a particularly inspiring program. The types of programs varied greatly, but a common theme among them was that participants left enthused, inspired, and fulfilled. Either the program forged in them a deeper connection with Allah, their religion, or themselves; or the program facilitated a deeper connection to others.

Listening to an Inspiring, Uplifting Talk

Focus group participants frequently mentioned having a fulfilling experience in a mosque when they attended an event that inspired, recharged, or spiritually uplifted them. Typically, the event was a speaker at a khutbah or a special presentation. Other events entailed a stimulating, open discussion in a study circle, group meeting, or friends who gathered to discuss a learned talk. In all cases, participants talked about having a sense of openness and seriousness in exploring a topic that led to insight and inspiration.

“When [the invited lecturer] was speaking you could hear a pin drop... And I just remember thinking, wow, this is amazing what this man is saying... It was such a tremendous spiritual event.”

“I think in a masjid, I look for some sort of recharge. So I feel we all have individual needs, spiritual needs, certain things that we find nutrition in... And I found that the Friday khutbah kind of determines ... how I feel about a space... I’ve been to some amazing khutbahs.”

“Going to a masjid is again feeding me, fueling me, cleansing me in some way that better enables me to be successful in all other aspects of my life.”

Listening to a Relevant Talk or Participating in a Relevant Discussion

Focus group participants repeatedly used the key word “relevant” in their discussions. Participants remembered memorable moments when a khutbah, lecture, group discussion, or program was relevant to their lives and to what is happening in the world. Young adults often mentioned relevancy as an essential ingredient of a fulfilling mosque program.

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“And what really resonated with you in these kinds of [youth] discussion is that the content was relevant.”

“[They] give extremely relevant khutbahs... So every time it seems that it’s not some really abstract concept... It’s usually something that’s very relevant and they can actually implement, things that they see every day in their lives.”

“I just want something relevant.”

Experiencing the Thrill of Learning

Some participants mentioned learning about Islam as one of the most valuable experiences in a mosque. As might be expected, converts in particular valued educational activities in their mosque. However, others cited the responsibility of the mosque to educate its attendees about Islam.

“I value the ability of a masjid to be a center for learning and at all different levels.”

“What I guess I look for [in a mosque] is really education about Islam... It’s about education, about how to practice, how to do things and then putting them into action.”

“The reason I started going [to this mosque is] because of the new Muslim class they have. And one of things I appreciated the most when I started going there was ... class structure.”

Enjoying the Interaction of a Small Group Program

Many participants remembered the intimate interaction of people in a small group setting as their most fulfilling experience in a mosque. Although they regretted the loss of closeness as mosques became larger and impersonal, many participants remarked that small groups are a way of bonding and forming friendships. Groups included a women’s halaqa, soccer group, book club, study group, and hiking club.

“[Those] were the best days... We [women’s group] would meet in the classroom... It wasn’t so much about yes, it’s the knowledge I’m getting, but it was really more about you talking about, well at that time, our kids or ‘I had a bad day.’ To this day ... I have a special bond with the person who [led the group].”

“I think it is important to identify different interests. For me, I like playing soccer, so to do that ... we set up in the winter time for soccer, every week. So that pulls people in.”

“I think the one event I really remember was we used to have weekly meetings, halaqas. It started out more like an identity—Muslim identity discussion and what it really turned into was we’d always have like these poetry recitals and what not.”

Experiencing Intimate and Communal Prayer

As might be expected, some focus group participants mentioned prayer at the mosque as a fulfilling, valuable experience. Mostly, participants mentioned the quiet time when they prayed alone in the mosque. A few cited the beauty of praying in congregation. Many participants mentioned the power of *taraweeh*^q and Eid, tying these very communal prayers to the warmth of a community coming together.

“My favorite time at the mosque was when I go in and there’s nobody there... It’s just so serene, so quiet and you don’t have the hustle and bustle of kids running around.”

“As far as moments of joy within experiencing the Muslim identity, I would just say the sense of tranquility and peace and ease of mind obtained through acts of worship.”

“Isha’ prayer and hadith^s reading after prayer—intimate, everybody busy but yet stop and pray and discuss.”

Enjoying the Mosque as a Community Center

In response to the question of what focus group participants most value about a mosque, many talked about the mosque as a community center where they can just hang out, or find services and resources.

“I think the sense of community is a really big one for me ... it’s more like a community center... If you are trying to play basketball, you can find it there. If you are trying to just hang out with your brothers, you can do that there.”

^q Taraweeh: Extra prayers in Ramadan after the Isha (night) prayer.

^r Isha: One of the five daily prayers, held at night.

^s 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.

“[What do I value?] The services that the masjid provides or the community center. Unlike masjids overseas in the Muslim or other worlds, they’re just prayer centers... But to the opposite here in the States. It’s counseling, it’s [the] youth center, it’s the services you provide for marriage, divorce, family counseling... So it’s all about the services.”

“Feels good when the kids can go to the masjid for activities that they enjoy. A place where the whole family can hang out.”

Themes Related to Leadership

Caring, Accessible Leadership

Focus group participants mentioned feeling good about a mosque when the imam or mosque leader showed concern for them, took an interest in their issues, supported them, defended them, or listened to them. The imam’s position can be a powerful position in the eyes of attendees—he is the one who possesses sacred knowledge, speaks the words of Allah, and delivers the message of Islam from the *minbar*.[†] A caring imam goes a long way to solidify a positive view of the mosque. Part of this appreciation derives from the accessibility of the imam when he gives the khutbah or leads the salah, and instead of disappearing, makes himself available to the congregation.

“[I was passing out flyers for an educational event and] somebody told me my flyers don’t matter... So I should just not do it because I’m a woman... I cried that day and I got really upset. I went to Sheikh immediately and I told him what happened. And he sat down with both of us and he said, ‘This is inappropriate to say.’ But there was accountability. I went to someone; it was rectified.”

“[What I value most is] your imam just hanging out after Salah al-Juma’ah. Just hanging out... Very casual... Or having coffee and cookies... It makes a difference.”

“It’s the personal interactions and how pleasant and easygoing he [the imam] in general tends to be and sort of the air that he inspires... He makes it easy for everyone to be around, for everyone to ask whatever questions they’d like.”

[†] Minbar: The pulpit.

Story of a Caring Imam

There was an incident during taraweeh ... it was a man [who] told off someone else's child... But the imam who actually hates delaying taraweeh... That day he took five minutes ... to apologize to that family, [to] say that this is not the culture of our community; we're very sorry. And categorically stated that we do not agree with the statement that person made to you. And then said that you know, brother who made that statement, I give you the benefit of the doubt and I pray that you're just having a bad day... And then called that child up and said, if this child is still in the vicinity, please come up and have them pray right next to them. So that just created—I mean, that was such a powerful statement... But I just know from a community sense that was a really strong thing.”

Empowering Leadership

Focus group participants said that a mosque was most valued when it empowered them to use their skills and expertise in doing programming at the mosque. Participants said they were fulfilled and grateful when mosques were open to suggestions and input and then facilitated their contributions. Those mosques did not project a feeling as if it was being run by a closed clique of people who resisted any new idea, but instead it felt welcoming to the talents and resources that participants brought to the mosque.

“If I’m able to do something I can go to the community and say, ‘Can I bring this program here? Is that something I can do?’”

“Ideally you want to be in a community that fosters that best part of you that you’re seeking to fulfill.”

Story of a Women Who Was Empowered

So there's this little masjid... So I just walked in there... So there was this guy there who just happened to be praying there... I asked him about the imam and everything and he asked me if I wanted to start a women's class there because I told him that my background was in *Shariah*.^u So I said, 'Sure.' And we just put a flyer together there. And he said, 'I'm just going to make a flyer and I'm going to deliver it to all the masjids.' I did not know what to expect, but I showed up the next Saturday, the time we had set, and there were about five people there ages 3 to 63. So I just did a little meeting for the five and in about two months the class grew to about 50 people. And it was just an amazing experience. I did not expect it at all. I guess that's what made it so special to me, but also that somebody who was not the imam or the masjid, felt the need of the society that was around it, and he just saw an opportunity and he grabbed it.

Themes Related to the Physical Space

Feeling the Serenity of a Mosque

Some focus group participants said that a time they felt most fulfilled in a mosque was when the mosque was quite serene—when the peace of the mosque was a vehicle to the peace of Allah. One of the main purposes of a mosque is to help people connect to Allah. That purpose was accomplished through inspiring talks and other uplifting events, but at times that purpose had been fulfilled by just providing a peaceful space where an individual could better pray and contemplate Allah.

“[I value] really quiet times at the masjid when there's no one there and it is really peaceful. And there's something about the space... I used to go to the campus masjid and I just loved it. That was like my ultimate—I don't know if you want to call it sanctuary.”

“Atmosphere is crucial. So if I want to grow myself, I want it [the mosque] to be serene... So if I have the quiet zone with the ... kids zone [I'm happy].”

“My main goal is to rejuvenate myself spiritually ... that quiet and safe place ... you feel spiritually and physically safe.”

^u *Shariah*: Core Islamic ethical principles from which Islamic law is derived.

Enjoying a Clean, Beautiful Mosque

Among the most valued aspects of a mosque are its beauty and cleanliness. The spirituality and solemnity of the space is aided tremendously by its beauty and cleanliness. The opposite—blight and dirt—robs the space of spirituality. Participants also want to feel proud of their mosque, and a well-kept, visually appealing mosque makes them feel good about the mosque. In addition, a beautified, clean mosque is a clear sign that someone cares about the space, and thus the mosque feels more welcoming and inviting.

“I personally want to see a pretty masjid, which is God’s place... I think that’s important... It increases your spirituality.”

“So there are the basics ... number one that it’s clean.”

“I don’t mind the [mosque’s] female space... I hate the fact that I can’t see the speaker, because it drives me nuts ... [but] I really love it because the way they try to make it pretty, given the budget... I’m at eye level looking out at all these wonderful evergreens, and I just feel so—I feel closer to God that way... I look out there and I feel like I’m communicating with God more.”

Recommendations for Creating a Welcoming, Inclusive, and Dynamic Mosque

For young adults, women, and converts in our focus groups, the most valued aspects of a mosque is one that gives them a sense of community and of being relevant and engaged in the world. The sense of community is expressed as the exhilarating, warm feeling of being welcomed into a community and a sense of belonging to a community—when they have these feelings, they are the most fulfilled and excited about being a part of a mosque. Another aspect of a mosque that excited young adults, women, and converts was when they had a sense that they were involved in something that was important to them or the world—something that seemed meaningful and relevant. They appreciated a mosque that was active, alive, purposeful, engaged, and dynamic.

An obvious lesson from the focus group discussions is that a mosque must become a community. A community can be defined as a group of people committed to one another and to a common cause. A mosque is not simply brick and mortar, and it is not simply a place of prayer. The successful mosque is a community of believers who are committed to building the true brotherhood/sisterhood of Islam and to being purpose driven and mission oriented in fulfilling the vision of Islam in the world. In striving to be a group that exemplifies the ideals of Islamic brotherhood/sisterhood, a mosque will be welcoming and inclusive. In striving to be a group that is purpose driven, a mosque will be dynamic. The ideal mosque community that will attract young adults, women, and converts is one that that is welcoming, inclusive, and dynamic.

An obvious lesson from the focus group discussions is that a mosque must become a community. A community can be defined as a group of people committed to one another and to a common cause. A mosque is not simply brick and mortar, and it is not simply a place of prayer.

But how does one create in a mosque a sense of community and how does one create a community of dynamism and relevance? That is a major challenge for every mosque. The following items are recommendations for creating such a mosque. As such, they should be viewed as rough guidelines as opposed to detailed prescriptions. Our hope is that these recommendations will serve as a starting point for a movement to envision ways to transform American mosques.

Creating a Welcoming Mosque

Form a Welcoming Committee

Assign a welcoming committee (i.e., a Tasleem Squad) to give salaam (greetings of peace) as people come into the mosque for Juma'ah Prayer and other mosque events. As one participant in the focus groups commented about a particular mosque, "When you open the door someone says salaam ... there's something special about that." The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH^V) himself advised Muslims to increase their love for one another by giving salaam: "You will not enter paradise until you believe, and you will not believe until you love one another, so spread salaam among you" (Sahih Muslim).

The goals of a welcoming committee are to welcome people, get to know people by initiating conversations, and facilitate their involvement in the mosque. A welcoming committee is the smiling face of the mosque community, working to elevate mosque attendees to mosque participants. Besides giving salaam, welcoming committee members should initiate conversations with new visitors, invite attendees to other mosque activities, and ask everyone to fill out a form that asks for contact information, expertise, and interests. These information forms can be used by a volunteer coordinator to connect attendees to mosque activities and programs.

Create a Welcoming Culture in the Mosque

The job of giving salaam and welcoming people is not the job of a few greeters, it is the responsibility of all mosque participants. The consciousness of every mosque member needs to be raised so that giving salaam with a smile becomes the culture of the community. When anyone comes into the mosque, their first encounter should be someone with a smile, and their lasting impression should be a sense of a welcoming community.

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Creating that culture starts with khutbahs and the examples set by mosque leaders, but it extends to lectures, group discussions, and personal conversations.

Nurture a Nonjudgmental Culture—A Safe Environment

One of the biggest turn-offs for young adults, women, and converts is to visit a mosque and then be criticized, frowned upon, or rudely corrected. Focus group participants told

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

stories of frustration in visiting a mosque and having their first experience be one of scolding or admonishment—their salah is invalid, their attire is not Islamic, etc. Some participants mentioned instances when their salah was interrupted by those who felt it their duty to correct something. The first experience in a mosque should be a smile, not a frown.

Mosque leaders will want to find a balance in setting standards while giving young adults, women, and converts a sense of being accepted and welcomed. A solution to maintaining this balance, which emerged in focus group discussions, is to develop a culture in which mosque members do not take it upon themselves to criticize or castigate anyone. Their job is to welcome visitors. However, the mosque can have designated people who can be alerted to an issue or problem with a particular attendee. This designated person will need to have appropriate training to discuss the issue or problem without being condescending or demeaning. Thus, if a mosque member senses that an attendee has a problem, the member may seek out the designated person to address the issue. One focus group participant mentioned a valued experience in a mosque when someone approached him to correct something about his salah, but it was done in such a warm, caring way that the participant felt that he was being included in the community instead of being marginalized.

Organize Ta'arruf Activities at which People Get to Know Each Another

In most mosques, attendees do not know the names of other people, let alone anything about an individual's life. There can be little sense of community when nobody knows another person's name or background. Part of being welcoming is being able to give salaam while mentioning the person's name. Mosques must be purposeful in using every opportunity to help attendees get to know one another. The bullets below offer some suggestions for doing this.

- Highlight the stories of individuals at every community dinner, possibly focusing on the individuals of a particular ethnic group. At Friday prayer announcements, individuals should be asked to stand and be recognized when appropriate.
- Another idea is Ta'arruf Friday, when everyone wears name tags and is encouraged to greet others using their name; a community dinner can be similarly organized.
- Using the Prophet Muhammad's example of pairing his companions, establish small groups of diverse individuals who may meet occasionally to socialize and learn together. The group can exist for maybe a year, and then new groups are formed.
- The best and most natural way of getting to know other people is to regularly pray and work together.

Provide Welcoming Packets for Newcomers

Information for newcomers should be made available both in paper form and through the mosque's websites. Someone should be assigned to contact newcomers to welcome them and offer assistance. Many young adults are in the category of newcomer when they move to a new location to start a career.

Create Opportunities and Spaces for Socializing and Developing Friendships

Many focus group participants mentioned that their most valued experience at a mosque was the joy of socializing and forming friendships. Friendships and the accompanying sense of community will evolve naturally when masjid members interact with each other over a period of time. Some thoughts on creating these types of opportunities are presented below.

- Provide spaces where attendees can relax together—a social area after Juma'ah, tables for mothers near a playground, café settings, youth areas, etc.
- Provide opportunities for socializing—for example, after Juma'ah, during Ramadan, and at community functions.
- Creating opportunities for socializing and developing friendships is often a function of working together, which is a result of a dynamic mosque that has a varied menu of activities to offer, giving a variety of means for attendees to become involved and to interact.

Install Good Signage

One of the first indicators of a welcoming mosque is signage. The mosque should have a respectable sign on the outside that explicitly welcomes people. Signage should be posted throughout the mosque helping people find various areas. It is disconcerting to visit a mosque and find no directions identifying the *wudu*^w area or even the musalla.

Organize a Wellness Committee

A wellness committee should exist to distribute health-related news in the community, including announcements of births, illnesses, and deaths. Most importantly, the wellness committee should have responsibility for contacting people who have not attended the mosque in some time. The welcoming committee and other members of the mosque should take notice of absences and pass word to wellness committee members for follow up.

^w Wudu: Ritual washing performed in preparation for prayer and worship.

Recommendations for Creating an Inclusive Mosque

A sense of community necessitates a feeling among mosque attendees that they belong—that they are included in the life of the mosque. Young adults, women, and converts too often feel excluded from the mosque, but when they feel included, they have a positive feeling toward that mosque. Some recommendations for creating an inclusive mosque follow.

Embrace Diversity

Every aspect of the mosque should reflect the diversity of attendees. In particular, young adults, women, and converts need to be represented in all aspects of the mosque, including on the board and committees, and in mosque activities. As focus group participants pointed out, when they see other individuals similar to them active in the mosque, they automatically feel good about that mosque—they feel that they can belong to the mosque.

- For elected boards and executive committees an appropriate solution is to have a clause in the constitution mandating diversity, allowing the board to appoint two additional members when certain segments of the mosque community are not represented on the board.
- The welcoming committee should include representatives of the entire mosque community.
- Giving the spotlight to competent women, young adult, or convert speakers is another way of honoring the diversity of the community. In particular, inviting a major female scholar and a young adult scholar to speak are positive steps forward in creating the sense of inclusion.

Improve Communication

When mosque attendees have the sense that information, especially inside information, is rationed to the mosque community, they may feel excluded. Mosques must be open, transparent, and aggressive in communicating with members. Mosques must use all means of communication available—bulletin boards, the mosque website, e-newsletter, social media, and Juma’ah announcements. Social media is often an effective means of reaching out to young adults and converts in particular. Mosques should invest time and

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energy in developing an e-mail list. The best way to do that is to involve the welcoming committee to make sure that everyone has filled out a contact form.

- Appoint a communication committee, led by young adults.
- Send out a short weekly newsletter (e.g., a Juma'ah Journal) to the mosque's e-mail list and make it available on paper for distribution during Juma'ah services.

Listen to the Community

A sense of inclusivity is engendered when the community has a feeling that mosque leaders care about their opinions and listen to them. Listening starts on a personal level, such that the imam and other mosque leaders are accessible to members, and that they listen.

- Organize town hall meetings or community forums to engage the community in dialogue. Demonstrating that suggestions offered in town hall meetings were taken seriously is important.
- Install suggestion boxes and give notice to the mosque community that suggestions are being considered by leadership.
- Take periodic surveys to obtain the opinions of mosque attendees. Make the results of surveys available to the community and arrange a discussion of survey results.

Recommendations for Creating a Dynamic Mosque

Young adults, women, and converts in focus group discussions repeated in different ways that they value a mosque that is active, empowering, engaged, relevant, and inspiring—a mosque that is dynamic.

Empower Attendees

Young adults, women, and converts want a mosque that is open to utilizing their skills and willing to consider new ideas. Focus group participants said they value a mosque that respects their views and talents, and gives them the opportunity to become involved with others in organizing activities, whether a youth group, a study group, a project, or a club. Mosque leaders must resist the tendency to be suspicious of new ideas coming from new individuals. Instead, they must be willing to step back and to empower others to realize their programming goals.

Recruit Volunteers by Appointing a Volunteer Coordinator

When young adults, women, and converts are involved in the life of the mosque, their estimation of the mosque grows. A few will be self-motivated, but most need encouragement to become involved, most need to be shown pathways for involvement, and most need to be personally asked. The dynamic mosque must seek out volunteers and then connect them to activities and projects. Designate a volunteer coordinator to contact mosque attendees using the information form collected by the welcoming committee. Invite attendees to become active by suggesting that they join a particular project, study group, committee, or activity. Getting people involved usually takes first reaching out to them. The mosque should actively and continually make known volunteer opportunities and other avenues for involvement.

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Form Small Groups

Focus group participants said they most often formed friendships in small group settings such as study groups, interest groups, or demographic groups such as those for young mothers. The friendships and bonds formed in small groups gave focus group participants a sense of community that was projected onto the mosque as a whole. A dynamic mosque is active in identifying the myriad ways that Muslims might form small groups, and the mosque then facilitates their coming together. The answer to the impersonal nature of large mosques, which many focus group participants complained about, is the sense of community that can emerge from within small groups. Numerous types of study groups can be organized, including book clubs, young adult study groups, etc. Interest groups can be organized around sports, recreational activities such as hiking, or particular causes such as environmental concerns. To organize small groups, mosques need to solicit ideas, identify champions who will lead the effort, regularly promote their activities, and have the volunteer coordinator facilitate attendees joining a group. Groups especially for young adults, women, and converts should be organized.

Organize Relevant and Inspiring Programs

A mosque should arrange khutbahs, speakers, and other programs at which attendees leave rejuvenated and uplifted by an inspiring and/or relevant event. Many focus group participants mentioned that they attend a mosque to be spiritually recharged, and when

they are, they feel positive about the mosque. Young adults in particular said they greatly valued relevant talks and programs. By relevant they meant relevant to both their personal concerns and interests, and relevant to the issues confronting American society and the world.

- Mosques must invite inspiring, knowledgeable speakers who can speak eloquently and powerfully to the topics of interest in the community, whether the topic is spiritual or worldly. Many focus group members mentioned such events as a highlight of their mosque experience. One experience can go a long way toward cementing a relationship with a mosque. One way to accomplish this is to invite known, inspiring out-of-town speakers to the mosque on a periodic basis.
- Mosques must arrange inspiring, relevant khutbahs. Mosques must continually evaluate the people who give khutbahs and select those who present well. The mosque can do this by periodically conducting a survey of attendees to evaluate people who give khutbahs. As part of such a survey, attendees can also identify topics they want to see addressed. Arranging for guest speakers is another way of improving the quality of khutbahs.
- Spiritually inspiring events mentioned by focus group participants included Ramadan activities, *qiyaams*,^x simple *khatirahs*,^y and hadith reading after salah. Ramadan is undoubtedly the most spiritual time for Muslims, and therefore, every mosque must focus on maximizing that occasion by reducing distractions and ensuring a peaceful, uplifting atmosphere and experience. Qiyaams are also another way of creating a special experience to focus on spiritual development. Other ways include making congregational daily salah not just a time to pray and leave, but a time for spiritual reflection through short talks and the reading of relevant texts.

Be a Community Center

Mosques that are valued the most are those that offer various reasons to attend the mosque besides just prayer. A community center mosque revolves around prayer, but it also provides activities and opportunities for people to stay at the mosque to socialize, for sports activities, and by having a playground for children and relevant programs. A

A community center mosque revolves around prayer, but it also provides activities and opportunities for people to stay at the mosque to socialize, for sports activities, and by having a playground for children and relevant programs.

^x Qiyaam: Late night voluntary prayer performed in Ramadan.

^y Khatirah: A short talk.

mosque that also serves as a community center tries to address the issues and needs that are of concern to mosque members, such as employment, counseling, and social services.

Engage in Outreach Activities

Many focus group participants said they valued their mosque because of its outreach activities in the general community. In particular, young adults want a mosque that is engaged, relevant, and active in the world. The various examples included engaging in local community issues, speaking out on social justice issues, participating in feed-the-hungry activities, inviting neighbors to the mosque for a special program, and organizing interfaith activities in the mosque. A mosque that is internally focused and not involved in the general community is not attractive to most young adults, women, and converts.

- Mosques must engage in a strategic planning process to decide which outreach activities will be priorities. All mosques should engage in outreach activities, but which activities can be determined only via strategic planning.

Beautify the Mosque

Many focus group participants mentioned the rewarding experience of visiting a mosque that is clean, well-kept, beautiful, and peaceful. Such a mosque can be called dynamic because it shows that someone cares. Cleanliness, beauty, and peacefulness also increase the spiritual experience of the mosque.

- Landscaping provides the first impression of a pleasing, well-maintained mosque.
- Quiet spaces may necessitate designating a children's area where children can play without disturbing the prayer area.

Give Priority to Major Mosque Events

Mosques must recognize that they will be graded by how well they handle major events whether it is the Eids, Ramadan, a conference, or a major crisis. Most focus group participants said they valued their mosque not only because it did a good job organizing Eid and Ramadan activities, but also because it reacted in an excellent fashion to a crisis such as a death in the community or an attack on the mosque.

Specific Recommendations

Using the guidelines of being a welcoming, inclusive, dynamic mosque, we now offer specific recommendations for each group—young adults, women, and converts.

Specific Recommendations to Support Young Adults

Organize a Young Adult Group

Mosques should find one or a few young adults who are willing to take the lead in organizing a young adult committee. The purpose of the group is to give young adults the opportunity and space to organize their own activities, which will promote bonds of friendship and enhance their Islam. To accomplish this, mosques must give leeway to young adults to set their own agenda. The group does not have to meet in the mosque always, but there should remain a tie to the mosque.

Make Sure Young Adults Are Represented in Leadership

Most young adults will not be attracted to a mosque if their peers are not present as active members and leaders. Identify young adults who can give the khutbah. Make sure young adults are represented in leadership positions. This might entail identifying potential leaders among young adults, nurturing them, and then finding positions of leadership for them. Including young adults will not work if the mosque is not open to new ideas and initiatives.

Be a Family-Friendly Mosque

Many young adults are starting families with young children. If a young adult has drifted away from the mosque, one of the best times to attract them back is when they start a family and are thinking of how they will raise their children. The most religious age group, as identified in the data mining section of this report, is 30–39, most likely because individuals in that group are settling down with a family. A family-friendly mosque means in large part that young children and new mothers are welcomed and accommodated. Suggestions follow.

- Provide babysitting services during mosque activities.
- Offer space in the mosque for young children to play so as not disturb other attendees, thereby lifting the undeserved burden of guilt off the shoulders of young mothers when their children make noise.

- Sponsor “mom’s night out” programs that also offer children activities that allow mothers to enjoy an evening out.
- Install a playground for children.

Organize Professional Support Activities

Many young adults are beginning a career, so any support that the mosque might provide will be much appreciated.

- Establish professional networking sessions to introduce young adults to more established professionals in their same area of expertise.
- Organize a mentoring program to match young adults with older professionals.

Facilitate Marriages

More than half of young adults are unmarried, and although many are not seeking to marry, any efforts to facilitate marriages are appreciated. Young adults in focus groups agreed that specialized marriage events are not attractive. The best way to facilitate marriages is to help young adults organize their own activities whereby events, including socializing events, can be held at which young adults can come together and get to know one another naturally.

- Mosques can facilitate marriage by emphasizing the importance of marriage and then working to develop a culture in which marriages are easier to arrange by lowering the high price tag of dowry, marriage banquet, and gifts. Right now, the high price of marriage and the maze of family politics make the prospect of marriage daunting for many young adults.

Specific Recommendations to Support Women

Invite Women to Serve on the Board

The presence of women on the mosque board and other leadership positions is a strong statement that women and their contributions are welcomed. An article in the mosque constitution should ensure that women are represented on the mosque board and executive committee.

Organize a Women's Committee

Women need a vehicle to focus on women's issues and to ensure that all the voices of women are heard in the mosque. Even if women are present in mosque leadership, a women's committee, which is not controlled by the board, is needed to ensure that women have an independent voice. However, a women's committee is not a substitute for having women on the board; instead, a women's committee should function to support the women on the board, facilitate the organization of activities for women, and provide a vehicle for alternative voices of women who might not be represented on the board.

Beautify the Women's Area

Another clear sign that women are welcomed at a mosque is a women's area that is pleasant and appealing, which is ensured by putting women in charge of their area. Pleasant and appealing means that the space is adequate, clean, tastefully decorated, and well furnished.

Ensure the Main Musalla Is Available to Women

Women should have the choice to pray in the main musalla or in a separate area, and mosque leadership should make it clear that women are welcome in the main musalla. There is no more powerful message of welcoming than to have the musalla open for women. Balconies are not the solution, because in most cases, only the first row of seating offer views of the imam. If young adult women in particular are to develop a lasting connection to the mosque, space for them in the musalla is essential.

Match Resources and Space Allocation for Women

The data summarized earlier in this report show that women and men attend the mosque in nearly equal rates despite the obstacles that women often face. Mosque resource allocation should reflect this reality rather than the outdated assumption that women attend the mosque in far fewer numbers than men, thereby justifying less space

and resources for them. Specifically, this means that an area for women in the musalla or a separate area should not so small as to be cramped.

Encourage the Imam to Be Accessible

In many cases, the face of the mosque and the source of Islamic knowledge is the imam, and if the imam is cut off from women, it gives the distinct impression that women are marginalized. In addition, the imam should have sessions for women only. Some imams are shy about interacting with women because of possible suspicion, but the Prophet (PBUH) held sessions with women and consulted with women, so an imam should not hold himself above the example of the Prophet (PBUH).

Address the Issues that Women Are Concerned About

Mosque halaqas and khutbahs, which are aimed at men and women, should address issues relevant to all, including Muslim women leaders and examples for all believers, the treatment of women in marriage, and the importance of women's role in the mosque. The mosque must make clear to all who attend that the mosque takes seriously the concerns of women.

Support Activities for Women

The mosque should enthusiastically support activities for women by means of finances, publicity, and staff assistance.

Specific Recommendations to Support Converts

Organize a Convert-Care Committee

A convert-care committee should exist to oversee the integration of converts into Islam and the community. Converts should be well represented on the committee.

Develop a Mentoring Program

Mentors should be trained to shepherd new converts through the initial phase of conversion. The most important responsibility of a mentor is to socialize with a new convert—sharing meals, doing activities together, and supporting a convert in various ways. A mentor will be the initial source of knowledge about how to pray and recite the *Quran*,^z but the main responsibility of a mentor is not education but socialization. After a period of time (possibly a year), the mentor should begin working with another new convert.

^z Quran: Central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be a revelation from God.

Establish a Convert Support Group

Establish a support group for converts that serves as a forum for discussion of issues that converts might be facing, a vehicle for socializing, and an avenue for exploring Islamic knowledge.

Distribute Basic Educational Material

Make a packet of basic Islamic educational material available to every convert that includes videos, books, and links to appropriate educational websites.

Organize Educational Programs

Organize educational programs for new Muslims that present the basics of Islam in a systematic fashion.

Hold Social Events

Organize social events for new converts. The development of friendships within the mosque is one of the most important factors in maintaining a connection of a new convert with the mosque.

Organize Convert Family Events

Invite the family of new converts to the mosque to expose them to Islam and the Muslim community.

Conclusion

Mosques and other Muslim spaces continue to play a vital role in the spiritual and social life of American Muslims. Mosques are where Muslims form community, learn about their faith, and often even engage in civics. But mosques are also where significant percentages of otherwise committed members of the congregation feel excluded or alienated. This lack of engagement endangers the health and viability of mosques; misses opportunities to bring in this talent as volunteers, leaders, and donors; and impacts the lives of those who desire to be engaged but feel marginalized. Mosque leaders and congregations must work together to revitalize mosques into places where all feel welcomed and where all can thrive. Our recommendations are a place to start the conversation, but each community's leaders and members must tailor solutions to their own needs together.

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For more information, please visit: www.ispu.org.

info@ispu.org | www.ispu.org | 1 (800) 920-ISPU (4778)

Washington, DC

1110 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 768-8749

Michigan

6 Parklane Blvd, Suite 510
Dearborn, MI 48126
Tel: (313) 436-0523

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