

REIMAGINING
**MUSLIM
SPACES**

**Creating a Welcoming, Inclusive,
Dynamic Mosque**
Executive Summary



REIMAGINING MUSLIM SPACES

Dear Colleagues:

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

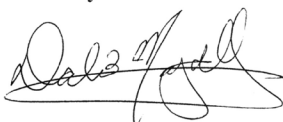
1. Welcoming: Inclusive and engaging
2. Well Governed: Effective and transparent
3. A Hub for Hope: A source of community service

To 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:



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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.

^dTa'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.

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ISPU conducts objective, solution-seeking research that empowers American Muslims to further community development and fully contribute to democracy and pluralism in the United States. Since 2002, ISPU has been at the forefront of discovering trends and opportunities that impact the American Muslim community. Our research aims to educate the general public and enable community change agents, the media, and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

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