

## **Islamic Social Services: Challenges and Opportunities**

The Sixth Annual Conference of the Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) was held June 17-19, 2005, at Arizona State University (ASU) and the Holiday Inn in Tempe, Arizona. Sponsors included the Department of Social Work, ASU at the West Campus; the School of Social Work, ASU at the Tempe Campus; the National Association of Social Workers—Arizona chapter; the Muslim American Society—Arizona chapter; the Council on

American Islamic Relations—Arizona chapter; the Muslim Students Association at ASU Tempe Campus; the Muslim Law Students’ Association at ASU; the Islamic Center of the East Valley; and Global Medical Technologies.

The conference and pre-conference institute continued ISSA’s mission: promoting awareness of the social welfare, mental health, and family concerns facing Muslims in North America by educating mainstream providers, Muslim practitioners involved in providing human services, imams, and community leaders. The pre-conference institute’s theme was “Muslim Culture and Faith,” the title of ISSA’s anti-bias project training for mainstream providers. The conference’s theme was “Islamic Social Services: Challenges and Opportunities.”

Pre-conference institute presenters Aneesah Nadir (Arizona State University and ISSA–USA) and Shahina Siddiqui (ISSA–Canada) provided information about Muslim culture, traditions, beliefs, the history of Islam and Muslims in North America, and social issues facing Muslims, as well as guidelines and considerations for addressing the social issues that Muslims’ experience. Social workers, counselors, teachers, health-care and mental-health providers from mainstream social service organizations, public and private schools attended the pre-conference institute.

Social work educators, doctoral candidates, and Muslim community social service providers were among the presenters for the overall ISSA conference. Abdul Malik Mujahid (Soundvision), Omar Shahin (National Association of Imams Federation [NAIF]), Mohamed Magid (All Dulles Area Muslim Society [ADAMS]) and Bonita McGee (ISSA–USA) facilitated discussions with imams and community leaders. This session explored ways imams can address social issues and strategies Muslim social service providers can employ to help them meet the community’s social needs. While the imams identified a complex situation with a variety of problems and solutions, it became clear that they do not have the knowledge and skills to address the community’s many social and family issues. Opportunities for consultation and education with imams and mosque leaders are necessary, therefore, organizations like NAIF are working with ISSA to provide this to their members. Imams also need to be recognized as professionals with clear job descriptions and regular (including counseling) hours. One imam is not enough; perhaps youth imams and assistant imams are needed.

Among the presentations made were “Female Circumcision” (Khadija Khaja, Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis), “Intervention with the Media” (Aqila Bayati, Virginia Commonwealth University, Association of Muslim Women in America, Inc.), “Refugee Mental Health Services” (Jenan Al Dalal, International Rescue Committee–Spring Center),

“Refugee Empowerment” (Milia Islam, Community Empower-ment Project), “Hunger, Poverty, and Establishing Food Banks” (Zarinah Awad and Zabiha Keskin, Cultural Cup Food Bank), “A Study of Muslim Opinions on Social Service Delivery in New Jersey” (Abu Jamal Teague, New Jersey Community Action Agencies), “Training Leaders and Parents to Talk to Youth about Drugs” (Tahra Guraya, Day One), “Cultural Compe-tency with Asian Indian Women” (Najma Adam, Northeastern Illinois University), “Social Work with African Americans” (Aneesah Nadir, Arizona State University), “Disaster and Crisis Intervention Counseling” (Latif Rasheed, Maryland Mobile Crisis Team), “Spiritual Counseling” (Shahina Siddiqui, ISSA–Canada), “How To Develop a Free Medical Clinic and Breast Cancer Study” (Lynn Salahi, UMMA Community Clinic), “Faith-based Initiative: Funding Islamic Social Services” (Eric Sloan, Arizona State Governor’s Office), “Providing Foster Care for Muslim Children” (Nadirah Rasheed, ISSA–USA), “Alternatives to Traditional Foster Care” (Shahina Siddiqui, ISSA–Canada), and “Assessment of the Identity of Muslim Youth” (Mohammad Hoque, Mississippi Valley State University, ISSA–USA).

The conference included two panels. One addressed the social service needs of Muslim youth. Panel members and moderator included Nazeef Ebrahim (Islamic Community Center of Tempe), Nicole Hadley (Mesa Community College), Huda Shrourou (Arizona State University) and Zarinah Nadir (Arizona State University–College of Law). This session highlighted the need for youth, women-only fitness centers, and community centers. They also discussed the challenges of finding suitable spouses and concluded that new strategies have to be developed for Muslims living in America. The second panel addressed legal concerns facing Muslims in North America and the impact on individual and family wellness. Panel members included Deedra Abboud (Muslim American Society – Freedom Foundation) and Aneesah Nadir (ISSA–USA).

Counseling, a major unmet need, was addressed by Halim Naeem (Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo), who focused on the needs of African-American Muslims, and Shahina Siddiqui (ISSA–Canada), who focused on counseling immigrant and refugee Muslims. Naeem discussed factors that affect African-American Muslim well-being (e.g., family structure and post-civil rights history) and described education, legal issues, the media, economic issues, and politics as contemporary issues facing the community. He indicated that African-American Muslims face discrimination from the mainstream majority, African-American Christians, and other Muslims. Nearly half of all American Muslims are African Americans whose family and friends may or may not accept their conversion.

According to Naeem, trust is an important consideration for counselors. Given African Americans' historical experiences with American authorities, any lack of such trust should not be dismissed as paranoia or delusion. Often, what appears to be anger in African Americans may be sadness. Participants were urged to be aware of their own biases and cultural and emotional baggage. Naeem urged counselors to recognize the environmental and systemic impact of everyday life on African-American Muslims.

Shahina Siddiqui pointed out that many immigrants come from former colonies or countries that have experienced internal conflict due to a divide-and-rule strategy. Unlike the African Americans' ancestors, immigrants come to North America voluntarily. She reminded participants that 80 percent of all refugees today are Muslims who arrive traumatized by war and civil war. She emphasized that the trauma of civil war is experienced differently than war with a foreign entity. Refugees may have been tortured or raped. Their initial happiness and gratitude often gives way to the emergence of what they experienced back home just at the same time government support ends.

Immigrant Muslims face inter-cultural and inter-generational conflict, dysfunctional marriages, family separation issues, and divided loyalties. She indicated that immigrants tend to believe that one day they will go back and so do not form a sense of community accountability or attachment in North America. Sulayman Nyang calls this phenomenon "the myth of return."

Both presentations pointed out the cultural differences that should be considered in counseling. The session moderator, Aneesah Nadir, reminded participants to consider the issues presented in their work with these groups and to remember the critical need for well-trained Muslim professionals to provide a full range of counseling and other services.

Imam Siraj Wahhaj and Imam Mohamed Magid were recognized for their commitment to Islamic social services and their support of ISSA since its establishment. Shareefa AlKateeb's accomplishments were highlighted with a posthumous award for her years of work in the field of human services. One of America's foremost Muslim pioneers addressing issues facing Muslim families, domestic violence, and strategies to promote peaceful families, she was a long-time ISSA supporter and the founder and director of the Peaceful Project. She returned to Allah on October 20, 2004. May Allah have mercy on her soul, forgive her sins, and grant her a place in Paradise. Ameen.

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