

Islam: Dialogue, Devotion, and Development

ISNA's Forty-first Annual Convention, held in Chicago (September 4-6, 2004), offered about 100 sessions and was cohosted by the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (CIOGC). Over 400 Chicago Muslim volunteer organizations offered their support, resources, and talents under CIOGC's leadership. The Friday night Interfaith Unity Banquet was dedicated to interfaith dialogue. The invitation-only event seeks to energize attendees, including politicians running for office in the Chicago area, to continue their efforts and to recognize those who are trying to build bridges between different faith communities. The Rev. Stanley L. Davis, Jr., was given a plaque for his continuing work in interfaith relations plus his dedication to peace and justice.

The Fifth Annual Community Service Recognition Luncheon, hosted by the ISNA Development Foundation, was addressed by Cherif Bassiouni, a respected attorney and professor at DePaul University, who is also president of the International Human Rights Law Institute. He declared: "It makes me angry when Muslims apologize for Islam. I am proud to be a Muslim."

For the first time, a female Muslim activist, Sharifa Alkhateeb, received the Mahboob Khan Community Service Award, which recognizes outstanding service to the Muslim community in North America. Alkhateeb, recognized for her work in various causes, especially those concerning women, could not attend. Her husband Mejdī accepted the award on her behalf, while her sister read her acceptance speech. Former ISNA president Muzammil Siddiqui also received the award.

In their “Beyond the Monologic Community,” Imam Nur Abdullah and Dauwd Wharnsby Ali discussed the importance of dialogue and intellect and stressed that common ground can be found by participating in community and trust-building activities. Abdullah emphasized that the highest level of intellect is the ability to debate, “not to defeat someone, but to find a common ground to coexist peacefully.”

Michael Wolfe and Alexander Kronomer, producers of “Mohammad: The Legacy of the Prophet,” discussed Muslims in the media and how to change the audience’s perspectives by becoming more visible and making the stations aware of our concerns about stereotypes and incorrect information. They also talked about their company Unity Productions Foundation (www.upf.tv), which shows how in earlier times Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in harmony.

Maha El Genaidi, Soumaya Khalifa, and Azra Husain of the Islamic Networking Group presented a workshop on Diversity Training to Law Enforcement Agencies and Corporations. Imam Magid Ali addressed a concern of many people: “The imam should understand his community, culture, and Shari`ah.” In the United States, the imam does not only lead the prayers, but must lead his community to the righteous path. Imam Asri echoed him by saying: “We should connect the information to practical skills.”

Authors Jeffrey Lang and Jerald Dirks conducted a “Dialogue with New Generation of Muslim Americans.” Lang stated that we have to clear the young minds, provide our youths with logical answers, help them stay on the straight path, and allow them to express themselves – even if that means questioning their elders’ values, traditions, and ideologies. Dirks emphasized that the children of immigrants, the second and third generations, are American and that if we force them to choose between being Muslim and American, they will lean toward being American. “Our purpose is not to differentiate the two, but to integrate the two without compromising the other,” he said.

Faroque Khan, president of the Islamic Center of Long Island, located half a mile from Ground Zero, relayed some of the difficulties his center faced and how he dealt with them. Nadia Khan talked about the Hasanaat Society, which seeks to spread the spirit of Islam by helping those who are in need. Reema Siddiqui talked about the use of television as a means to put a face on our Muslim neighbors. Farhan A. Syed decided to do something about the lack of support structure available for new Muslims and developed a 14-week course consisting of free CDs on basic Islamic topics.

Sabih Q. Zaman related the importance of youth-directed interfaith events. Asra Nomani of the *Wall Street Journal*, spoke about her efforts to gain more rights for women in mosques and the bill of rights, which she wrote, based on *ahadith*.

The session on “Roadmap for Muslim Community to Get Involved in Social Services” heard from field workers. Frederick Thaufeer al-Deen and Aneesah Nadir pointed out the need for more Muslims and imams to get involved as social workers, counselors, and therapists. Abdul Malik Mujahid, president of Sound Vision Inc., spoke about the Islamic benefits of the social services.

CAIR chairman Omar Ahmad warned Muslims against allowing stereotypes and other racial labels to divide their community. He declared that we need to overcome our personal barriers and take a stand for justice. We need to advocate our rights. We need to advocate justice for all Muslims. We must take a stand for our rights. How do we do this? We vote. “We must vote! We have no choice but to vote and no choice but to stay together.”

The panel on “African American Experience 40 years after the Civil Rights Act: Dialogue with Dr. Sherman Jackson,” was addressed by Kenya Numan, Ihsan Bagby, and Amir Al-Islam. Al-Islam stressed: “It is time for us to own up to reality, and more importantly, become a part of it. Having a Muslim identity in America is one thing, but achieving an American Muslim identity is the final goal.”

Muslims showed depth of creativity through poetry, songs, and film at arts panels. Former MSA President Altaf Husain and Imam Zaid Shakir hosted “Rhythmic Reflections.” Shakir gave the event a solid start with his poem, “An Ode to the Christian Right,” in which he discussed what “they” consider right and what we as Muslims consider to be right. The biggest response of the night was received by the short movie “Gandaghee” (Dirt) which left the audience wanting more. Another song sung by Karim and Nabeel Khan sent a very positive yet real message with its hook: “Think day-to-day, because you never know when Allah will take you away.” Numerous other performers discussed political issues through their rhymes, especially those dealing with the Muslim brothers and sisters dying all over the world in places such as Iraq.

The Second Annual ISNA Art Exhibit, consisting of six tables flanking the main entrance to the Convention Bazaar, featured the works of 21 artists, among them master-calligrapher-in-training Soraya Syed Sanders, Suhaib al-Barzinji, Najib Ghoush, Javeria, Saba Ali, as well as members of the all-women Islamic Writers’ Alliance. The convention’s “Meet the

Author” program featured Sheikh Yusuf Hamza, Jerald Dirks, Sister Mary Margaret Funk, and Muhammad Arif Zakaullah.

Among other topics discussd were issues related to civil rights, Islamophobia in America, leadership and leadership training, giving to Islamic charities in the post-9/11 environment, establishing a successful marriage, effective communication, interfaith dialogue within the American context, Islamic unity, the USA Patriot Act, racial profiling, human rights, and various trouble spots overseas.

ISNA Convention Reporters Committee
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