Understanding Our Muslim youth: Problems and Solutions

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In the name of Allah the most Merciful the Most Kind

Understanding Our Muslim youth: Problems and Solutions

We praise Allah SWT, all praises are due to Him, and we ask Allah for His guidance and we repent to Him; whomever Allah guides, no one can misguide him and whomever is misguided, no one can guide him, and we bear witness that there is no god but Allah who has no partners, and we witness that Mohammad - pbuh- is Allah's slave and messenger whom Allah has sent to be mercy to mankind.

I would like to thank the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America for the opportunity of allowing me to address our respected Imams and scholars regarding the issue of "Muslim Youth Challenges in the USA: Problems and Solutions". It is an honor to be with you and to serve you; however, carrying the trust of delivering this paper with the most accurate data and information is not an easy task, and I ask Allah SWT to guide and help me to state the truth and to present the data and facts as accurately as possible.

Think about this analogy: Would you rather go to a physician who prescribes medicine to his patients based on the symptoms of the disease? Or would you rather go to a physician who treats his patient based on his understanding of the roots of the disease, after studying the family medical history and performing the needed exams? Although the physician in the first case might think that he did treat the patient, not only might not the patient recover, but he/she could face a serious life threatening disease.

Due to the fact that Muslim Youth challenges will not be solved if the roots of the challenges are not understood, I will skim over the historical development of the Muslim community and the larger community and show how its development over the last 50 years has affected our youth today. Without the historical background, the challenges can be listed easily; however, it will be hard to propose real solutions for the actual disease.

The importance of this issue stems from the great challenges facing our Muslim youth. Those challenges, if not addressed, will affect the future of the Muslim community in the USA. Producing a new young committed American Muslim generation is a mission itself. The type of youth we raise today will dictate the type and shape of the future Muslim community.

Studying, understanding and finding the solutions to our youth challenges is not an isolated issue from dealing with the Muslim community's challenges and issues. If we rectify the youth issues, we will rectify our community as well insha-Allah.

OUR MISSION IS *"To move young people to strive for God-consciousness and social justice and convey Islam with utmost clarity."*

This paper has been organized in the following format to assist the reader to understand the root problems our youth face from a historical point of view: how did they evolve? And what can we do to fix them?

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I - **Historical Analysis: The enrooted disease:** This section will address how the development of the Muslim community, and its youth, was affected by the development of other communities in the USA.
- The Development of the Muslim Community in the USA
- The Development of other Communities in the USA:
- Historical development: intersection points affecting Muslim youth in the USA

II- **Understanding the youth: Diverse needs:** This section will address the issue of understanding the diversity of the youth in our community, their issues, and how they are different.

III- **Time to act: Defining the path**: This section addresses some suggestions of how to contribute to the solution.
- Personal and program Development strategies and ideas

IV- **Final Word: Collective responsibility:**

Disclaimer: Although this paper has been written with the intention to be presented to an honorable audience consisting of well respected scholars, Imams, students of knowledge and Dawah workers; dealing with the youth and proposing solutions mandates a collective action that requires the involvement and the contribution of the Muslim community and its leaders. Moreover, recognizing that our Muslim youth are our immediate targeted audience, we aspire to propose and implement solutions that can help other youth from different faith and non faith based communities.

Facts presented in this paper are referenced; however some of those facts/data have aged as the studies and surveys which produced those facts were conducted a few years ago. Moreover, some of the scientific methodologies used in conducting some of these studies can be questioned and it may be argued that they are not close to accuracy. [Example: The pew research].

However, I did research on many of the facts presented in this paper to be sure that I present what is reasonably accepted by the majority of the researchers on this topic.

I - Historical Analysis: The enrooted disease

Scanning few decades back into the history of the early Muslims in America, we find a shared common narrative among the Muslim communities about the different phases of growth and development that our Muslim community did go through. Each phase had its own goals, challenges, and accomplishments. Muslims living as a minority have been affected by the surrounding environment which led to new types of problems, such as negative assimilation on one side or isolation and disengagement on the other side. Unfortunately, those problems eventually got inherited by the youth from both the Muslim community and

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surrounding non Muslim communities. _Muslim American youth face tremendous challenges which resulted from the complex intersection of lacking religious identity, conflicting cultures, confused citizenship, misguiding social norms, influential peer pressure, and many other issues_.

Moreover, the daily interaction with other non Muslim youth through different mediums, such as public schools, shopping centers, movie theaters, sports arenas, and social events made many of the Muslim youth face similar problems as their peers from outside the Muslim faith. Therefore, addressing the many issues which our youth face will touch upon not only the struggle of the Muslim community to raise good committed contributing Muslim citizens, but it will help us insha-Allah provide some real solutions to our community at large and its prevailing youth challenges. Based on that, it is necessary to understand how other communities' problems have affected our own youth. I will briefly overview two concurrent developments within the same time frame of two different communities [Muslims and Non Muslims], living together geographically in the USA, and how the Muslim community and Muslim youth got affected by the development of the other communities.

Next, we will briefly cover the development of both the Muslim community and the American communities and then conclude with how this development has resulted into diverse Muslim youth with diverse needs.

- **The Development of the Muslim Community in the USA:**

The Muslim community did exist in the United States of America before the arrival of students who came from South Central Asia and the Middle East in the late sixties to pursue their undergraduate and post graduate studies. Some of those students were not committed to Islam while others were members, supporters, or sympathizers of Islamic Movements and Muslim causes in their home countries [The Palestinian/Israeli conflict – the Afghani/Russian war – Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood struggle …etc]; upon their arrival to the USA they became committed to a mission that was not designed, nor it was suitable, for America which revolved around serving the immigrant Muslim community until the students return back to their home countries: "The Myth of Return".

Activists by their nature, they organized themselves mainly based on ethnicity into groups and started a series of activities that expanded horizontally through the seventies and eighties [building masajid and Muslim schools], while the other section of the community who were more secular assimilated within the larger community.

The type of structures, organizations, bylaws, and community engagement platforms that were setup did not allow much interaction with other ethnicities or with the indigenous Muslims in the USA, especially with the African American Muslim community. This created 3 major isolated large Muslim communities and entities with almost no minimum interaction. Each entity was divided even into many more segments based on ideological understanding of Islam, culture, and vision for Muslims in America.

Moreover, the rigid commitment to either a specific school of jurisprudence and/or school of dawah has divided the Middle Eastern, Gulf region, Indian-Pakistani, and indigenous American Muslim activists over so many issues that lead to dividing the Muslim communities.

In the later eighties beginning nineties, the majority of immigrant Muslims found America to be the land of opportunities [for education, career development, and building a future]. However the "myth of return" was still deeply enrooted in their hearts. Although Muslims started purchasing lands and converting them into Muslim cemeteries, the first generation immigrants struggled to accept the new reality that they are not going back overseas.

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Although many Muslim organizations started to evolve with the vision of integrating Islam and Muslims in America, the struggle is continues until today to change the attitude and demolish the "myth of return." During the fast development cycle and the heavy migration for Muslims to the USA, the indigenous Muslims struggled with their own problems. The development continued horizontally [building masajid and schools] but not vertically [integrating and living as contributing citizens].

During the late nineties and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the immigrant Muslim community witnessed large scale growth in the second generation Muslims, and now the third generation Muslims are evolving in the community. Since September 11, 2001, and after the beginning of a new reality for the Muslim community in the USA, Muslims –both immigrants and indigenous- started realizing the importance of uniting, reaching out, and addressing the real issues relating to the future of the Muslim community in the USA [concept of citizenship, role of outreach and issues of co-existence, interfaith bridging, media and political involvement, institutional and organizational development].

The new reality and conditions of the Muslims in the USA made many Muslims, Muslim organizations, and leaders start thinking about the need to change to a vision that addresses the issues that are affecting the community and its future in the USA.

Envisioning a bright future for Muslims in the USA suggested a focused vision that revolves around investing in the second and third generation Muslims. The newly introduced vision encompasses uniting Muslims and the diverse Muslim communities and continuing the development cycle of the Muslim community in different areas, such as engaging civically and politically, developing the next generation of Muslim leaders, establishing more institutions, and developing a stand in regards to different domestic issues related to the larger American community and in regards to many international issues related to foreign policies.

- **The Development of other Communities in the USA:**

It is important to understand the major changes in the country and what events have occurred during each era as we the next section will conclude the results this analytical stage. Source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_generations]. You will notice that each generation was affected by the concurrent events taking place [war, economic depression, cultural change, educational advancements, and other facts] which affected the youth generation of that time. Below you will notice how different generations were affected by domestic and international events.

1883-1900 (18 years)
The Lost Generation was a term originally used to identify a group of American literary expatriates living in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s; it is now used more generally to describe the generation of young people who came of age in the United States during and shortly after World War I. Very few Americans from this generation are currently alive.

1901-1924 (24 years)
The G.I. Generation, the generation of veterans that fought and won World War II, later to become the Establishment, and the parents of children who would later become the Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964). Journalist Tom Brokaw dubbed this the Greatest Generation in a 1998 book of that name.

1925-1945 (20 years)

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The Silent Generation was the generation born between the two World Wars, who were too young to join the service when World War II started. Many had fathers who served in World War I.

1946-1954 (8 years)

The Baby Boomers (Boom Generation) were the generation born just after World War II, a time that included a 14-year increase in birthrate worldwide. Baby Boomers in their teen and college years were characteristically part of the 1960s counterculture, but later became more conservative.

1955-1964 (9 years)

Generation Jones was the heretofore lost generation between the Boomers and GenXers, which has emerged now as a bona fide distinct generation. The election of Barack Obama to the U.S. Presidency created significantly increased awareness of this generation as many prominent sources referred to Obama as specifically a member of Generation Jones.

1965-1979 (14 years)

Generation X is the generation born between approximately 1965 to 1979, and connected to the pop culture of the 1980s and 1990s they grew up in. Other names used interchangeably with Reagan Generation, Generation X are 13th Generation and Baby Busters. Most of this generation is children of The Baby Boomers and The Silent Generation. Those born before 1973 spent most of their teen years in the 1980s.[1]

1980-2000 (20 years): Generation Y/the Millennials.

2001-present

- This latest generation is un-named as they haven't come into their own yet. Early names have included Generation Z, "Generation V" (for virtual), "Generation C" (for community, content or cell phone), "The New Silent Generation", the "Internet Generation", and "Gen @." Generation Z are very young but active consumers, and very connected, being born into a world of *digital* technology.

The table below shows that the current generation is living through the **"culture war"** which in American usage is a metaphor used to claim that political conflict is based on sets of conflicting cultural values. The term frequently implies a conflict between those values considered traditional or conservative and those considered progressive or liberal. The "culture war" is sometimes traced to the 1960s and has taken various forms since then. [source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_Wars]

So you would notice by now that each youth generation was affected by the events surrounding it which affected the personalities, priorities, commitment to the nation and good causes…etc.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_generations

Century	Era	Generation	Sub-Generations	Time Table	Notable Occurrences
	Jazz Age		G.I. Generation	1901 – 1924	*Experienced WWII in adulthood*
			Silent Generation / Beat Generation	1925 – 1955	*Experienced WWII in childhood, Civil Rights Movement*
	(Great Depression and World War II)	Baby Boomers Generation Jones	Boom Generation / Hippie	1946 – 1964	Space Exploration, First Modern "counterculture"

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Century	Era	Generation	Nickname	Years	Description
	Revolution				
21st century	(Vietnam War / Counterculture / Cold War, First Gulf War)	Generation X	Baby Busters	1955 – 1964	Rise of the Arcade/Atomic Age
				1965 – 1979	*Experienced Vietnam War/Cold War*
		Baby Boomers	MTV Generation / Boomerang Generation	1975 – 1985	*Rise of Mass Media/end of the Cold War*
	Culture Wars	Generation Y	First Digitals / Echo Boom	1981 – 1997	*Rise of the Information Age/Internet/War on Terror/Iraq War/Credit Market Collapse/*
	(War on Terror / Rise of the Internet)	Generation Z	iGeneration	1997-present	

- **Historical development: intersection points affecting Muslim youth in the USA**

Dissecting the historical development of the communities in the USA illustrates the many areas of intersection representing the same challenges faced by those communities.

Analyzing the table below, you will find that there are new trends that have been emerging and developing since the late sixties among youth in general due to the evolving technology, new social and economical patterns, and the changes in the socio-political environment that changed based on major national and international events.

Historical national and international events affected the direction of the USA and its citizens at every generation and stamped its prints on the direction of the youth [dictating their concerns, priorities, hobbies, and many other things…etc]. Analyzing the table in the next section you would notice that the newly emerging trends affected the youth communities.

Among those new trends: building a materialistic systems which aspire maintaining leadership, power, and wealth; new attachment to music and arts; addictions to drugs and alcohol; struggling to preserve identities of ethnicities, religion, or even other nationalities; and other trends. For example:
- At the time of war: you would notice that the youth are more civically and politically engaged;

- At the time of significant stable financial and economical status of the country: you would notice that the youth are more inclined towards education and finding jobs. According to a recent CNN study and due to the tough economy, current youth are not interested in looking for jobs.

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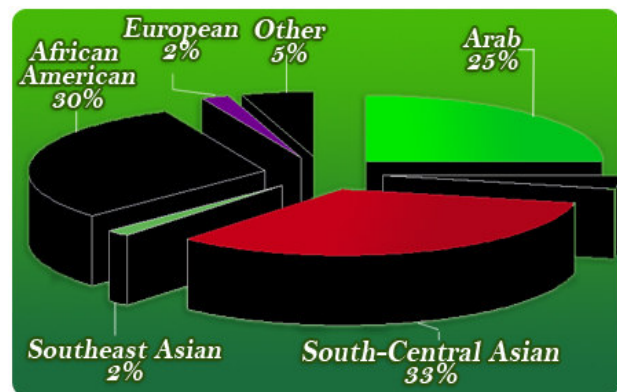(c)Copy right of this document belongs to Fady A. Qaddoura

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- At the time when the internet and computers entered every house, you would notice that the youth started spending more time in front of the computer screens. This led them to create online social networks and virtual communities.

II- Understanding the youth: Diverse needs

When we address the issue of the Muslim Youth of America, we need to distinguish that the targeted audience, although they may share a common age range, are not one generic group of people who all have the same needs; moreover, we did not reach a level of understanding of what all their needs are. We need to first realize that there is so much diversity amongst Muslim youth and their needs are very diverse. The differences are not only at the level of practice (i.e. Masjid or non-Masjid attendee type of youth), but the difference resides into so many other areas.

Dissecting the American Muslim community is essential to understanding the diversity and the size of the youth population which we are trying to reach out to. Following are a few facts about the American Muslim demographics provided by Allied Media Corp-2001 http://www.allied-media.com/AM/index.html

- 7 million Muslims live in the U.S.; 1 million Muslims in Canada.
- Annual growth rate of 6% versus 0.9% for total U.S.
- Interaction between Indigenous and Immigrant Muslims is *limited.*
- Same size community as Hispanics 25 years ago.
- An estimated 67% of American Muslims are under 40 years of age (Zogby, 2000).
- 22.4 percent [1,540,000] of American Muslims were born in the United States (American Muslim Council, August 2000).
- 61.8 percent of all American Muslims are college graduates (American Muslim Council, August 2000).
- 58.1 percent of American Muslims are men and 41.9 percent are women (American Muslim Council, August 2000).
- The American Muslim community is divided into ethnicity as following:
    o African American Muslims: 30%
    o Arab: 25%
    o South Central Asian: 33%
    o South East Asian: 2%
    o European: 2%
    o White American: 1.6 %
    o Hispanic Latino: 0.6%
    o Iranian: 0.7 %
    o Other: 5.3%

Muslim American Ethnicity

Reviewing the data above would help us understand that the youth are as diverse as much as our community is. Therefore to understand the youth challenges we need to understand that diverse youth communities exist and that different youth have different needs. For example:

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- Ethnicity/racial background difference: Being a young African-American Muslim male is a totally different experience and has different needs than a young Arab male due to such realities as racial profiling, societal expectations and stereotypes, etc.

- Commitment to religion: Being a sister who wears hijab vs. one who is practicing but doesn't wear hijab and their experiences within the Muslim community.

- A youth who immigrated here as a child has a different experience in life and needs compared to someone who came to America as a refugee from Bosnia, Somali, Afghanistan (and each country has unique set of circumstances).

- They all have a totally different experience than someone who was born and raised and never traveled outside of their city.

- The life experience, needs, aspirations, and ways to support a youth who lives in a low income area is TOTALLY different from the needs of a suburban Muslim youth.

- The family support of a convert/revert Muslim youth may differ significantly from someone who was born Muslim.

- Muslim youth who drop out of high school have different needs than those who go on to complete graduate work.

So when we address the issue of the needs of Muslim youth, the first question should be which youth are we considering? Are we cognizant of the fact that there is such diversity of youth out there?

"Puberty and young adulthood is characterized by a constant fluctuation due to changes in the young person's identity, relationships, societal expectations, and the development of new cognitive, emotional, and physical characteristics. In addition to the normative developmental challenges shared with all adolescents, Muslim youth must cope with challenges specific to their religious identity within the current geopolitical context. Preliminary research on American Muslim youth identified the following major challenges facing Muslim youth: lack of social support, issues of identity and acculturation, difficulties maintaining personal values and beliefs, feelings of discrimination, and challenges with gender relations" (Ahmed & Akhter, 2006).

Spending the last 10 years working with the youth on different capacities [as a youth director for 5 years, a youth center director for 3 years, youth speaker …etc] helped me understand some of the challenges our Muslim Youth face. Many youth feel:

- A lack of support from parents, religious leaders, and the Muslim community. [Example: Children of immigrants feel that their parents do not understand the American social context and youth culture. Many Muslim youth feel their parent's pressure to not interact with non Muslim friends in fear of assimilation which is very hard due to the fact that Muslim youth spend at least 8 hours a day/ 5 days a week with other non Muslim youth in the classroom and at school.

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- Living a strict life due to rules by their parents due to concerns regarding assimilation or loss of the young person's reputation in the Muslim community. This led the youth to find their secret ways to explore the society through different mediums.

- Living the peer pressure: pressure to participate in activities that conflict with the Islamic beliefs, such as going to the prom, experimenting substance, dating and pre-marital sex.

- Lack of social and recreational programs designed with religious sensitivity and available for Muslim and non Muslim youth.

- Cultural pressure where they have to choose between maintaining their religious values or sharing their peers' culture. Many of our sisters live the cultural pressure due to the fact that they usually wear their Islam in the form of hijab. Many are caught between the struggle of wearing the hijab and fitting in with fashion and the dressing norms of their culture. Oftentimes, the hijab is compromised.

- Lack of supportive environment at the public schools since the teachers and administrators are not well educated about the beliefs and lifestyle of Muslim students.

- Lack of understanding of the challenges and little accommodations from Islamic centers and mosques which are not able to provide relevant, appealing programs to support and attract the development of the youth.

- Frustrated over being neglected and not being considered in the development process of the community.

- Frustrated and affected by the view of their peers in regards to Islam. Our youth do not feel that Islam and the Muslim community are accepted and respected in the USA. In many cases Muslim students experienced negative incidents on campus due to their religious beliefs.

- Feel it is hard to maintain their values and beliefs in public.

- Having multiple identities and living in a bubble between their parents' cultures and mainstream American culture which forces the youth unconsciously to resolve this conflict by developing dual identities. [The youth may display a religious and cultural identity at home while playing the 'American' identity – the positives and the negatives of it- to fit within their peers. [conflict in being proud of the American citizenship and maintaining the religious values]

- Struggle with gender relationships. According to Islamic beliefs, physical intimacy between individuals of the opposite gender, outside the confines of marriage, is not permissible. The Muslim communities' often strict segregation policies result in the lack of opportunities for young people to model and engage in religiously appropriate gender interaction.

- Complain that there is no proper sexual education available to them through their parents, Masjid, or even school. Muslim Youth either get such information in the wrong format from non religious youth, internet, TV, iPod, or any other medium. Many times, and under the pressure of all of the tempting surrounding environments, our youth cannot resist the temptations.

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- Lack of understanding from our religious leaders about the reality of the youth and their needs, which made the youth feel that the religion is not fit for many of them due to the nature of the fatwas. Due to the fact that many of our Imams do not speak the language, did not live in the USA for extended times, did not attend the school system, did not face the challenges of living in a minority, and many other issues makes it hard for many Imams to adopt to the reality of the USA.

- Finding acceptable alternatives to the social and entertainment facets of American culture which are deemed as not Islamic. We need to find Islamically appropriate and alternative dress, novels, music (nasheed), sports activities, etc.

- Finding like-minded friends. Friendship is CRITICAL. Likely if one's friends see Islam as an important guiding force, they will be more likely to practice and adhere to Islamic teachings.

All of those challenges make the youth get engaged in risky behaviors. Without the collective action and collaboration of the educators, religious leaders, Muslim institutions and organizations with one another it will be almost impossible to find and implement real solutions.

III- Time to act: Defining the path

In order for the Dawah workers who are dealing with the youth and trying to propose solutions, it becomes relevant that the workers in the field of Dawah realize and understand the nature of the complexities that exist within our community, the targeted youth groups and their diversity [their culture, ethnicity], family values, wealth status, education, political environment, gender specified habits and behaviors, interests, competing social norms, and the reality from their perspective].

When we plan youth activities, we tend to forget who we are targeting. What about the ones who do not come to the Masjid? Do we have other activities geared towards them? There is no one event that can meet the needs of all young people and the Muslim community does not offer a variety of programs and activities to meet the needs of the different youth groups. Some of the main issues that need to be addressed at this stage are: if we aren't able to meet the needs of a group now, due to human resource issues, do we have a serious plan to begin offering programs that meet different youth needs?

In summary, we need to realize that different young people have different needs and then start developing the youth through reaching out to them by different means, designing adequate programs to accommodate diverse youth, and integrate the youth in community roles.

Personal Development of our youth

I'm not sure why or how, but we have developed a simplistic, static, unnatural understanding of personal development for our youth. We have limited ourselves to think that personal development is what happens in the study circles at the Masajid. However many youth do not know or do not care about the accountability system and rules and regulations of Islam about many of the issues they face. Example: when a

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parent faces a challenge were his daughter or son is facing a gender related problem or drugs issue the parents consult with the Imam seeking his help to guide them of how to deal with this issue; however, in many cases just telling the youth it is prohibited "haram" to do such an act is not going to be enough to convince the youth from refraining from doing the forbidden.

In our attempts to build the youth and their personalities

- We need to be visionary and understand the different components that we want to build in the young people we work with and fine tune and develop people based on their strengths and weaknesses. But all of this requires the parents, dawah workers, and Imams to be able to meet and reach out to young people where they are located at, and not force them to come to us or to change to be what we feel is the way a good Muslim should be.

- When we force them to act a certain way and meet a certain standard, we are pushing them towards having 2 separate and distinct lives: one "religious" identity and one that the youth feel is the "normal" accepted American identity. We have to work on making our youth's lives easy, not harder. When we push them (by indirectly judging people) we are setting everyone up for failure. We are not allowing them to be real, and let us into their life (because if they did, then we might be horrified at the reality). This creates frustration and distance between us and the youth.

- We need to capitalize on the youth's strengths, instead of focusing on their weaknesses and help them through their struggle understanding/approaching Islam by giving them the skills to understand Islam for themselves so they can believe in it and adhere to its commands.

- We need to realize that an approach may work for some people, but not all. Some people will come closer to Islam through lectures, while others through spirituality, while others through community activism, while others through spots, and while many through arts and music. We need to creatively understand how to reach different types of people and sincerely try to meet them where they are at.

- We also need to keep in mind that as each person is different; the very individual will have different needs over different time periods. For example, if a person is not interested in Islam, then we need to work on making Islam relevant to his/her life. This person might not be interested in attending a lecture by an amazing speaker or going to summer camp. As the youth move from one life phase into the other they may need different types of programs.

- We need to be aware of not only the method of reaching out to the different youth, but also realize that by providing a need at certain time periods in a person's life we will also increase the likelihood of being effective [For example when a person starts a new high school, college, moves to a new community, enters a different phase in life, etc]. These are some of the many opportunities when people are most open for change.

- We need to develop in the youth an appreciation for the beauty and value of Islam as an ideology and way of life in comparison to the materialistic and individualistic ideology that is dominating and crippling the world. Although we claim that Islam is the ANSWER to all of our life challenges, the youth need to live real models of implementation were they can feel the pride of belonging to Islam.

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This not only applies to Muslims, but also to non Muslims. When people see real implementations of the teachings of Islam they will change their attitude towards Islam and Muslims.

So when we look at the programs we offer locally, do we offer a variety of programs meeting the needs of different people/ interests, phases of life, etc?

As we talk about the needs/interests of young people one of the interesting points to ponder is that most change happens in the context of a relationship. Example: Either between parents, friends, mentors, dawah workers, spouses, or in one's relationship with Allah. But what may work for one person may not be what works for another person. Therefore, as we try to bring change through our interpersonal relationships, how do we conduct ourselves with young people? How do we respect them? How do we create creative outlets and opportunities for them? How do we assist them in gaining important skills? It is very clear that different ways we try to connect with the youth will help promote their development both individually as well as collectively.

If we define our core base youth audience as the committed young Muslims who are currently engaged and support dawah work, then definitely we have to provide them with programs that fits with their level of commitment to Islam. However we need to provide other programs to other youth who are not committed to Islam. The question is do we have to take an "either or approach"? Meaning either we focus on one group of youth and neglect the other?

Similarly, there will always be people who may not think you are enough of one thing or another. That is to be expected if we're trying to be balanced. But if we try to cater to only one group of people, we automatically alienate another group people we can't reach out to. So, if we try to please our core, do we realize we are alienating another group of people who are potential core and who might be even better than the people we are currently working with?

Suggested Solutions to consider:

"Our enemy is not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge"

We need to know where we stand ourselves on the youth issue and how much are we educated about it. The fact that more than 65 % of the Muslims in the Muslim community are first generation immigrants makes it a priority to educate our community, parents, and Muslim leaders and Imams about the youth, their diversity, needs, issues, and reality.

Suggesting programs and solutions will not make any difference if we did not change our attitude and view about how to deal with the youth.

Suggestions will be in three different areas: personal development, program development, and community civic, social, and political engagement.

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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS: There are many development programs, designed by many Muslim and non Muslim organizations which do not contradict with any Islamic teachings and can be adopted and used by the Muslim community [Example: MAS Youth chapters have established signature projects [can be found at http://www.masyouth.net/default.aspx?siteId=165 or the Jewish Community Centers http://www.jcchouston.org/index.php or the YMCA http://www.ymca.net/]. Those programs can be geared to the diverse youth communities. Some of the programs are activities oriented such as the scouting programs, while others could be educational in nature geared to maintaining the religious identity of those groups.

First: Activities Oriented personal development programs: Scouting Programs

All scouting programs promote what Islam promotes and encourage the youth to become better individuals. The advantages of registering your own troop in your own Masjid is that it does not cost you money. Adult Muslims get free training to establish and lead their own scouts' troops, and it engages the parents in their children's activities which builds a stronger relationship between both. More details about the programs can be found at http://www.scouting.org/ and for the girls scouts http://www.girlscouts.org/ .

❖ Children Ages 7-10: Cub Scouts

This age range requires fun and engaging events which promote positive attitude and help develop balanced personalities. Few ideas that have been implemented with positive results: The scouting programs.

Cub Scouting means "doing." Everything in Cub Scouting is designed to have the boys doing things. Activities are used to achieve the aims of Scouting—citizenship training, character development, and personal fitness. Many of the activities happen right in the den and pack. The most important are the weekly den meetings and the monthly pack meetings.

Apart from the fun and excitement of Cub Scout activities, the Cub Scout Promise, the Law of the Pack, and the Cub Scout sign, handshake, motto, and salute all teach good citizenship and contribute to a boy's sense of belonging. The scouts teach the children every time they meet to do the following: [can be found at http://www.scouting.org/CubScouts/AboutCubScouts/Boys/values.aspx]

Cub Scout Promise	**Law of the Pack**
I, (name), promise to do my best	The Cub Scout follows Akela.
To do my duty to God and my country,	The Cub Scout helps the pack go.
To help other people, and	The pack helps the Cub Scout grow.
To obey the Law of the Pack.	The Cub Scout gives goodwill.

Cub Scout Motto
Do Your Best

This Program helps the kids from a young age, regardless of their age, learn how to feel responsible and build an internal accountability system that helps them distinguish what is right and what is wrong – at this age they do not understand the scope of the forbidden and the permitted or Paradise and fire.

❖ Young youth 11- 15: Boy and Girl Scouting [http://www.scouting.org/BoyScouts.aspx]

Boy Scouting, one of the traditional membership divisions of the BSA, is available to boys who have earned the Arrow of Light Award and are at least 10 years old or have completed the fifth grade and are at least 10, or who are 11, but not yet 18 years old. The program achieves the BSA's objectives of developing character,

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citizenship, and personal fitness. Boy and Girl scout programs are separated based on gender which is what Islam promotes.

Scout Oath (or Promise)	**Scout Law**
On my honor I will do my best	A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly,
To do my duty to God and my country	courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty,
and to obey the Scout Law;	brave, clean, and reverent.
To help other people at all times;	
To keep myself physically strong,	
mentally awake, and morally straight.	

❖ **Young youth 15- 20: Venturing:**

Venturing is a youth development program of the Boy Scouts of America for young men and women who are 14 (and have completed the eighth grade) through 20 years of age. Venturing's purpose is to provide positive experiences to help young people mature and to prepare them to become responsible and caring adults.

What a Venturing crew does is limited only by the imagination and involvement of the adult and youth leaders and members of the crew — sail the Caribbean, produce a play, climb a mountain, teach disabled people to swim, or attend the Olympics. All these adventures and many more are being done today by Venturing crews and ships across the country. All that is needed are concerned adults who are willing to share a little bit of themselves with today's youth — tomorrow's leaders.

Second: Spiritual & Educational programs for youth personal development:

Allah SWT has taught us in the Quran the importance of knowledge and implementing what we learn. Therefore, strategically the Masajid, Islamic Centers, Muslim leaders, Imams, and Muslim educational institutions need to maintain different programs on a regular basis for brothers, sisters, young and adults about of Islam. However we should not run those activities only at the Masajid, but also offer it on high school and university campuses where the youth are located.

Educational Programs:

1- Higher Education commercial and nonprofit Muslim Institutions are well needed and must expand their services to the Masajid, Islamic centers, and try to offer classes at different non Muslim universities and educations institutions. Also We need to establish more of the Professional Quran schools that teach Quran and all of its sciences to graduate Hufath, born and raised in the USA who can be the indigenous imams that reach out to the youth [not only because they speak the language, but because they can reach out better to the youth http://www.quran-institute.org/]. SAP [Summer Study abroad program for the youth to travel and visit Muslim nations to study the History of Muslims, religions, and enjoy the relaxing environment – educational project in relatively fun event]

2- Masjid Based activities: Include many ideas such as:

      i. Sleep over [for night prayers], breaking the fasting when recommended days to fast.

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    ii.   Establish weekly study circles [Arabic, Quran and its sciences, Hadeeth, Seerah, and Fiqh] and classes about the contribution of Muslims to the West and the History of Muslims in the West.

    iii.   Establish support groups for new Muslims.

    iv.   Establish youth groups at every Masjid to manage the affairs of the youth.

    v.   New Idea implemented and very successful in Dallas – Youth Taraweeh in Ramadan.

    vi.   Fun Spring, Summer and Winter educational camps and retreats.

    vii.   Leadership Training classes geared towards developing the next generation leaders.

    viii.   Swap Imams from the different communities to teach at different Masajid.

3- Community based educational events addressing youth issues: Speakers can be Muslim or non Muslim experts in the fields of youth development, social work, and psychology. Those issues to address issues such as marriage counseling for young professionals, depression, drugs, sexual education, pregnancy, smoking, alcohol, substance consumption, and other special needs. Remember that the Christians and the Jews are facing similar problems that Muslims face. Every faith based community struggles to attract its own youth and keep them committed to the religious and cultural identity of that particular community.

4- We need to improve our Islamic Schools. Although Islamic schools are not perfect and do not produce perfect Muslims, Islamic schools contribute tremendously to building a better Muslim personality.

5- We need to encourage our youth to get involved in local and national Muslim youth organizations such as MAS youth [MY]- The youth branch of Muslim American Society, Young Muslims [YM the youth branch of Islamic Circle of North America]. Through this involvement, our youth will feel a sense of belonging to a larger group and feel connected to Muslim youth like themselves around the nation. They can meet at conferences and work together for greater goals. MAS Youth website is www.masyouth.net YM sisters site: www.ymonline.org and YM brothers site: http://ymsite.com

Third: Sports and Social programs for youth personal development:

1- Sports: is one of the greatest tools to reach out to the youth. I recommend that each Muslim community hosts sports events that are open for both Muslims and non Muslims. This will solve the issue of our youth feeling isolated from their friends. [MY Olympics] However this requires a strategic change in the design of our Islamic centers to accommodate those needs.

    i.   Our Muslim schools and Islamic centers do not have adequate sports facilities and can do not compete with professional sports facilities available for the youth at their public schools or community based gymnasium. So our job is to encourage the new direction of building community centers with prayers halls in it rather than a Masjid with no facilities to accommodate the youth and the community.

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ii. For sports that cannot be accommodated at the Masjid, you can rent the facility from a local public school – independent school district – and run your own activities.

iii. Include the sisters in sisters' sports events as they make about 50% of the Muslim community, and they have the right to exercise and play sports.

2- **Social:** This is one of the most challenging areas where many disputes happen among the Muslim leaders and Imams: whether to use it gradually to bring the non committed Muslim to the masjid and use it temporarily. The youth number one problem is the lack of having adequate social events in the Islamic centers or the Islamic schools. In their own expressions, our youth want to "have a life". Latest studies and surveys show how the new generations are very inclined to having a lot of fun, not committing to responsibilities, spending hours in front of the computers and TV screens, listening to music, lower commitment for good causes, and are less inclined to be employed.

Dawah workers who are working on the ground make Ijtihad [sometimes right and sometimes wrong] on which are the best methods to use to reach out to the Muslims from outside the Masjid attendees. Dawah workers-may Allah reward them- do make mistakes because they work. If they did not work, they would not make mistakes. Without the guidance of the scholars and the people of knowledge, they will have more risks of making mistakes rather than finding solutions to our youth problems.

The reason I mentioned the diversity of our youth in this paper is to remember that our youth audience are not only the ones who come to the Masajid, but also the ones who are not committed to Islam, and non Muslim youth.

Remember that the way that many of our African American Muslim brothers and sisters –who form 25% of the Muslim community- have a different view about the permissibility of music. I have seen one of the Masajid [from Ahlu-Sunnah wa-Aljama3a] have Annual Musical festivals which includes Jazz, Rap, spoken words, etc to raise money for the Masjid construction and operation.

Also the Hispanic community –which will be the majority community in the USA in 2025- are so attached to music in an unbelievable way- when our new Muslim brothers and sisters learn that music is forbidden or disliked in Islam, they find it struggling.

Over 90 % of our children - even those who go to the Masajid -believe it or not- have iPods, and guess what they listen to on the iPod? Definitely not Quran- they listen to things that you and I will not tolerate.-[things that promote sex, drugs, alcohol, and living rich]

Many of the Imams who were born and raised in the USA approve music and send mixed messages about it, while other fiqh entities [especially formed from Imams who were born overseas and who came as immigrants] say it is forbidden which confuses the community about where Islam stands on the issue of music. Many adopt and feel comfortable with the opinion of Sh Yusuf Al-Qardawi in His book the Halal and Haram of Music.

Also, many of the so called Islamic bands in the USA and Europe claim that they have the scholars approval for their work [Sami Yusuf, Yusuf Islam, Abu Rateb, Native Deen, Outlandish, 786, ...and the list goes on...]

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The Masjid attendees youth listen to all of those bands because they consider them Muslim bands. So when Sami Yusuf uses the guitar and sings the 99 names of Allah to the youth, the youth love it; however many of the immigrant community members would reject such an act even though many do not understand the words of the song. In contradiction, we find the same audience approves Abu Rateb and other Arabic nasheeds by Arab Munshids. And the argument that will rise - do the goals justify the means?

So the point that I wanted to raise is not what is my opinion or others about Music. It is a major challenge, a disease that is affecting the Muslim community day and night. We need to engage our scholars <u>not to</u> reconsider music to say it is 100% halal, nor to say 100 % it is Haram, but to agree on some guidelines that can be promoted among the dawah organizations and the community so that they can know what is the fiqhi position about it.

Therefore, if we succeed in defining a few Islamically acceptable social mediums for our youth to have fun, we will be successful in preserving their identity.

Our youth are being challenged with negative music, movies, internet, prom, clothing styles, drugs, smoking, alcohol, bad behavior, and many other things. If we do not provide the alternatives which are Islamically accepted we will continue to be challenged tremendously.

Suggested Ideas:

a. Seasonal Festivals: arrange for spring, summer, food, film-musical, or Eid festivals which include games, rides, food, sports, etc and let the youth participate in the planning process.

b. Occasional barbeques and social youth groups meetings to strengthen the relations among the youth. Meeting and greeting events, **especially joint events that reaches out to the other segments of the Muslim community [Arab, indo-Pak, African American, Hispanics,etc]**

c. Matrimonial services to help single Muslims find the right spouse through an acceptable setting.

d. Establish alternative virtual communities to reach out to the youth [majority of our youth are using online social networks]. This service should provide an alternative social network rather than our youth going to face book, MySpace, twitter, and other virtual communities.

e. Support social groups and establish a visitation program for the youth to attend other masajid.

f. Establish café' settings at our Islamic centers to provide the youth with a place to meet.

Fourth: Civil engagement and community services

Many of our youth feel lack of pride in their identity due to their feeling of lack of support at the high school or university campus. Therefore it is strategic that we work in different areas to improve the support system for our youth by some of the following ideas.

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a. Requesting the schools to host Islam awareness weeks on campus [to improve the image of Islam and Muslims and make our own youth feel comfortable talking about their identity and religion on campus]

b. Training our committed youth to be active on campus in promoting Islam.

c. Arrange for our youth to get engaged in community services [such as helping the homeless, senior citizens, the poor and hungry] through Muslim and non Muslim organizations benefiting the community at large. [promote the stand of Islam on environment, social justice..etc]

d. Getting them engaged in the political process [elections and voting] to be able to promote what is good and try to change what is considered harmful to the communities.

e. Encouraging our youth to get leadership training from Muslim and non Muslim institutions who offer leadership training.

Collective responsibility and Community Engagement

As you can notice the work is tremendous and the whole community should put hands and hearts together to be able to work together to secure our youth and preserve their faith. All Muslim organizations and institutions are collectively responsible in paving the road for the next generation. This requires an overhaul and re-engineering that is needed on different levels in the Muslim community such as:

a. Vision level: thinking strategically for the future of the Muslim community; this is really different than thinking or planning strategically for our own organizations. [we really need to unite our efforts and cooperate on a very serious level]

b. Institutional and organizational building: **[We need to start building Community and Youth Centers]** I recommend studying the different communities who were reasonably successful in dealing with some of their youth problems. [I am working on a new study about those communities and their institutions and how their vision in dealing with the youth.] Some examples that I encourage you to study:

   a. The Jewish Community Centers http://www.jcchouston.org/index.php

   b. YMCA http://www.ymca.net/

   c. Christian Community Service Centers http://www.ccsww.org/site/PageServer

   d. Big Brother Big Sister of America http://www.bbbs.org/site/c.diJKKYPLJvH/b.1539751/k.BDB6/Home.htm

   e. Muslim Youth Centers [A project by Muslim American Society search Google for MAS Youth Center of _____]

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1. In Dallas http://www.masdfw.org/

2. In Raleigh, NC http://masyouthraleigh.org/

3. In Nashville http://www.masnashville.org/ContactUs/tabid/57/Default.aspx

4. in NJ http://www.mycnj.com/

5. Inland Empire http://www.mas-ie.com/Joomla/events-blog/38-past/103-event-myc-grand-opening.html

6. Houston www.mashosuton.org

7. New York http://www.mas-ny.org/muslim_american_society_BK.aspx

8. Boston http://www.masboston.org/isbcc/v2/

9. Chicago http://www.maschicago.org/

It is the next step to build well functioning community centers that welcomes everyone and address their diverse needs. We need to continue the development cycle of the Muslim community, and we ask Allah SWT to help us serve HIM in the best way we can within our human capabilities, Ameen.

If I have said, suggested, or mentioned something good, then it is from Allah, and If I have mentioned something wrong or inappropriate then it is from me; I ask Allah SWT to accept this effort in educating and raising the awareness regarding our Muslim youth.

I ask Allah SWT to accept from all of us our deeds and to we ask Allah for His guidance. May Allah accept the good work of every concerned Muslim who works for the greater good of our communities, Ameen.

References:

Ahmed, S. & Akhter, K. (2006). When Multicultural Worlds Collide: Understanding and working with Muslim

youth. Invited presentation at the 114th Annual convention of the American Psychological

Association, August 12, 2006, New Orleans, Louisiana.

All other references [mainly internet references] have been included in the document at the appropriate

places.

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