

Alianza, Here For The Community

Upon entering a masjid (Muslim house of worship) a certain joy enters my heart, particularly when I see people from many different lands involved in diverse religious activities: praying, reading and learning the Qur'an (Holy Scriptures) or just exchanging salaams (the Muslim greeting).

As I sit and observe the beautiful architecture and ponder over the many wonderful things that a masjid has to offer, it saddens me to see that my community has not taken advantage of them. A masjid can be a center of enlightenment and spiritual growth, a moral beacon amidst the darkness of ignorance and dissolution. Yet it remains an undiscovered treasure. Why? Perhaps my community doesn't feel like Islam can belong to them.

The institution of the masjid has its roots in the early history of Islam. The masjid of the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was not only the spiritual hub of the community where Muslims gathered to pray five times a day, but a focal point for all social and political matters of relevance. It leads me to think about the individuals and organizations responsible for the construction of modern-day masjids, and how closely have they kept to the Prophet's model.

I then reflect back to the stories I heard about the formative years of Alianza Islamica—and why they felt its establishment necessary—of bright sunny Sunday morning classes in Central Park with birds hovering above chirping the sweet sounds of Allah's beautiful creation, or of classes in a cramped office at Grand Central with people huddled together

on a few chairs, the floor, even on top of desks to remember Allah and acquire Islamic knowledge. And they did so to gain personal eternal salvation and to learn how to be of service to the community. They realized early on that in order to call the indigenous people to Islam you have to be from the community, because only they can truly understand the idiosyncrasies and needs of the people.

This is the essence of the Prophet's ideal institution. The masjid was the place where knowledge was dispensed to dispel ignorance, and justice was dispensed to dispelling injustice, and charity was dispensed to dispel poverty and suffering. From the outset, Alianza Islamica's purpose was to continue the Islamic tradition of personal salvation by the promotion of and doing of good to others.

Alianza Islamica's first attempts to establish a center of service were fraught with failure. The locations were either unsuitable or too expensive. Some landlords even tried to swindle them about rent and repairs. But Allah rewarded their constant striving with a small place on Lexington Avenue in El Barrio. Alianza Islamica was subsequently incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1992 and has since provided free Islamic Teachings and social services to the community, with an ultimate goal of acquiring a building to be used as a masjid and to expand services.

In their first two years they have been very successful in their attempts to inform their neighbors about Islam, conduct classes and seminars, and implement social services. The organization has grown, and as a result of their existence, many people from the neighborhood embraced Islam and joined our brotherhood.

Along with that, their involvement in community affairs also increased. They formed strong relationships with community leaders, the local police captain, and neighboring organizations. They increased their outreach program, moved drug pushers off their street, and were even

approached by landlords who wanted them to provide security for their buildings. They have made an impact and a difference in the community. Part of their goal is accomplished. They established a place for the indigenous people to utilize, to enjoy and to benefit from. Now they must strive even harder to complete the other aspect of their goal—to acquire a building to be utilized as a masjid providing them the sufficient space to expand services for the community. The community needs to know that Islam is for everyone. They are an open organization, welcoming all!

However, this year has been a tough one for them. Their resources have been exhausted, they are behind in rent, and their utilities are on the brink of disconnection. As a result, their efforts to spread Islam and offer social services, have been tragically affected. They feel they have made a difference and would like to continue to do so. For those interested in helping and in finding out more about them, please contact Muhammad Mendez at (212)427-1142.

"The parable of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is that of a grain of corn: It groweth seven ears, and each ear hath a hundred grains. Allah giveth manifold increase to whom He pleaseth: and Allah careth for all and He knoweth all things," (Qur'an 2:261)

The writer of this article, who wishes to remain anonymous, is one of the people from the neighborhood who as result of Alianza's existence was moved to embrace Islam and become community activated.