

واجعلنا للمتقين إماما

And make of us leaders among the righteous

Guidelines to
Best Practices of
Islamic Centers

ISNA

ISNA LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CENTER (ILDC)

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In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

And those [the believers] who say: our Lord, favor us with spouses and offspring who are a comfort to our eyes. And make us leaders of the righteous. (Furqan 25:74)

And we made amongst them leaders giving guidance under our command when they patiently persevered, and had conviction in our signs. (Sajda 32:24)

Put me in charge of the treasures of the land, for I am trustworthy and competent. (Yusuf 12:55)

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INTRODUCTION

The **Guidelines for Best Practices of Islamic Centers** underscore attitudes and actions needed to empower the Muslim community and to allow it to make better use of the tremendous human and financial resources it possesses. The **Guidelines** aim at improving leadership effectiveness, harmony, and compliance with Islamic principles. Setting the Islamic center on firm footings is essential for allowing American Muslims to focus their energies on building their communities, enhancing public relations and interfaith understanding, and contributing to the advancement of services and charitable work.

The guidelines presented here are based on both the practices adopted by some of the most organized and vibrant Islamic centers in North America, as well as on discussions with, and the recommendations of, Muslim scholars, leaders, and persons involved in the hard work of building the leadership capacity of the American Muslim community.

The document should be considered a work in progress, as we will continue to refine it on the basis of the evolving experiences of the Muslim community, and the feedback we receive from Muslims throughout North America.

The **Guidelines** cover eight important areas that need the immediate attention of community leaders. Each set of guidelines is preceded by an overview to provide context and underscore the need that gave rise to their announcement. The overview also points briefly to their Islamic roots.

To facilitate the implementation of the **Guidelines**, a number of resources, both human and material, are suggested for each area. Some basic materials are currently available at

the ISNA Leadership Development Center (ILDC) in print form, and will soon be available online. We, however, welcome additional information and resources, and expect to be expanding the resources available through ILDC.

ILDC is currently working to develop training sessions to facilitate the implementation of the **Guidelines**, and on the preparation of packages to make it easy for community leaders to apply the recommended **Guidelines**. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to contribute to this project, or are interested in training and consultation on building leadership capacity in your community.

Developing the leadership capacity of the American Muslim community is not only necessary to overcome the many challenges we all confront, but is part of the duty and responsibility we all have to make sure that Islam stands on strong footings for future growth and development in North American.

Dr. Loucry M. Safi
Executive Director

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Legal Notice	iv
Introduction	v
1. Good Governance	1
2. Community Development	4
3. Conflict Prevention and Resolution	7
4. Women's Participation	9
5. Youth Involvement	12
6. Public Relations and Services	14
7. Interfaith Programs and Activities	16
8. Sound Financial Base	18

HOW TO USE THE GUIDELINES

Each of the eight areas addressed in this document consists of three sections: Overview, Guidelines, and Resources.

The Overview provides the normative and conceptual foundation for the guidelines, and is derived from the authoritative sources of Islam. Community members need to understand the Islamic conceptual and moral foundations in order to develop, and are committed to abide by them, there is a little chance that the guidelines will influence actual practices. Therefore, it is essential that the community leaders schedule educational seminars and forum to stimulate discussion and develop a consensus in favor of applying the guidelines.

The Guidelines are expressed in as simple and direct terms as possible. Still, the adaptation of the guidelines to the particular situations of the different Islamic centers requires further elaboration, and the Islamic centers leaders, administrators, and volunteers can benefit from the trainings and workshops offered by ILDC to facilitate their implementation.

Resources list at the end of each area provides additional help in the form of manuals, guides, and reading materials. These resources are available both online and in print. Please visit ILDC website at **www.ILDC.net** to download the resources.

Please contact ILDC for consultation, or to schedule leadership seminars and training programs.

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1. GOOD GOVERNANCE

OVERVIEW

Leading an Islamic center is a solemn responsibility that entails great consequences for both the community and the individual leader. The Qur'an stresses the importance of leading with wisdom and justice, and warns against complacency in conducting one's leadership duties. "O you who believe! Betray not the trust of Allah and the Messenger, nor misappropriate knowingly things entrusted to you." (Spoils of War 8:27) "God commands you to return things entrusted to you to their rightful owners; and when you judge between people, to do so with justice." (Women 4:58).

Muslim communities that leave decisions to the whims of individual leaders are in violation of divine commandments. Communities should strive to institutionalize their practices, by setting specialized committees, adopting sound procedures, and establishing due process to ensure fairness.

Many resources are wasted in quarrel because the community has no clear and transparent rules to guide actions and relations. A great deal of confusion and friction can be avoided when the community adopts a well-developed constitution and bylaws, and when community leaders embrace a code of ethics that sets parameters for using their authority judiciously.

Decision making should be based on consultation, and should always be guided by established principles and the collective wisdom of the community. The American Muslim community is very diverse, and community leaders must strive to accommodate various practices recognized by various schools of

fiqh or rooted in established cultural traditions, as long as the latter do not contravene established Islamic principles.

GUIDELINES

- The leadership of the Islamic center should ensure that the center is governed by clear and fair rules and guidelines rooted in Islamic teachings and approved by the general body.
- Islamic center leaders should closely and reasonably adhere to established policies and procedures.
- Decisions that fall within the mandate of the governing body should be taken after proper consultation with elected leaders. Elected leaders should, however, consult with the general body in matters that fall outside their constitutional authority.
- Community leaders must ensure that the rules and procedures that govern conducts in the Islamic center respect the diversity of the Muslim community. Enforcing limited interpretations of Islam, or practices specific to a particular Muslim culture or tradition, are bound to exclude important segments of the Muslim community, alienate Muslims who would otherwise add to the strength of the community, and inhibit the growth of Islam in North America.
- Islamic centers should strive to hire full time imams and administrators, and ensure that they are well qualified and well paid to do the work assigned to them.
- Imams, and other individuals involved in teaching Islam and providing religious and moral guidance, must be well versed in Islam and reasonably acquainted with American culture and institutions. The community should provide learning opportunities for its imams and public speakers.

- Imams and community leaders should adhere to a code of ethics developed by the community, or adopt the one designed by ISNA, pledge to uphold it, and adhere to its stipulations.
- Islamic centers must set a due process for handling all grievances. The due process must ensure fairness and be clear and sufficiently transparent.

RESOURCES

Model Bylaws for Islamic Centers

Defines the organizational structure and procedures needed for fair and effective running of the Islamic Center. Model Bylaws are informed by the unique experience of Islamic centers in North America.

Code of Ethics for Masjid Officials

Ethical principles every Muslim leader and imam should adopt to ensure that the Islamic principles of compassion, fairness, and leadership are carried out and integrated in the work of Muslim leaders in charge of running the affairs of the community.

Qualifications and Duties of Imams

Tips and guidelines to help communities select an imam, define his rights and duties, and identify criteria for evaluating his performance.

Sample Forms and Procedures

Forms to help facilitate the interaction between community members and masjid officials.

2. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

OVERVIEW

Developing the community morally and spiritually, and empowering its members through knowledge and involvement so that they can contribute to the improvement of life conditions around them, is the paramount mission of the Islamic center. As the Qur'an makes it clear, a true Muslim is a person who purifies his/her soul and refines his/her character through knowledge and service. *"Who is better in speech than one who calls to Allah, works righteousness, and says: I am of those who bow in Islam?" (Ha Mim 41:33)* *"And say: O my Lord! Advance me in knowledge."* (Ta Ha 20:114)

The masjid is the center of moral and spiritual growth, and must provide an environment conducive to learning and experiencing the spirit of Islam. Masjid leaders should, therefore make it a priority to provide members of their community with opportunities to increase their knowledge of Islam and engage in spiritually uplifting practices. They must also attend to the needs of new Muslims to learn the faith and to receive the support they need while adjusting to life as converts to Islam.

Equally important is the issue of family counseling. The community should have trained volunteers to help resolve issues relating to family disputes whenever the need arises. It is also important to identify professionals who are familiar with Muslim practices to help when situations are too difficult or complex for volunteers to handle.

GUIDELINES

- Islamic centers should provide community members with regular opportunities to learn about Islam and to be informed about issues of concern to the community.
- Islamic centers should organize panels on Islam that help enlighten the community and reflect diverse views and approaches. This can be best done by inviting nationally recognized Muslim scholars to speak on issues.
- Islamic centers should organize awareness programs to inform community members about internal and external challenges facing American Muslims.
- Islamic centers should organize training programs to help community members develop organizational skills and empower them to undertake community projects.
- Islamic centers should establish pre-marital, family, and marriage counseling, and periodically sponsor parenting courses.
- Islamic centers should provide special classes to new Muslims and develop support systems to help them overcome challenges they face as the result of going through a major transformation in their lives.

RESOURCES

Activities Roster

A list of various educational and social activities to be organized by the community for the purpose of increasing knowledge of Islam and helping develop moral character.

Speakers Bureau

List of speakers who can address various themes of relevance to the American Muslim community.

Muslim Professional Organizations

List of Muslim organizations that can provide educational material and programs.

Resources on Counseling

List of professional Muslims who can act as resource persons in matters of consultation and counseling.

Manual for Networking with New Muslims

Information and tips as to how the community can set up programs and help establish support networks for new Muslims.

3. CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION

OVERVIEW

Conflict is experienced among individuals in all social settings. Given the cultural and ideological diversity of the Muslim community, conflict can hardly be avoidable. Still, the masjid must take measures to reduce instances of conflict and train its officials to both prevent conflict from happening as much as possible, and to handle conflict in a proper way when it does.

By following proper guidelines, providing proper training, and setting appropriate procedures, conflict can be transformed from a negative experience in the life of the community into a positive one that can provide a mechanism for self-correction and self-improvement.

GUIDELINES

- The best way to prevent conflict is by accommodating the needs and demands of the various individuals and groups that constitute the general body.

- When the needs and demands of some community members cannot be accommodated for ethical or theological reasons, a structured dialogue should be instituted to allow for the exchange of views and the development of common ground. Alternatively, mediation and arbitration sessions should be organized with the help of professional conflict resolution experts.

- Community leaders should plan seminars and workshops to address issues that polarize the community.
- Islamic centers should develop local expertise for dealing with conflict by organizing conflict prevention and resolution seminars. They should also establish arbitration panels to resolve conflicts among community members, center management, and board members rather than relying on civil litigation in the courts of law.
- When local resources becomes ineffective, community leaders should enlist the help of national Muslim experts and consult with professional Muslim organizations.

RESOURCES

Arbitration Panels and Grievance Procedures

A set of procedures and necessary steps to be adopted by the community to address grievances, and hence prevent them from escalating into an open conflict. Arbitration Panels are essential to deal with conflict when it erupts, and to handle it in fair way that would allow for effective remedy and general satisfaction by the larger Muslim community.

Grievance Report Form

The form facilitates the proper documentation of grievances and identifies essential information to be requested for use by the Arbitration Panels.

Professional Muslim Organizations

A list of organizations that can provide both consultation and training in conflict resolution.

4. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

OVERVIEW

The masjid is a place for spiritual growth and development for all Muslims, and should be equally accessible to both genders. The Qur'an has set the spiritual and moral equality of men and women in explicit and unequivocal terms: "*Allah has prepared forgiveness and great rewards for the Muslim men and women; for the believing men and women; for the devout men and women; for the truthful men and women; for the men and women who are patient and constant; the men and women who humble themselves; for the men and women who give charity; for the men and women who fast, for the men and women who guard their chastity; and the men and women who are exceedingly mindful of Allah.*" (Ahzab 33:35). Both men and women, the Qur'an stresses, have the obligation to develop themselves morally and spiritually, and to fulfill their social responsibilities. The masjid is, and has always been, the center of moral and spiritual learning and growth.

Likewise, the masjid is a public place in which discussion of issues of public concern and responses to the challenges facing the community take place. The Qur'an is also clear on the equal responsibility of both men and women for developing public good: "*The believing men and women are protectors and helpers of each other. They (collaborate) to promote all that is good and oppose all that is evil, establish prayers and give charity, and obey Allah and his Messenger. Those are the people whom Allah would grant mercy. Indeed Allah is Exalted and Wise.*" (Al-Tawbah 9:71) Promoting public good and opposing evil are public duties equally required from men and women, and the masjid is the place where Muslim men and women can meet to plan community development and devise strategies for promoting public good.

Assigning women a separate and secluded space not only goes against Qur'anic injunctions and the practices and directives of the Prophet, peace be with him, but also is detrimental to the spiritual and moral growth of women and the development of the community. Preventing women from gaining direct access to the main hall of the masjid, where lectures and study circles take place, deprives them from taking an active role in learning. In addition to the psychological and emotional impact of not taking an active part in the meetings, the ability to interact with the speakers, to ask questions and offer comments, is impeded.

Furthermore, Islamic centers where women are integrated into the leadership of the organization have displayed higher level of performance, and are more efficient in outreach programs and activities.

GUIDELINES

- Women are equal partners of men in building the community, reforming practices, and providing services.

- Islamic centers should help Muslim women acquire leadership skills, and ensure that they are well represented on the governing body.

- Women should be given direct access to the main hall, particularly during public lectures and study circle sessions. Walls and barriers that separate women's and men's areas should be avoided and removed, as they often lead to isolating women and reduce their participation in programs and involvement in activities. The community should, however, accommodate Muslim women who desire private quarters and choose to stay away from the main hall.

- The community must ensure that babysitting services are provided during prayers and lectures, to allow Muslim women and others to concentrate on prayer and learning.

RESOURCES

Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Working Together to Reclaim Our Heritage

Brochure explaining the various aspects of women's participation in the masjid, and discussing the Qur'anic injunctions and Prophetic practices on this important issue.

Professional Muslim Organizations

List of organizations that provide counseling and training on issues relating to women's participation.

Leading Muslim Women

List of leading Muslim women in North American, and the services they provide to the Muslim community.

5. YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

OVERVIEW

Youth are the future of Islam in North America and they deserve the utmost attention of the Muslim community. Many Muslim youth, particularly those who have completed their post-secondary education, have difficulty integrating into the masjid as they find themselves cut off from decision making processes, and find the community uninterested in the capabilities, talents, and services they can offer.

The Prophet paid close attention to use and assigned to them important responsibility. One can find numerous instances of incorporating the youth into the leadership of the community, including the appointment of Usama bin Zid a general in the Madina army. At the age of 18, Usama had a commanding authority over Abu Bakr and Umar.

This problem is compounded in many communities with an immigrant majority where the style of management and preferred activities often do not correspond to the style and interests acquired by Muslim youth growing up in North America.

GUIDELINES

- Islamic centers are the best place to build the confidence of Muslim youth and help them gain the experience they need to live Islam in their daily life.

- Islamic centers should provide programs for both youth education and entertainment.

- Persuasion and setting moral examples, rather than com-

pulsion, should be the essential mode for imparting Islamic values and beliefs to Muslim youth.

- Muslim youth should be allowed to elect their representative(s) to participate in decision making bodies, either as a full members or youth consultants.

- Muslim youth should be allowed to organize their own programs and activities in consultation with the Islamic center executives.

RESOURCES

Manual for Muslim Youth Extra-Curricular Education

A detailed plan for organizing a comprehensive weekend and after-school youth education program, with goals, sessions, topics, activities, resources, focal Points, and reading material.

Administration Structure for Youth Program

An organizational chart and roster of functions for developing a youth council and executive committee.

6. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SERVICES

OVERVIEW

There is no better way to live Islam and develop an Islamic character than to translate belief into actions and services that benefit humanity. The Qur'an time and time again reminds us that faith cannot be complete without righteous deeds to accompany it. *"Surely Mankind is at a loss except those who believe and do good..."* (Asr 103:2-3) Prophet Muhammad (may peace be with him) told us that we are not true believers until we want for our neighbors what we want for ourselves.

Public relations and services encompass improving relations and developing friendships with members of the larger community around Islamic centers, as well as getting involved with local government and service organizations (e.g. shelters, hospitals, orphanages, etc.). Commitment to Islam and its beauty flourish when Islamic principles are put into action through public interaction and service.

GUIDELINES

- Islamic centers should endeavor to foster good relationships with other faith groups, charity organizations, media groups, and local governments.
- Islamic centers should join other groups, and should build coalitions with organizations that work on projects advancing shared goals and promoting shared values.
- Islamic centers should organize seminars and workshops to help community members develop a positive attitude in deal-

ing with outside organizations and groups, and to improve their public relations skills.

- Islamic centers should establish media and public relations committees, and ensure that committee members are well qualified to work on public relations, providing training as needed.

- Islamic centers should encourage volunteerism and charitable work so as to provide services and support to hospitals, fire departments, public rescue services, food distribution services, etc.

- Community leaders should ensure that their Islamic center joins any councils of Islamic organizations, or helps set up one, in their area.

RESOURCES

Manual for establishing food and clothing bank

Manual for dealing with media kit

7. INTERFAITH PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

OVERVIEW

Interfaith activities provide the Muslim community an opportunity to introduce Islam to the surrounding non-Muslim communities, and to correct misconceptions about Islam. They also allow the Muslim community to build coalitions with other people of faith, and thereby increase the ability of the Muslim community to promote good values and practices, to provide needed services in the local community, and to wield greater influence by standing in solidarity with other people of faith. The Qur'an tells us "*There are those among the People of the Book who are upright, who recite God's revelations during the night, who bow down in worship, who believe in God and the Last Day, who enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, who are quick to do good deeds. These people are among the righteous.*" (The Family of Imran 3:113-115) Prophet Muhammad (may peace be with him) while delivering his message did not hesitate to rely on the Christian King of Abyssinia when his people needed assistance, or to make treaties with the Jews and Christians of Medina.

GUIDELINES

- Islamic centers should establish an interfaith committee and provide the necessary resources.
- The purpose of interfaith programs should be to inform and educate people of other faiths about Islam, rather than attempting to convert them. Allah alone can change the hearts of people; the responsibility of the Muslims involved in

interfaith programs is only to present Islam in a friendly and articulate manner.

- Muslims should reject bigotry and racism, and speak up against bigoted statements and gestures, whether these are directed at them or at followers of other faiths, particular races, or different ethnic groups.

- Muslim leaders should help community members understand the beliefs and views of people of other faiths. They should arrange for special training for those involved in interfaith programs and activities.

- Islamic centers should seek common ground and friendship with religious groups in their neighborhoods and towns, and should periodically invite neighbors and people of other faiths to visit their centers by organizing open houses.

- Islamic centers that have the means should develop joint community service programs with other religious groups.

RESOURCES

Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue

Muslim Organizations and centers experienced in interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

8. SOUND FINANCIAL BASE

OVERVIEW

The guidelines for a sound financial base are designed to ensure the masjid or Islamic center will be able to develop and maintain a stable financial base in order to sustain operations, fund programming and activities, and nourish the growth of the organization. The guidelines cover the areas of good practices in bookkeeping and due diligence in making sure that money is acquired and used in a Islamically proper way. They also offer guidance in keeping withing American laws and government regulations.

The Qur'an tells us "Let him who is trusted deliver his trust." (Baqara 2:28) and numerous verses deal with the legalities of financial transactions, so the responsibility to handle money conscientiously is not one to be taken lightly.

GUIDELINES

- Islamic centers should rely, as much as possible, on local financial resources, and encourage members to make regular contributions.
- Islamic centers should set up endowment funds, and make long-term financial planning and investments.
- Islamic centers should establish fundraising committees, and invite successful entrepreneurs and business leaders to serve on these committees.
- Islamic centers should partner with national Muslim organ-

izations in joint fundraising events to align local and national projects.

- Due diligence policy should be established to ensure the propriety of the donors and recipients of donation. A due diligence policy should be established in consultation with professional experts and consultants.

- Care and meticulous bookkeeping methods should be devised to ensure that all donations are accounted for and all expenditures are approved.

RESOURCES

Due Diligence Policy Guidelines
Fundraising Structures and Methods