

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Field Notes: The Role of American Mosques in Supporting Muslim Families

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Abstract

A healthy family is an essential building block to a healthy society. The goal of building a healthy family is especially important to Muslim communities living in non-Muslim-majority countries, where concerns of maintaining one's faith and strong family values in the next generation, in light of outside societal pressures, occupy parents' minds. In Muslim-minority societies, many families' lives center around the mosque. Given this reality, what roles should American mosques take on to support Muslim families in their communities?

This study interviews fourteen mosques and three experts across the United States to explore topics such as how mosques are already supporting families (e.g., religious, social, financial, mental, and emotional support), the role of imams in these efforts, current strengths, gaps and challenges, and promising practices. The article concludes with some recommendations for the future of this work, including proposals on what mosques, Muslim communities, and organizations can do to support families better and some possible directions for future research.

Keywords: American Muslim families, community services, mosques, imams

Introduction

In the diverse tapestry of American society, mosques stand as pivotal institutions for Muslim communities, for many serve as more than a place of worship. According to the

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US Mosque Survey 2020, there are 2,769 mosques in the United States, a 31% increase from the 2010 count of 2,106 mosques (Bagby 2021a, 4). The estimated population of American Muslims, an ever-increasing population in size and diversity, was 3.45 million people across all ages, according to the Pew Research Center 2017 Study on Muslims (Mohamed and Smith 2017, 30). By 2020, this estimated population grew to approximately 4.5 million (The Association of Religion Data Archives, n.d.).¹ These communities' needs and demands necessitate that mosques play a significant role in making a range of services accessible to the broader community and, more specifically, to Muslim families that face the challenges of maintaining Muslim identity and Islamic practice while being fully present in the spheres of home, work, community, and society.

Like many churches, mosques have a role to play beyond just offering religious worship services to their faith communities. According to the US Mosque Survey 2020's second report (Bagby 2021b, 12-13), most mosques offer some social service activities, such as charity in the form of financial support for needy community members, food pantries, health education fairs, counseling, tutoring and literacy programs, and social justice activities or advocacy groups. However, only 29% of mosques score high on community involvement, meaning that they still have a long way to go in terms of providing congregants with the services they need.

This article will delve into current areas of mosque support for families through religious education, social, financial, counseling and mental health, death and bereavement, and other targeted support. In each, the commonalities, challenges, evolution, and nuances experienced by mosques in supporting families will be discussed. The article will then explore the imam's role and discuss their needs, capacity, and expectations by the community when providing support. Having presented the types of support currently available, the paper then discusses the strengths, gaps, and challenges mosques face in this regard, noting variance by size and capacity. The research will highlight the vision for the mosques' role in helping families, as well as discuss promising practices and recommendations for the future.

Methods

A total of 121 American mosques – at least one mosque per state – were invited to participate. Identified via the Salatomatic website² and Google search, they were chosen to represent diverse geographical regions, predominant ethnic groups, denominations or sect (e.g., Sunni, Shia, etc.), size, and type of neighborhood. Attempts were made to make the

¹ This number was obtained by taking the total of estimated Muslim populations in each state, as collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. This was corroborated with data presented by the US Mosque Survey 2020 and the ISPU American Muslim Poll 2022. According to the US Mosque Survey, the total number of American Muslims who attend mosques is just over 4 million, with an average of 1,445 participants per each of the 2,769 mosques (Bagby 2021a, 13). With the ISPU American Muslim Poll reporting that 14% of American Muslims do not attend mosques (Mogahed and Ikramullah 2022, 5), these numbers combined give an estimated American Muslim population of just over 4.5 million.

² Salatomatic.com was one of the websites which the US Mosque Survey 2020 used to calculate the number of mosques in the United States (Bagby 2021a, 3).

number of invitations per state proportional to the number of mosques found in that state, with some exceptions for areas of particular interest (see **Figures 1** and **2**). In terms of predominant ethnicity, among the mosques were those listed on Salatomatic as being predominantly African American, Latino, Somali, West African, European or Eurasian (e.g., Albanian, Bosnian, Turkish, Kurdish), South Asian, Southeast Asian (e.g., Malaysian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Cambodian), and Arab and North African. A number of mosques with no predominant ethnicity (listed on Salatomatic as “multicultural”) were also included. For the African American mosques, those invited included ones that self-identified as coming from the Imam W. D. Muhammad movement, some who self-identified as Salafi, and others who did not clearly self-identify themselves. Multiple mosques in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas who may have dealt with the aftermath of hurricanes and their ensuing effects were invited. Most mosques were invited by email. When an email was not available, a small number were invited via phone call, through the Contact Us form on their website, or through a message to their Facebook page. All invitations were sent over a period of six weeks, and interviews were conducted over a period of ten weeks.

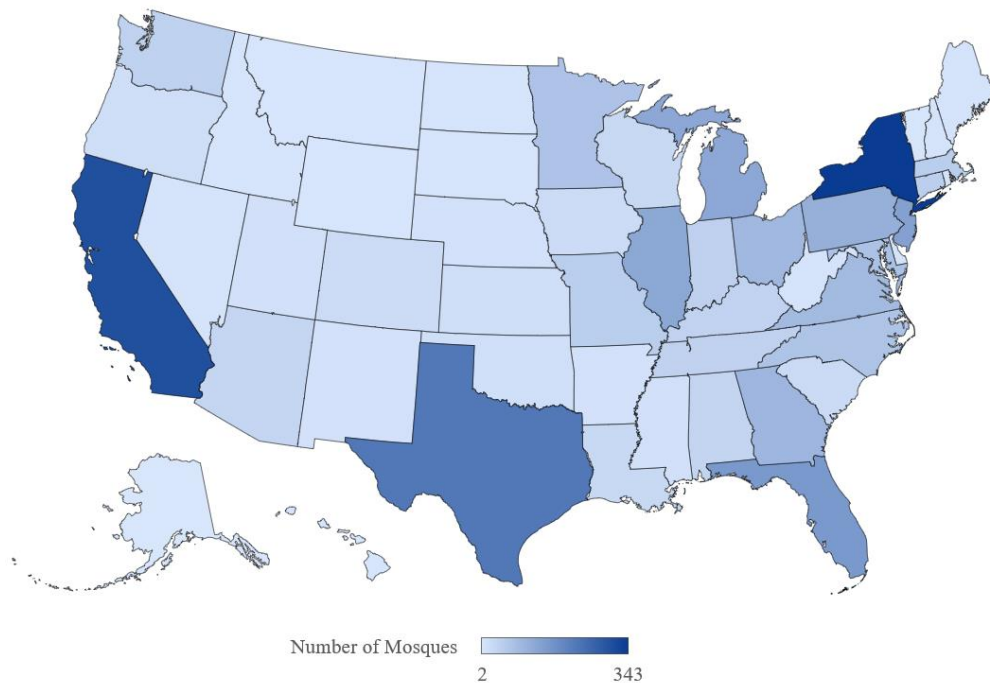


Figure 1: Heat map of the number of mosques in the United States, according to the US Mosque Survey 2020 (Bagby 2021a, 8).

Malian mix; and a third was generally West African), South Asian, and Arab (one was generally Arab, while another was specifically Yemeni). Two mosques had a relatively even Arab-South Asian split as the predominant groups. Five had no predominant ethnicity. Some mosques reported having large Albanian, African American, and convert (particularly Latino) populations, although they were not the dominant groups.

The mosques' size was measured based on their self-reported typical jumu'ah and Eid prayer attendance. Two were very small (jumu'ah attendance under 50 and Eid attendance under 350), three were small (jumu'ah attendance of 50-250 and Eid attendance between 400-1,000), two were medium-sized (jumu'ah attendance of 250-500 and Eid attendance between 1,000-2,000), four were large (jumu'ah attendance of 600-1,000 and Eid attendance of 2,000-5,000), and three were very large (jumu'ah attendance of 2,000-3,000 and Eid attendance of 5,000-10,000). The mosques interviewed are located in downtown areas, busy commercial areas or main streets, residential areas, inner cities, and suburbs. Neighborhood type does not seem to be connected to mosque size, city size, or geographical location. Smaller and medium-sized mosques tend to be in smaller cities, while larger mosques are in large cities, with the very large mosques in major metropolitan areas with very large Muslim communities. The mosques represented communities with predominantly low, middle, or high income participants, with some communities having an even socioeconomic distribution among their congregants. Small and medium-sized mosques tended to have low to middle income congregants. As the mosques grow in size, there starts to be a more even distribution of incomes and/or more middle to high income congregants.

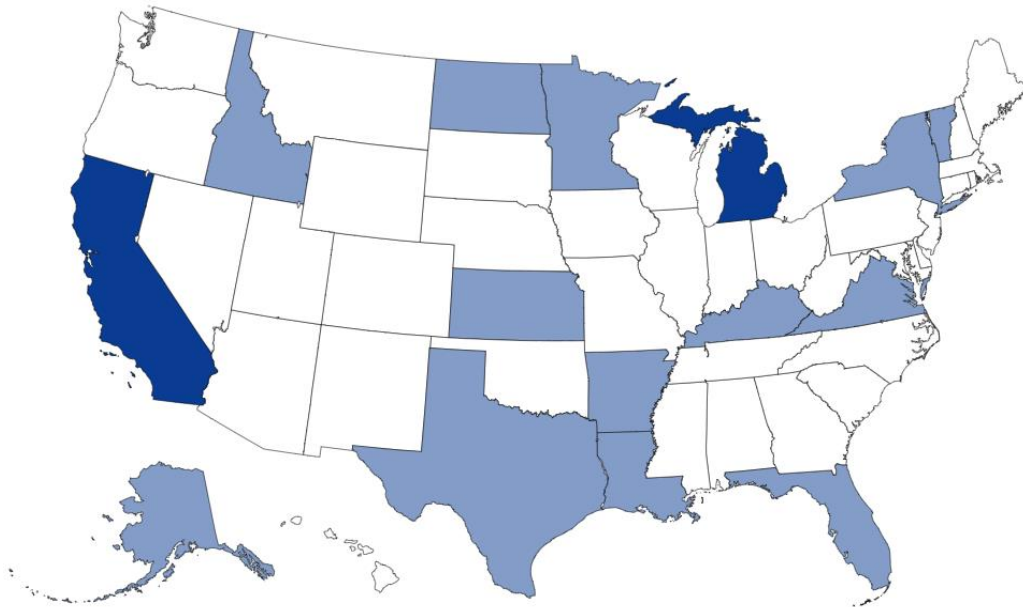


Figure 3: Mosques and experts interviewed by state. Two interviews were conducted based out of each of the states of Michigan and California, and the rest of the states had one interview conducted each.

Limitations in this study include the small sample size and lack of representation of certain groups. For example, although Shia mosques were invited, none were interviewed. African American mosques were not included. According to the US Mosque Survey 2020, there are 360 predominantly African American mosques in the country (Bagby 2022, 18). African Americans make up approximately 28% of the American Muslim community (Bagby 2021a, 5) and have a long and rich history in this country. Within this history, mosques played a pivotal role in the establishment of faith, family, and community. In the early half of the twentieth century,

Islam...was a vehicle for uplifting an oppressed people by means of emphasizing individual morality, clean-living, self-help manifest in economic empowerment, speaking out against racism, and standing up for justice [...] African American mosques historically have served as a catalyst for entrepreneurship, which was encased in their advocacy for self-help and self-determination. These entrepreneurship efforts focused on developing mosque-run businesses and encouraging members to go into business for themselves. The goal of these entrepreneurial efforts was to provide jobs for Black people and to bolster the Black economy. (Bagby 2022, 13)

As time went on, this focus on uplifting the community continued, with African American mosques successfully working to reduce crime in their neighborhoods by cracking down on drug dealers, prostitution, and crack houses (Bagby 2022, 14). To this day, these mosques tend to be very community service-oriented, with almost 80% running a food pantry or food distribution program, 64% participating in social justice activities, and the same amount getting involved in interfaith community service projects (Bagby 2022, 19). They also tend to be smaller than many immigrant-run mosques, and thus depend on smaller budgets and are more volunteer-reliant (Bagby 2022, 21). Although thirteen predominantly African American mosques were invited to participate, none were interviewed. Given their unique history and their declining number during the past decade – from 23% of all American mosques in 2010 (a total of 484 mosques) to 13% in 2020 (Bagby 2021a, 15) – this begs a number of questions. How does their history and historical focus on community causes and services and faith-based entrepreneurship inform how they are run today, what types of services and supports they offer to families, and how this might differ from many immigrant-run mosques? How might their decrease in number have affected their communities, and, in particular, African American Muslim families?

Ways in Which Mosques Support Families

Religious Support and Education

All of the mosques interviewed primarily help families through religious support and education. This makes sense because, according to the experts interviewed, early American mosques were primarily established by parents, particularly mothers, to serve as a place for teaching their children Islam. Beyond offering the daily prayers and weekly jumu‘ah prayers, mosques also provide programs to take care of the families’ religious needs.

Small mosques tend to have very little formal programming. Those with full-time imams offer some religious classes and lectures, along with one-on-one religious guidance and counseling by the imam. Those without a full-time imam try to offer some religious counseling when needed. As the mosque's size grows, more sophisticated programming develops. Qur'ān classes are held several times a week, which tend to have very good turnouts. Some medium-sized mosques see up to 100 students attend. Imams give daily lectures after congregational prayers, and Islamic classes are scattered throughout the week, covering topics such as *'aqidah* (theology), *sīrah* (prophetic history), *ḥadīth* (prophetic narrations and traditions), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis). Medium-sized mosques begin to have dedicated *ḥalaqas* (learning circles) for women and youth, and special lecture series during Ramadan. Some of these programs are volunteer-led rather than imam-led.

As the mosque size increases further, these programs expand even more. One large mosque is known statewide and even beyond for its advanced multilevel Qur'ān program and focus on religious education for children. Parents are dedicated to this. Some have even moved to the area for this program, which has produced internationally award-winning students. Another very large mosque runs a full-time *ḥifdh* (Qur'ānic memorization) program led by world-renowned *qārīs* (Qur'ānic reciters) that has approximately 70 students, with an additional 40 students studying part-time.

As the mosque size continues to grow, so does the structure for Islamic schooling. The small mosques interviewed did not run a weekend or full-time Islamic school. Medium-sized mosques start having weekend Islamic schools, with the number of students increasing with mosque size, up to 200 students. Large mosques establish full-time weekday Islamic schools, in addition to having one or more weekend schools. These full-time schools provide both an Islamic education and an academic education guided by state curriculums. Very large mosques expand their full-time Islamic school capacity from around 200-250 students up to 500-800 students, and expand the grades available to include high school. This pattern of smaller mosques establishing first a weekend school and then larger mosques having both a weekend and full-time Islamic school has followed the community's evolution over the last 40 years. As one expert outlined, the first ongoing educational program in most mosques was a Sunday school – following the example of churches – then full-time Islamic schools were established as community size grew and more resources became available.

The services offered within the school structure grow along with community size. One of the very large mosque's Islamic school offers a Montessori program. Another one operates a full-time tutoring center that provides both academic and religious educational support to Muslim homeschoolers. In addition to having a full-time Islamic school and a weekend school, one mosque runs a separate weekend Islamic school taught in American Sign Language. They also established an Islamic institute that offers a high school program to prepare students for further Islamic study, as well as Associate's, Bachelor's, and post-graduate degree programs.

One of the mosques was actually first established as an Islamic educational institute that opened a mosque later on. Because of this, its main focus is religious education. Rather than follow the model of a full-time Islamic school, their programs were designed for the

community's students and professionals and classes are held in the evenings and on the weekend. They hold daily children and adult evening classes, a Qur'ān memorization program, and an intensive live-in weekend program where students stay from Friday to Sunday as a sort of weekend Islamic boarding school. They also train imams to engage in interfaith dialogue.

Social Programs

Small mosques tend not to have a lot of social programming structure. Some mosques have small social committees and so specific volunteers or groups of volunteers decide to take the initiative as regards to monthly community brunches or potlucks, *iftārs*, and Eid celebrations. Medium-sized mosques form more formal committees and try to hold more programs by organizing camping trips, family nights at the mosque, youth programs (e.g., youth camps and monthly events for teens), and some limited programs for adults and the elderly. However, they noted that their programs are still limited and need to be vastly improved. Some of them also face opposition. For example, one mosque said that some elders in the community do not understand the need to compromise their expectations of "proper mosque behavior" to make the mosque more welcoming to youth. Instead, in their pursuit of respecting the mosques' sanctity, these elders give the youth grief when they are too loud or violate such expectations. This rigidity can then drive youth away from the mosque.

Large and very large mosques' committees specialize in specific needs, among them active youth committees, education committees, sisters' programs, and family service committees; however, not all of them are always very active. A lot of these mosques try to focus particularly on youth programs (e.g., weekly *halaqas*, weekly sports, monthly outdoor programs, and sisters' youth *halaqas*), with some even having multiple youth committees to focus on different youth subsections.

Most mosques said they have a relatively even age distribution in their community, with many tending toward a slightly younger age demographic. Very large mosques have a slightly higher elderly demographic. Most mosques try to focus more on youth than the elderly, as many of their lectures, breakfasts, picnics, and other programs already attract the elderly. The larger and very large mosques stated that they do a decent job of targeting all age groups, with one saying that rather than worrying about age groups, perhaps they do not do as good of a job of targeting diverse social groups, such as converts. One mosque observed that its social activities are very important for all ages to maintain their faith, Islamic identity, and character, as not everyone has a Muslim family or friends.

Financial Support

Financial support in small mosques tends to be one-to-one, given as needed. The mosque tries to help them through donations from community members. Some examples of this one-on-one help included helping a family, who was accused by their daughter's school of forcing her to wear hijab, with legal fees, providing individuals in need and newcomers with a place stay for the night and transportation to a larger community with more resources, and directing individuals and families to other programs and resources in the city.

Medium-sized mosques start to establish welfare committees that direct financial support to those who qualify through *zakāt al-māl* and *zakāt al-fitr*.³ Some of their other services include providing gifts to new mothers for their babies, student scholarships, and a hot meal program for the elderly. One mosque with a large refugee population has a formal financial support process, official policies and processes outlined on their website, a form for those seeking help to fill and submit with supporting documents, and links provided to other resources available in the city.

Large mosques' services depend on the community's needs. One mosque said it sometimes does emergency fundraising when specific cases come up, but most families are financially self-sufficient. Another mosque leans heavily on local Islamic relief organizations to provide financial and food assistance to community members. A third one said that a committee handles these requests, with the bulk of support coming from *zakāh* funds. Some mosques also run food pantries, provide short-term accommodations for international students, and informally help community members find jobs by connecting them with other members who may be able to employ them.

These services really expand if the mosques are very large. All three very large mosques described a formal process: those seeking support fill out a request form, which is then checked by a committee that decides what kinds of support to provide. This aid is funded by a combination of *zakāh*, other donation funds, and grants or programs provided by the city and state. A lot of community members reach out for this help. Besides direct monetary support, these very large mosques provide weekly or biweekly food pantries and/or daily hot meal programs, free health clinics, and health fairs. Supported by grants and partnerships with nonprofits, one mosque reported that it distributed 5 million hot meals in 2020, 9.3 million in 2021, and around 2,500 hot meals each week of 2023.⁴ Another mosque provides skills training programs (e.g., in coding and the pharmacy technician field) and allows community members to advertise their businesses digitally on its platforms. A third allows Islamic relief nonprofits and other organizations and mosques to fundraise at the mosque every other month.

Mosques reported that financial concerns (e.g., food insecurity and lack of jobs) remain high in the community, especially in places where major employers are currently

³ *Zakāh* is a term that refers to the obligatory amounts of money that Muslims who reach a certain base level of wealth must give to other Muslims who are poor or needy (often referred to as "almsgiving"). Two categories of *zakāh* are indicated here. *Zakāt al-māl* is an annual amount (accounting for 2.5% of their wealth) that Muslims must give to poor and needy Muslims once a year if they reach the base level of wealth for an entire lunar year. *Zakāt al-fitr* is an amount (around the value of a full meal) that Muslims who can afford it give at the end of the month of Ramadan to needy Muslims, so that these Muslims can celebrate Eid al-Fitr with at least a good meal. While some Muslims pay their *zakāh* to the needy overseas (either by giving to those they know personally, or through reputable Islamic relief organizations), many American Muslims choose to give this money to their local mosques, to be distributed to needy families in the local community. When Muslims just use the general term "*zakāh*" or "*zakat*," they are usually referring to *zakāt al-māl*.

⁴ This is a collaborative effort with Islamic Relief USA and city and state organizations. Their food support programs were corroborated by online sources, including local news articles. According to highergov.com, this mosque has received over 15 million dollars in grant funds since 2020, primarily to support their food programs.

doing large-scale layoffs. One expert pointed out that while most mosques offer financial assistance in the form of one-time bill payments or ongoing food help, it is very rare to find one that helps members lift themselves out of poverty. Perhaps this should not be the mosque's concern; instead, it should be aware of those government or social service agencies' programs to which they can direct those in need.

Counseling and Mental Health Support

Community education

For many mosques, one of the first steps in this regard is educating the community on the importance of mental health and of counseling services and how they can help their own families. At least one mosque of each size reported that it has tried to do this. Smaller and medium-sized mosques may have held occasional lectures, while larger mosques try to do this on a regular basis. One small mosque organized a health and sex ed program for teens; unfortunately, no one attended. Another said that their imam gives occasional marriage workshops. One medium-sized mosque held some lectures for those looking to get married and invited police officers to the mosque to explain how they can be a resource for families. Several of the larger mosques hold regular sessions to, among other things, train parents on current youth issues, provide a space where parents can talk about their challenges, remove stigmas on certain topics, and teach how to build a successful family. They bring experts to speak on topics related to family dynamics, parenting, youth concerns, and mental health.

Mental health counseling

Most mosques stated that they cannot provide mental health counseling or support within the mosque, and thus refer such people either to professionals within the community or direct them to available resources outside the Muslim community. Some deal with some level of mental health problems within their family counseling sessions or, when they cannot, may recommend that individuals seek professional therapy.

One very large mosque is the exception to this trend: It has established a formal mental health program run by full-time licensed therapists to provide one-on-one therapy, including both mental health counseling and marriage and family counseling, within the mosque. These experts are frequently overbooked. This program also includes an advocacy wing, which focuses on improving the community's mental health, through training workshops, art therapy for children, lectures, counseling groups, parenting sessions, and partnering with other mosques and schools on mental health initiatives. It also works with the mosque's youth committee to organize premarital education seminars by trained experts and organizations.

Premarital counseling

Premarital counseling is not a widely mosque-offered service. Although many of the mosques recognized the need to provide at least some guidance, only some of the larger mosques currently do so. But even then, it seems to be done very informally and is not widely utilized. One large mosque said it has matrimonial services and "helps young people

trying to get married,” but gave no further details. Another said that it encourages such people to attend some advising sessions before getting married through them, but this is only done on a case-by-case basis. A third larger mosque said that the imam does some premarital sessions, but that they can be greatly improved. One mosque remarked that it refers people looking for one-on-one premarital counseling to specific sheikhs outside the mosque who do this.

One medium-sized mosque remarked that it is something they hope to do in the future; although, in their experience, couples in their community do not seem to see its importance. Another provides online resources on their website, such as links to Salma Abugideiri’s and Imam Mohamed Magid’s *Before You Tie the Knot* and the Peaceful Families Project’s *Islamic Marriage Contracts Resource Guide*, for couples seeking the mosque’s help in getting married.

The one very large mosque that stated that it makes a point to provide premarital advising sessions within the mosque has no formal program to do so. Among its multiple imams, the one with some premarital training requires those couples who want to get married through him or to use him as a *walī* (the bride’s Islamic guardian) to go through some premarital sessions with him. In these sessions, he has leveraged the Gottman method combined with Islamic methods prepared by Muslim therapists, as well as has gone over both parties’ rights and obligations in an Islamic context. However, not all imams at the mosque do this, and so not all couples will go through this process.

Unfortunately, a lack of premarital counseling programs and services seems to be common across American mosques. In a 2018 study of 32 Muslim community members in Michigan (including married and divorced individuals, therapists, and imams), Killawi et al. found that although almost half of those who they interviewed believed that premarital counseling or education should be required before marriage and most of the imams reported that they require premarital counseling before officiating marriages, almost all of the married and divorced participants in the study said that they were not required to go through any premarital counseling prior to getting married through an imam (Killawi et al. 2018). Most of them said that they would have participated if they had been encouraged or required to do so. In two other studies cited by the authors, divorced Muslims by-and-large wished they had been offered more extensive premarital education (Macfarlane 2012) and believed strongly in the usefulness of premarital counseling (Alshugairi 2010). Killawi et al. further pointed out that even for those who do offer premarital counseling, there is a lot of improvement needed. Most of those couples in their study who did some counseling sessions with an imam prior to getting married did not find them to be helpful, due to their brevity, focus on the particulars of the marriage contract and Islamic rights and responsibilities – rather than checking for compatibility, discussing sensitive issues, teaching communication and conflict resolution skills, and preparing couples for possible struggles they may experience – and the fact that these sessions typically took place after a wedding date was already scheduled, rather than early on in the courtship process when red flags may be better addressed. The authors recommended that imams try to obtain specialized training in premarital counseling, partner with therapists and other experts who already have this training, and make use of research-based curriculums and resources that exist for premarital education and training for Muslim couples (Killawi et al. 2018).

Marriage and family counseling

Most of the mosques in this study that do not have a full-time imam offer no marriage and family counseling within the mosque; instead, they try to refer community members to existing resources outside the mosque. Some try to offer some support to families through religious reminders and advising on a case-by-case basis, depending on the extent of the support needed and the availability and expertise of those community members or part-time resident scholars who can provide it.

All mosques that have a full-time imam provide some form of marriage and family counseling or advising, some more frequently than others. In most cases, these are relatively informal, with couples and families approaching the imam to schedule one-on-one appointments when needed. Some imams post office hours on when these sessions can be scheduled. In one mosque with multiple imams, couples choose one based on their area of expertise: one imam tends to attract immigrant and older couples, as well as couples seeking *ruqya* (healing from physical, mental, and spiritual ailments via Qur'ānic recitation and Islamic supplications), while another imam tends to attract converts and younger couples.

Some of the common issues that come up in these family counseling sessions include cultural differences and changing dynamics, personality mismatches, and day-to-day struggles between family members, where they may need an outside perspective or new tools and strategies. Parenting concerns come up frequently, with parents worried about their children having doubts about Islam or even leaving it, dealing with generational and cultural gaps, conflicts between parents over how to raise the children or the balance of work between mothers and fathers, and parents dealing with their children's struggles (e.g., drug addiction and premarital pregnancies). In some cases, families must unlearn certain habits or approaches based on past traumas. Some couples seeking marriage counseling are dealing with finding out about sexually transmitted diseases after marriage, mistreatment, and spiritual abuse and manipulation. One expert related that he has seen tremendous challenges in marriages within the American Muslim community, with high divorce rates: "Muslim marriages are falling apart... It's the bedrock of the family, and so if that part of the structure is compromised, the whole structure is compromised."

Divorce counseling and arbitration

One of the smaller mosques spoke about how many of their community members, who are largely more recent immigrants and refugees, are "baffled" by how the American court systems work and feel that it is sufficient to get Islamically divorced without going through any legal processes. One of this mosque's focuses is to educate the community on how these systems work and can be used in terms of marriage and divorce, especially as they have had cases where a man may marry a second wife, and this wife has very few legal rights if anything goes wrong because the courts do not consider such marriages to be legal. This mosque stated that it does not have the resources to properly support couples who are getting divorced and that it tries to direct them to Muslim therapists who may be able to provide faith-informed help. The mosque also provides letters officializing their Islamic divorce if the couple provides an American court-approved decision on the divorce.

Most of the medium-sized and larger mosques deal with couples who are trying to reconcile. In the initial stages, imams usually try to help them, and in many cases, some spiritual reminders and Islamic mediation can be sufficient. Many imams try to follow up and provide the couples with several sessions. One imam spoke about how he sometimes gets phone calls from community members, especially sisters, who would prefer to speak over the phone and remain anonymous. In these cases, he just tries to provide as much assistance as he can in that one call. As cases become more complicated, however, imams may encourage couples to seek help from professionally licensed marriage counselors.

When couples reject reconciliation and are determined to divorce, most imams offer religious advice and guidance on the Islamic divorce process and leave the couple to figure out the rest via the legal court system. One mosque sometimes refers couples to organizations within the community that can provide legal aid funds to help cover any legal costs. Another offers couples some level of mediation on some issues, such as when spouses want different things within the divorce, child custody issues, and some aspects of the divorce settlement. Mosques, in general, avoid getting involved with legal court proceedings.

Two of the imams spoke about their approaches when a wife wants a divorce but her husband does not. One imam, due to previous issues at his mosque with these cases, does not believe that he has the authority to issue an Islamic annulment (*faskh*): a previous imam in their community did so without the husband's consent based on what the wife had told him. Later, it was discovered that she had misrepresented her case, causing her husband to fight with the imam. The imam cancelled the annulment, but she had already remarried Islamically, even though she was not legally divorced from her first husband. In these cases, this imam advises women to seek legal divorce through the courts here and, if they were married overseas, to find someone who can help her through the process and represent her in getting Islamically divorced or annulled in that country. The second imam said that he refers these individuals to another sheikh within their community who has expertise on these issues: they live in a very large Muslim community that used to have an Islamic arbitration court for such cases. Although the court is no longer active, many of its expert members still live within the city.

According to the experts, a mosque establishing a holistic system of helping couples dealing with divorce is very rare. In such cases, the ideal space for an astute imam is to provide minimal support, especially focused on teaching the technical aspects of the Islamic rulings when it comes to divorce, but then refer the couple to people in the community whom the mosque trusts and who have specialized relevant expertise (e.g., lawyers, therapists, and mediators). Divorce arbitration, which is a heavy responsibility and a very taxing process, requires specialized training that not all therapists may have. Even for an imam who has received this training, it is not something he can easily take on. With all of his other responsibilities, how can he find the time to give this its due right? The experts recommend that divorce arbitration requires its own specialized space.

Most mosques have nothing specifically set aside in terms of post-divorce support. Instead, single-parent households and divorced families can access any needed financial or emotional support from the mosque just as others in the community do, usually by contacting the imam or board members for one-on-one help. The mosque that was

previously mentioned to have a formal mental health program offers a weekly counseling group for divorced women.

Dealing with Death

Almost all of the mosques in this study help families in need cover funeral costs. Some mosques have specific funds set aside for this; others use general mosque funds or raise money as needed. One very large mosque uses government funds to help offset these costs, through a grant made available in 2021 to places of worship as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One mosque that cannot provide financial help to cover funeral costs tries to direct families to other resources available in the community.

None of the mosques interviewed have facilities within the mosque to prepare the deceased for burial; instead, they take care of this process in local funeral homes. In smaller and medium-sized mosques, members of the congregation take care of these preparations within non-Muslim owned funeral homes with whom the mosque has an agreement, and a general cemetery usually has a Muslim section. Some larger communities now have Muslim cemeteries and Muslim-owned funeral homes. In very large communities, these Muslim funeral homes may take care of all preparations and logistics. One medium-sized mosque in a relatively small city sends its deceased to a Muslim funeral home in the nearest large Muslim community – which is two hours away – and that larger community takes care of all the preparations, *janāza* (funeral) prayers, and burials. One of the larger mosques also helps converts legally file their burial wishes to ensure that they will have an Islamic burial, even if this goes against their family’s wishes.

Most mosques have nothing specifically set aside to support bereaved family members, and families can access whatever support exists for all community members. This trend was noticed by the experts, who remarked that the comprehensive, wrap-around service that so many families would benefit from is sorely lacking. As one expert put it, “[The logistics of burial] are the bare bones... that’s the skeleton; the flesh and the clothing is missing.” This is a very vulnerable time for many, as their grief is heavy and their lives can become paralyzed. The loss of a family’s primary breadwinner can cause major disruptions in their lives, beyond the emotional toll it takes. This can lead many to become disenfranchised from life and lose their connection to the community if the mosque does not actively seek them out. According to the experts, this is an easy opportunity to be developed, as mosques already work with families at their time of grief. However, mosques rarely have a committee that actively works to address this need. One mosque does provide this to an extent: its licensed counselors approach families at the time of burial to make them aware of its grief counseling service.

The Role of the Imam

Six of the mosques interviewed currently do not have an imam; this isn’t connected to mosque size. Three of them have this as a permanent, intentional setup: two are small in size and do not have the funds and/or community size to justify a permanent imam, and the other one deliberately has this as their model, as an Islamic educational institute runs a mosque with students leading daily and jumu‘ah prayers. The remaining three are between imams. One of the small mosques without an imam is trying to save up three years’ worth

of salary to hire one. Its congregation is debating whether or not an imam is needed: they know that an imam plays important roles, but there are also concerns that his great influence may end up dividing the congregation. They hope to hire an imam who has very clearly outlined responsibilities and can meet the needs of an American mosque, which means that they have to offer him good compensation. Within those interviewed for this study, when multiple imams become necessary in large and very large mosques, responsibilities are typically divided up based on their training, expertise, and whether they are full-time or part-time.

The experts spoke extensively on the various challenges of the role of imam. One expert, a therapist who works with imams, compared both groups when it comes to setting boundaries: therapists have the luxury of setting appointments, having people respect the appointment times, and are generally paid well. Imams, on the other hand, are in a more difficult position because there is little respect for their boundaries or time. A blending happens in mosques that makes it very difficult for them to separate their personal and professional lives. Some may argue that these should not be separated at all. But it can wear on the imams' mental and physical health and even their own faith: after seeing challenge after challenge, with few boundaries, and without a good system of self-care, many can end up burning out. Some experience shaming and judgment when they try to set boundaries for their time and roles. Depending on the community's expectations, their job can be a very difficult one, with very little free time to spend with their families and insufficient compensation. This expert spoke on the importance of consultation groups between imams and therapists, which is something that she has participated in, as these provide a space for imams to talk about their challenges and to grieve over painful situations. This is especially important, as a recent report by Yaqeen Institute showed that of the 205 Muslim religious leaders interviewed, one in five met the GAD-2 screening cutoff for generalized anxiety disorder and one in seven met the PHQ-2 cutoff for depression, meaning that many of the North American community's imams are dealing with some level of mental illness (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 87).

Imams take on a variety of roles within American mosques: religious teacher, program leader, public relations representative, facilitator or mediator, counselor, and case manager. A specific imam's roles depend on his personality and skills, as well as on other available resources. As the experts noted, in smaller communities imams tend to take on more general roles and are often the mosque's main organizer and leader. This has been the case in most American mosques historically. As mosques expand, however, it makes sense that an imam transitions to focusing more on more specialized roles that require his expertise and knowledge, while volunteers and staff lead other activities.

Religious role

For all mosques interviewed that have a permanent imam, his main role is to lead prayers and give *khutbas* (the Friday sermons), along with religious teaching via Qur'an classes and programs, lectures, weekly *halaqas*, specific *halaqas* for women, family night programs, and sometimes youth lectures. In most mosques, he also provides religious counseling and guidance on a one-on-one basis and, when needed, making marriage, funeral, and other arrangements.

For the six mosques without a permanent imam, this role is divided among members of the community, depending on who has the relevant knowledge and ability for it. Some of these mosques have scaled back this role for now, as they are focusing primarily on the most basic functions (e.g., leading the daily and Friday jumu'ah prayers and providing one-on-one spiritual support) instead of *halaqas*, youth lectures, and similar programs. In the two very large mosques that are currently between imams, many of these extended programs are still ongoing, as they still have part-time resident scholars or a large pool of dedicated knowledgeable volunteers to run them.

One of these two very large mosques specified that their system is set up in a way that tries to keep the imam focused on religious affairs, as this is what he was trained for and where he would be best suited; other professionals take care of counseling, administration, outreach, and other affairs. In short, its imam is not the leader of everything, as he is in many mosques, but only the leader of religious affairs.

Another large mosque has designed their mosque to be run by a *shūra* (consultative or advisory committee), a group of resident scholars and students of knowledge who divide the imam's responsibilities among themselves. This is because it is run by an educational institute, so there is a large focus on training their own students to become leaders and imams.

Counseling and mediating role

To a certain extent, most imams take on a counseling role. Most of these services are neither a formal program nor follow a formal process; families just contact the imam directly for help with marital conflicts, parenting concerns, and avoiding divorce via marital reconciliation. As the mosque size grows, this seems to happen more often and is a bit more expanded. Imams of larger and some medium-sized mosques give occasional classes, *halaqas*, and *khutbas* on parenting, family values, and guidance on family issues. Some of them give premarital sessions for couples who request it.

The very large mosques appear to have more of a structured system. For example, one mosque has trained counselors who take care of this, and another one has multiple imams who do extensive family advising. In the first case, when needed, the imam would be part of a team that includes a licensed therapist and, potentially, a legal assistant. In the second case, each of the mosque's multiple imams focuses on a specific area of expertise. The lead imam does extensive family advising, trying to reconcile families to prevent divorce, provides *ruqya*, and advises couples on the *fiqh* of divorce for those who cannot reconcile. The second imam does some premarital advising sessions, family advising sessions, and in some cases acts as a *walī*.

Most mosques without an imam provide no counseling services; some of them refer these people to other resources in the community. In two large mosques, the imams also help mediate in some business disputes between community members.

According to the experts, if an imam is open, accessible, able to meet the community's pastoral needs, and is aware of what his role and limitations are, his ability to provide marriage and family counseling within the mosque can be a very helpful resource. Many imams understand their role well and, when things are beyond them, are more than happy to partner with and/or refer people to professionals in the community who

can give more specialized care. However, there are some very bad examples of this, such as when an unqualified imam provides counseling, for his advice could really damage families. How this is navigated at the mosque is very important, for the mosque is often the first stop for a Muslim family experiencing challenges. The ideal model put forward by the experts is one where the mosque recognizes its responsibility to provide access to counseling, and it takes steps to develop partnerships with trustworthy local organizations and professionals. The imam may provide some level of advising or counseling, but must connect families with these professional resources whenever needed. The mosque should advertise these partnerships and resources by posting their links on its website, posting flyers within the mosque, and even hosting these organizations or professionals for community awareness events.

Outreach role and connecting people to resources

In one very large mosque, one imam does a lot of outreach work, such as sitting on interfaith councils and city council committees, being aware of organizations and resources in the community for the mosque to work with and/or refer members to, giving lectures at nearby mosques, and working with prison outreach efforts. A large mosque said that they make it a priority to announce relevant resources or good news that will help families. For example, its state recently passed a law that allows all kindergarten students' education to be sponsored by the government, even in private schools. They shared this with the community, as it would allow their children to attend an Islamic school for free.

Training of imams

In all of the mosques that have an imam, these imams have extensive religious training, usually from Islamic institutions overseas. Most imams have no formal counseling training: only two of the imams expressed that they had attained this sort of training, with one making it a point to seek as much training available to imams as possible. The rest had undergone no formal training in this field, although some of them had decades of family counseling and advising experience to draw upon.

When asked about the extent of training for imams, all three experts stated that this is sorely lacking and that American imams by-and-large are not adequately prepared for the many roles they are expected to take on. Being an imam in America entails becoming a "pastor-like" figure: someone who can engage all levels and segments of the community and provide many types of support. One expert emphasized the importance of imams focusing on youth and young adults, age groups that are particularly vulnerable to disengagement but who are essential for the community's future success. He remarked that this focus is not on the radar of many imams, as they frequently focus more on adult classes and being the mosque's scholar, rather than being a youth-focused imam. This is exacerbated by the overseas origin of many imams, who struggle to understand American youth's culture and challenges and connect with them. This is one reason why larger communities have begun hiring full-time youth directors and youth imams; however, the American community still needs more young adults to become imams or youth directors. As the expert pointed out, this is a worrying problem: one of the best ways to have mosque

leaders who are in tune with the real issues is to have those leaders emerge from the community itself.

All of the experts spoke about the importance of developing training programs within American Islamic seminaries to help address these gaps. Right now, there is no standard certification process to become an imam in the United States. Most traditional seminaries focus almost exclusively on religious education, neglecting other parts of the future imams' job. Some newer seminaries, among them The Islamic Seminary of America, Boston Islamic Seminary, and California's Bayan Islamic Graduate School (now partnered with the Chicago Theological Seminary), try to provide some of this training – their graduate programs focus heavily on leadership, chaplaincy, and pastoral care. Organizations such as the Peaceful Family Project and Maristan provide training sessions to imams on being a mental health first responder, suicide prevention, dealing with domestic violence, and more. However, there is still a long way to go in providing imams with adequate training for their job. As one expert pointed out, when working in a largely boundaryless space, as most imams do, it is almost inevitable that he will take on roles that he is not ready for and that are beyond his scope. She believes that boundary management training would be helpful but was unsure if this is incorporated into any of the existing imam training programs or resources. She added that as a community, we also need to train members to understand that an imam's boundaries as regards time and roles are not due to personal arrogance or lack of devotion.

Other Ways in Which Mosques Support Families

Immigration and refugee support

Mosques of all sizes try to help new immigrants and refugee families. In some smaller communities who cannot establish a dedicated committee for this, they organize potlucks, meet new arrivals at the airport with a warm meal and a grocery bag filled with necessities, and work with the relevant local organizations. Other mosques help them understand and fill out paperwork, as well as apply for jobs and government assistance programs. One medium-sized mosque teaches adults how to read and write in English. Another mosque serves a community that is composed almost entirely of recent immigrants and refugees. The city in which it is located has multiple major resettlement agencies, and mosque leaders work with them to meet the local Muslims' unique needs. A very large mosque spoke about its many programs for new immigrants and refugees, including work training, help applying for government assistance, some financial support, community integration programs, advocating for them with the city and state, and partnering with organizations that provide free legal aid on immigration issues. Another mosque said that it mostly focuses on religious programming geared toward these new members at the community's request; for example, with recent influxes of refugees from Afghanistan, the mosque started offering religious classes in their native language.

Convert support

Medium-sized, large, and very large mosques all spoke about their programs designed to support converts, such as providing *shahāda* packets (containing reading and other

materials that will help converts in the beginning of their Islamic journey), religious education classes, and social support groups. One mosque tries to pair converts with mentors from the community. One very large mosque expressed that it attempted to organize social events but did not have much of a response, perhaps due to the presence of other organizations within their large Muslim community that specialize in convert support. As a result, this mosque focuses more on religious education, one-on-one advising, and marriage and family advising sessions for converts who reach out.

Prison outreach

At least one mosque in all size groups tries to provide some religious support to Muslim inmates in local prisons by responding to letters and requests, as well as giving them access to copies of the Qur'ān, Islamic books, prayer rugs and calendars, and information on when the Islamic holy days fall. These mosques may also send them dates to break their daily fast during Ramadan and sponsor special Eid meals for them. In some mosques, trained volunteers visit inmates on a regular basis to give them religious guidance and conduct learning sessions. One mosque tries to help former inmates reintegrate into the community and into their families.

Working with other organizations and with government agencies

If the relevant resources are unavailable, many mosques direct community members to external resources, among them services provided by Muslim professionals or Islamic nonprofits and programs run by non-Muslim organizations and government agencies. These referrals cover needs such as therapy, financial and food support, legal support, and immigration help. Some of the mosques' services (e.g., food pantries, hot meal programs, or health fairs and clinics) are largely partnerships with local Muslim and non-Muslim organizations or are partly funded by government and nonprofit grants. These mosques work extensively with professionals within the community to provide many of these services. Many mosques are trying to build stronger relationships with local government, with some organizing civic training with the city and police and fire departments. Larger mosques try to participate on city council committees and meet with local agencies, law enforcement, and schools to advocate for the community's needs and concerns.

Strengths, Gaps, and Challenges When It Comes to Supporting Families

Strengths

One expert pointed out that the most important strength he has observed is that mosques in general understand that they have to prioritize supporting families. The vision is there, even if the capabilities and ideas on how to do this most effectively may be lacking.

Very large mosques mentioned that their strength is community trust, based on how much they are doing for the community and how proactive they are at trying to solve its issues. As a result, the community is very generous with donating and giving back. These mosques have a lot of financial and personnel resources, sizable populations who are financially well-off, and many members who are willing to get involved. As a result, they can allocate a good chunk of their budgets to helping needy families. Large mosques echo

a lot of the same strengths: financially independent members who donate, and many people who give back and lend their skills and expertise, including young professionals who have obtained specialized training. Some of these mosques reported that the community always gives very positive responses and have good turnouts whenever they advertise family-related programs. One mosque mentioned that if they were to take the initiative and be more deliberate and purposeful in how they help families, they would likely find a lot of members who would be willing to help run these services and programs. Many of these large and very large mosques are in locations that have large Muslim communities and, as a result, are surrounded by Muslim nonprofits that specialize in areas such as financial aid, legal aid, convert support, and mental health support. This allows them to tap into these resources instead of trying to figure everything out themselves, and thus they can direct members to them. One mosque said this allowed it to support families more effectively while freeing up resources so the mosque can hyper-focus on its specialty: religious education.

Both small and medium-sized mosques mentioned that their Muslim communities are very unified and congruent, despite their great ethnic diversity. This allows everyone to feel that they belong. With their communities starting to realize the important role that the mosque can play in their lives, mosques are hopeful that bringing trained individuals to the community will help members accept these services. These mosques are trying to build systems that make it easier to support families. Among these are planning budgets one year or more in advance, educating the community on public services (e.g., government and non-Muslim agencies that exist to help them), and ensuring that families seeking help are not subjected to undue burdens and investigations before receiving aid.

Small, medium, large, and very large mosques alike expressed that their communities are growing, which engenders the arising of potential conflicts and internal division. But there is also hope for new resources and ideas that can move the community forward. The experts suggested that as the community size grows, a wider array of professionals with specialized skills can be leveraged by periodically asking the community as a whole what skills and training they can offer. As the community expands, people experiencing similar challenges may band together to create entirely new support networks and may feel less ashamed to use the resulting resources. For example, one expert spoke about a community that provided respite rooms during Ramadan for children with disabilities to receive specialized babysitting while their parents participated in the *tarāwīh* prayers. She acknowledged that this type of banding together can also lead to some internal division based on members judging those who they think are different from them. In this case, mosques must be able to notice such bias and find meaningful ways to bridge these rifts.

Gaps in How Mosques Support Families

Youth programs

Mosques reported that youth issues, one of the community's most pressing needs, that families faced decades ago still exist: generation gaps compounded by a culture gap between immigrant parents and American-born children; preparing youth to be resilient,

faithful, and able to face the challenges of growing up in the United States; instilling family values and an appreciation for their culture and native language; and problems with peer pressure, public high schools, and lack of mentorship, to name a few. However, there are new areas of concern as well: youth homelessness and opioid addiction are growing issues. In one community, more than a dozen Muslim youth died of drug abuse in one year. Mental health is another growing concern, as youth have been dealing with much higher levels of anxiety in recent years. One mosque shared that in the past year alone, they have lost three Muslim youth by suicide. Youths' lives are being increasingly lived online, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is a noticeable stunted maturity and development as a result. Parents are worried over how the shifting societal norms with regards to sexuality, gender, the LGBT movement, and the increasing focus on these topics, especially within public schools and on social media, will affect their children's faith. It is becoming increasingly essential for mosques to address such issues and provide both parents and youth with the necessary tools to face these challenges.

Mosques and experts across the board shared the need for more youth programs, especially those targeted toward teens and young adults. Over the last decade or two, mosques have realized that having weekend Islamic schools is not enough. One mosque stressed the incredible importance that youth groups and programs have for the family unit. Over the years, they have seen individuals who came regularly as youth grow up to bring their own children to the mosque years later. Most communities noted that they have large youth populations, but that current programs do not do enough to meet their many needs. Some mosques suffer from a lack of interest among youth, others from a lack of volunteers. Others have enough willing volunteers but lack the necessary knowledge and experience for their programs to be sustainable.

One expert spoke about how most active youth groups are found in larger mosques, mosques that tend to have more volunteers to draw from and are more financially stable. This latter reality enables them to start hiring youth directors who are familiar with youths' lives and can lead a team able to address their religious, social, and developmental needs. Paid youth directors are a relatively recent phenomenon: the US Mosque Survey 2020 reports that only 6% of mosques have a full-time youth director (Bagby 2021a, 25). For smaller mosques who cannot hire a youth director, this expert recommends that the imam's main focus should be on teens and young adults, and that the community should help him run other programs, so that he can focus more intently on this important age group. He suggests that small to mid-sized mosques should partner with other mosques in the area to share efforts and create one youth group for the local community. One mosque was considering this strategy. But since it was the only mosque in the area, they were looking into partnering with a local nonprofit to provide a summer program for youth of color, refugees, and underprivileged youth funded by a government grant.

Although larger mosques tend to have more active and sophisticated youth programs, there are still a lot of gaps in terms of volunteers, training for them, and a more intentional strategy for devising effective programs. Mosques are trying to think more creatively about such undertakings. One expert observed that some mosques set up youth centers, especially in low-income areas, for both Muslims and non-Muslim youth to get them off the street and into after-school activities until their parents come home from work.

One mosque invited Muslim youth from a local rehab center to have *iftār* at the mosque during Ramadan. This allowed them to rebuild a connection with the mosque, and to their parents and the community, something that many of them had lost during their addiction struggles. Another mosque became a center of the drug response for the local Muslim community, creating multiple committees to focus on various aspects of this issue, ranging from having Narcan at the mosque, educating parents on what to look for, destigmatizing asking for help, and interacting with Muslim drug dealers.

Something even less developed in American mosques are committees and programs targeting college students and young professionals. According to the US Mosque Survey 2020, between one quarter and one third of mosque participants are aged 18 to 34; however, this number only accounts for just over half of the American Muslim population in this age group (Bagby 2021a, 15). In other words, a large portion of young adults are not coming to the mosque. This is a growing concern of mosque leaders. According to one expert, one new strategy being explored is the development of “very small groups”: mosques try to be the catalyst that brings young adults together around a particular issue or activity, such as hiking clubs or environmental groups. Other mosques are offering expanded facilities, such as cafes, gyms, workout rooms, and recreational sports facilities, to make the mosque more of a hub of youth and young adult activities. As of this writing, such initiatives remain in the beginning stages.

More programs in general

When it comes to programs in mosques, one expert differentiated between two different kinds of efforts. The first is those targeted toward specific services (e.g., *zakāh* distribution, social services committees, free clinics, and pastoral counseling from imams) and focused on finding people in need and trying to supplement what social service agencies might provide for them. Such programs tend to be labor- and resource-intensive and provide great benefits for small groups of people. The second type consists of programs focused on creating community connectivity (e.g., educational, sports, and social activities) aimed toward the community at-large, but that may not be done as systematically as one would wish. Mosques expressed that they would like to have more programs focused on educating the whole family. A large mosque said it needs a lot more child and family therapy. Some mosques spoke about programs they’re just beginning to run or are hoping to start soon, such as homework-help programs and reaching out to a local hospital’s Muslim patients. It was pointed out that mosques very rarely develop holistic programs that address each stage of one’s life, that are, in the words of one of the experts, “cradle to grave.” Usually, whoever is in a specific life stage takes on the mantle of creating and advocating for appropriate activities for their specific group.

Experts and mosques alike identified other groups in the community who are not being adequately served, among them single-parent families, especially ones headed by single mothers. Although many mosques offer some religious support to converts in the form of *shahāda* packages and new Muslim classes, much remains to be done in terms of providing them with the social and emotional support and mentorship they may need. Families with disabilities still face a lot of stigma, and mosques are not always accessible for them. But this is starting to change, thanks to forming partnerships with organizations

such as Muhsen as well as local efforts. Race and ethnicity continue to be issues, with some mosques noticing that conflicts sometimes occur along racial or ethnic lines, or that certain groups seem to be unincluded in a lot of mosque activities. Addressing these concerns requires being systematic behind the scenes. As one expert put it, someone on each committee must think about what is missing. It is not just about establishing programs, but also identifying issues being faced and who is unrepresented. Our communities are so diverse, encompassing different socioeconomic circumstances, ethnicities, and dynamics – including immigrants and their children, converts and their children, and families who have been here for centuries and Muslim for multiple generations. And yet our mosques are still unable to show the level of nuance needed to address their various needs.

Challenges Mosques Face in Trying to Support Families

Attracting people to the mosque

Mosques find it difficult to get people to come to the mosque, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, and many are still seeing a decline in numbers. How, they are asking themselves, can they create activities and events that attract people? In particular, how can they make young people feel welcome? Members are losing their spiritual connection, seeing Islam as more of a racio-ethnic identity than being underpinned by faith and knowledge. How can the mosque counteract this? Another concern is getting women to take on more active and prominent roles. For American mosques to really thrive and make a meaningful impact, both men and women must be involved. Multiple mosques stated that women take an active role in running many programs behind the scenes, even though they may not be directly represented within the leadership. One mosque puts a lot of effort into engaging women in the community and getting them to take on prominent leadership roles in the mosque's governance and overall structure. Mosques run sisters' *halaqas* and other initiatives aimed toward addressing women's needs. However, challenges still exist; for example, in one mosque, cultural issues and members' expectations sometimes lead to women feeling unwelcome. In the United States, most Muslims' religious and spiritual connections are very closely related to their sense of belonging to a mosque – mosques are frequently at the center of Muslims' Islamic development – and making it a place where every person feels welcome, engaged, and at home is essential to our future presence and faith practice in this country.

Reluctance to seek help

One concern that multiple mosques brought up is that families are reluctant to expose their issues and struggles. Rather than come to the mosque for help, they try to figure it out on their own. In some communities, certain ethnic groups have created support networks for families of their own ethnicity that are able to resolve most such issues. In others, mosque leaders expressed that parents do not seem to fully realize that they are in the United States permanently, that their kids are growing up here, and that they need to understand their children's issues and prepare them for the challenges they will face here. Believing that they can go "back home" one day to fix all of their problems is mistaken. One mosque related that many of its members hesitate to get therapy: back home, they would reach out

to trusted elders, those with life experience and wisdom, and who are valued for their honesty and sincerity. How can these families trust a stranger enough to open up to him/her, especially if he/she does not understand their cultural norms and values?

If the mosque does not know what its families are facing, it becomes difficult to support them adequately. It can be hard to create a system that works for everyone, given that the families come from different backgrounds and have diverse needs, constructs, and expectations. One of the American mosque's mandates is to break down some of these barriers and stigmas so that families will feel comfortable coming to the mosque and using the services available to them through it.

Challenges of leadership: lack of awareness and lack of consistency

Mosques in this study expressed that they could do a better job of proactively seeking out those who need support. There can be a lack of awareness of or deep care for the real struggles that those members are dealing with, and the need to reach out beyond those who are already coming to the mosque. How can we support the much larger Muslim community, many of whom are unmosqued?⁵ One expert said that sometimes this comes down to mosque leaders not understanding their responsibility in this regard: if leaders see their responsibility as simply providing a place to pray and offer ritual worship, or if they are satisfied with the status quo, then a lot of Muslims will be neglected. Another expert pointed out that this might require a shift in mindset in some mosques, in looking at mosques from a human relational standpoint instead of from a business standpoint. She explained this in the following way: a human relational mosque realizes that the product they are trying to create is community, relationships, and connection, while a business-minded mosque is more focused on efficiency, professionalism, and meeting certain performance measures. While efficiency and professionalism are essential in mosques, if they come at the cost of human relationships – for example, a mosque is meeting overhead costs but mistreating its volunteers – is it worth it?

For mosques that do realize their larger responsibility to the community, many suffer from a lack of professional function and are working within a broken system. One mosque shared the concern that programs and services can change significantly due to changes in leadership or imams, or from one board to the next. In fact, sometimes these changes might not be based on well-researched reasons. Mosque leaders can lack the proper training, and while some mosques try to remedy this – one mosque used to send their leaders to leadership training opportunities, and organizations like Oaktree Institute offer leadership workshops and consultancy services to mosques – many mosques do not

⁵ The term “unmosqued” refers to the population of Muslims who never attend any religious services in the mosque (Mogahed and Ikramullah 2022, 5). Much discussion has been had around this topic, especially regarding those who no longer attend the mosque due to feeling unwelcome or pushed out of it, rather than from lack of Islamic practice. For more resources on this phenomenon, its possible causes, and how it has been addressed, see the *UnMosqued* documentary and its website (Eid et al. 2014), MuslimMatter's primer on the unmosqued discussion (Usman 2013), the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's *Reimagining Muslim Spaces* study (Bagby et al., n.d.), and their *Creating a Welcoming, Inclusive, Dynamic Mosque* report (Bagby et al. 2016).

prioritize this, perhaps due to a lack of awareness or funds. Even when mosque leaders want to make a positive change, they may face pushback. As one expert pointed out, many Muslim communities are very organic, with members having dual, triple, and quadruple relationships with one another. Someone on the board may be married to the head of the Sunday school and be the cousin of the head of the *zakāh* committee. Making a change stick requires understanding these relationships and getting the community to buy into the change. She noticed that sometimes new leaders may come with great ideas and energy but become burned out or disillusioned when they face barriers to applying these ideas.

Lack of human and fiscal resources

One of the largest challenges is a lack of resources, particularly in the form of workers and financial capabilities. Mosques in the United States rely on volunteers, most of whom have full-time jobs which they try to balance with running an entire community. People make huge sacrifices in terms of family and other personal responsibilities, in an attempt to run the mosque smoothly. This severely limits what mosques can do, and most mosques interviewed shared that they simply do not have enough people, especially trained personnel with the necessary skills or expertise, to meet the community's needs. This is an issue in mosques of all sizes, with many stating that they often see the same volunteers doing most things, and not enough members becoming more involved. Mosques in smaller and mid-sized communities are concerned about who will lead their mosques in the future, as the current leaders are growing older and many young families move away for better job opportunities.

One reason why mosques are so reliant on volunteers is that many feel they cannot afford to hire staff. Mosques in this study were asked if they had paid staff other than an imam. Smaller mosques seem to have no employees. Medium-sized mosques have started to employ janitorial staff and, in one case, a project manager for a mosque expansion they are working on. The large mosques have started employing more staff, although with some this is still limited: two just have one more part-time employee other than a full-time imam, and only one has a paid executive director in addition to other staff members. The very large mosques have experienced a large increase in paid staff, ranging anywhere from six to eighteen full-time staff: executive directors, office managers, administrators and other front-office employees, accountants, security guards, counselors, custodians or janitorial staff, and tutoring center administrators. These numbers are separate from Islamic school staff.

Some mosques mentioned that while they try their best to help families financially, they cannot always meet the need and that the lack of funds also limits what programs they can offer. They are often hesitant to pay external organizations or professionals who may be able to come to the mosque to offer auxiliary programs that would address some of these gaps. One expert shared that the average jumu'ah attendance in an American mosque is 400, a number that in this article was classified as a "mid-sized mosque." In comparison, an American church with a Sunday attendance of 400 would be considered "large" and, according to him, would have a full-time youth director, staff, and two pastors. He also said that mosques are severely underfunded. In some communities, especially some of the smaller ones, this is partly due to the high costs of living and mosque-goers not being very

well-off financially. One small mosque shared that it is looking for a way for the mosque itself to generate income, rather than rely only on donations. One example of this is as follows: One of the very large mosques is working on building apartments and office spaces for rent on mosque-owned property. Another said that it is short on grant writing, and that governmental and nonprofit grants could support many of its programs and services. Multiple mosques expressed that their growing communities now have to upgrade and expand their spaces but that such undertakings can be cost-prohibitive at this time.

Envisioning the Future: Promising Practices and Recommendations

A Vision for the Role of Mosques in Supporting Families

Shaping attitudes

When asked how they envision the role of American mosques supporting Muslim families in the future, those interviewed shared that they would like members and leaders alike to see the mosque as something more than just a place to pray, as something so much more than a mosque in a Muslim-majority country. In this country, a mosque is critical for the individuals and families' Islamic and social development. It should be a community hub, a space for growing in faith and to connect families. For families to feel connected, there must be programs, activities, and services that speak to and are centered around their needs. But for this to happen, efforts must be conscious, deliberate, and planned intentionally and the focus on families must be prioritized. Leaders need to educate the community on the role that mosques can play in their lives, and members must be willing to get involved and work to make the mosque a place that everyone, especially young people, look forward to coming to. One expert pointed out that a large drag exists in many communities: even if it acknowledges the need for programs that will attract youth and young adults, they are unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices to make these programs a reality. Do they support the mosque when it tries to bring these ideas to fruition by donating their time and money? Do they understand that, for the good of the next generation, they need to show compassion, grace, and compromise when youth make mistakes? He expressed that communities need to develop a "theology of giving," of lending their full support to mosque initiatives. Without their full support, it becomes very difficult for mosques to implement all of the family-centered programs they may otherwise be capable of establishing.

More active services and community involvement

Mosques across the board hope to be able to offer more active and well-run services to families in their communities. In smaller mosques, this might include looking to larger mosques for inspiration and reaching out to them for support and ideas on how they can improve their existing services. Larger mosques hope to expand what they currently offer by establishing more focused departments. Some specific goals are offering more educational programs on a regular basis, more culturally appropriate counseling, and support for Muslim children being bullied in schools. One mosque spoke about establishing

a comprehensive community center where anyone who comes can find something that speaks to them.

One major way to make this vision a reality is to have more active committees powered by more volunteers. As mentioned earlier, most communities currently suffer from a lack of human resources. For mosque-goers to become willing to lend their valuable time, they have to feel a sense of belonging to that mosque's community. In some mosques, technology (e.g., social media and WhatsApp groups) is being used to keep members in touch with each other and to build connections. Others try to involve those whom the programs will benefit in making the decisions, such as ensuring that the youth committee includes high school students on its planning body. Mosques hope to provide volunteers with more training opportunities so they feel comfortable in the roles they take on. Smaller and mid-sized mosques said that they would ideally like to follow the model of some wealthier communities, which can afford to hire employees to focus on specific roles and needs.

Promising Practices and Recommendations

Be welcoming and involve the community

All but one mosque spoke about the need to be more approachable and to make it easy for congregants to ask for and to access help by building close relationships and trust with them. The community needs to know that the mosque is there to help them and they should be able to get to know its leaders and see them working for them (e.g., cleaning the mosque and setting up for events). Mosques spoke about the importance of confidentiality and privacy so the families can overcome their potential reluctance to seek the imam's help. It is equally important for them to feel that their dignity is being maintained, that they are not being looked down upon, have to make a public display of themselves, are humiliated, or are being put through undue investigations in order to access support. One mosque leader shared an Arabic saying, which loosely translates to, "When I come to you, welcome me. You don't have to let me eat your dinner, but let me see your welcome."

According to one expert, this starts with us as a community working to embody Allah's *rahma* (mercy) and changing the conversations we have from "shoulds" (i.e., this is how you should be acting or doing things) to "come as you are." We need to ask ourselves how we can keep Allah and His *rahma* at the center of our family support systems so that people feel emotionally connected and uplifted, rather than shamed and judged. When we can do this, members will feel more comfortable coming forward with their struggles. For example, when an imam is counseling individuals, he must balance the need to hold to a textual truth (i.e., Islam says you have to do this) with the human element of meeting them where they are at and helping them progress to a higher level of practice and behavior. There must be a balance of firmness and gentleness, and of establishing boundaries and standards, while centering forgiveness, mercy, and maintaining relationships.

Part of creating a welcoming environment also includes being open-minded. Community members are coming to the mosque with various understandings of the faith, levels of practice, and cultural experiences and expectations. One mosque spoke about the

challenge of getting the community to be open to those who are different, especially when they may have previously lived only with their “own kind.” How do we get them to accept this reality and still be in community with them? This entails directly addressing tribalism, sectarianism, and racism, which may be either overtly or discretely dividing the community. Some mosques recommended trying to ensure that the leadership is diverse in terms of cultural, socioeconomic, and experiential backgrounds so that the entire community is being represented, understood, and served properly. Mosques also spoke about the need to make their spaces more family-friendly. An expert shared that one imam he spoke to was shocked upon learning that a young woman who had grown up in his mosque no longer came because members scolded her for her young child’s disruptive behavior. Young mothers and children, who should be prominent members, are being pushed out of the mosque. Mosques need to be more welcoming and accommodating to young families headed by young adults, for they are most at-risk of straying away and building a lifestyle that does not include the mosque.

Mosque leaders who are striving to be more welcoming must try to better understand their congregants’ challenges and adapt the services offered. Leaders who have not gone through such struggles or observed them directly with those close to them may have “grown” blinders on and thus are not entirely aware of what people are truly dealing with. For example, one imam spoke about how his mosque had an online application process for financial assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic; when the mosque reopened, this online system was discontinued. He was disappointed, for this system increased access. For example, some individuals who needed help with transportation were informed that they had to show up in person to ask for support – an unnecessary barrier. Another example he shared was that some mosques have wheelchair ramps but no button to automatically open any of the doors. He said that sometimes it comes down to leaders simply not fully thinking through the process of accessing mosque services and the little unnecessary obstacles put in their way. He emphasized that mosque leaders need to adapt to the community’s needs, rather than expecting the community to adapt to the leaders’ various comfort zones.

Multiple mosques and experts spoke on the need to have client-centered services, of constantly talking to those being served, and listening to them in terms of the most appropriate support. The community’s face is changing quickly, and their challenges constantly evolve. Even if there may be a lot of overlap between communities, those dispensing the services must really get to know the local community and its unique problems. Suggestions from those interviewed include setting up private or anonymous ways of giving and receiving feedback, holding informal community meetings at various places (i.e., both within and outside of the mosque facilities), and conducting regular needs assessment studies so that leaders remain in touch with each segment of the community’s needs, desires, and struggles. One frequently ignored segment in this regard is those who have left the mosque. What did not work for them, and what can the community do to convince them to come back?

While listening to community members, find ways to involve them in the solution. One mosque leader mentioned that people should strive not to get upset when receiving very negative feedback, but rather should try to find how this person may be able to help

improve that specific problem. Is the criticism justified, and can they help identify other unnoticed issues? Can he or she be encouraged to be part of the solution? A community engaged in brainstorming solutions and in decision making is more likely to trust its leadership and support mosque programs and initiatives. This, in turn, might enable the mosque to have more resources at its disposal as members become willing to donate their time, expertise, and money.

Be more proactive and deliberate

Mosques remarked that the leadership needs to seek out families proactively, rather than waiting for them to ask for help. Needs assessment studies are a great tool for doing this. Another one is to hold regular educational workshops on issues that families may currently be facing and following this up with a clear articulation of the relevant resources and services available and how to access them. One community ensures that all lectures, family night activities, and *khutbas* revolve around one theme each month, as they feel this will have a larger impact than just giving one lecture and moving on. Advertising the available resources related to the topic can encourage families to engage with existing support systems. One mosque leader recommended to just start doing things to support families, even if it's something small, and not to let overplanning stop you. When their mosque changed its model from just being a mosque to seeing themselves more as a service center for the Muslim community, he said that for each door they went to, three more opened up.

According to one expert, mosques by-and-large do very little intentionally and deliberately when it comes to families. They may organize a really good program here or there addressing Muslim marriages or family concerns, but these are usually one-offs. While just starting something, even with limited resources, is important (i.e., not letting overplanning stop you), continuing in this manner is not sufficient in the long-term. Mosques need to have a more conscious, driven, and goals-based approach focused on building up Muslim families. This starts with mosques creating an internal structure focused on family needs. Many mosques' family committee or women's committee try to address some of these issues. These committees need to be built upon and invested into via diverse and trained committee members focusing on specific issues. Programs need to be expanded and receive more resources, including enrolling volunteers and staff in official training workshops and hiring professionals to run these services effectively. This naturally requires funds and sacrifice, but improving services is an investment in the community's future.

Prioritize and tap into existing resources

As one mosque shared, one organization cannot do everything that needs to be done. But is the mosque even supposed to play all these roles? An expert pointed out that many American mosques are poorly administered, most are extremely understaffed, and they lack an organized system that would even allow them to engage in these spaces in a meaningful way. Mosques are not equipped to do a lot of this work. Being able to deliver a broad program, which requires the mosque in question to be very organized, is rare. Instead, multiple mosques and experts spoke about optimizing the programs that are within their capabilities and, when it comes to other services, taking advantage of existing

resources within the greater community. The mosque should be a connection point, not necessarily a formulation point, for the local Muslim community's needs. This is where the experts agree that mosques have the largest responsibility: after knowing what the needs are, be aware of and connect to those organizations and professionals who have the time, resources, and expertise to provide these services; and be ready to refer people to them. Mosques should also partner with those Islamic organizations in larger Muslim communities that specialize in particular needs to provide the specialized services needed to move the community forward together. One expert expressed a concern that can come up when a mosque becomes a "mega-mosque":⁶ the amount of foresight, planning, and bureaucracy that develops makes it less dynamic and harder to respond to the community's changing needs. As the mosque builds healthy and active partnerships with affiliate organizations run by their own boards, the community as a whole can move in the same direction – diversifying, specializing, and adapting quickly to changing needs as they arise.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, mosques should try to learn from one another in order to save time and resources. Examples are partnering with neighboring mosques on specific initiatives or opening lines of communication between mosques nationwide to share their knowledge and experience. Mosques across the board can avail themselves of government programs and grants, social service agencies, and non-Muslim nonprofits to support their efforts. This becomes increasingly important in smaller communities that have only one mosque and no Islamic organizations.

Additional Recommendations

Addressing Service Gaps and Disparities

Although mosques are currently doing a lot to support families, many gaps remain. Many of them focus on youth engagement programs; however, families have other needs that mosques can help address. For example, the elderly, disabled, and caregivers could benefit from mosque support. As parents – especially those of the Baby Boomer generation – age, the community faces a potentially growing concern: are young Muslim families equipped to support their elderly members? While some families keep various aspects of elder support from their native cultures, such as living in multigenerational homes, not everyone has this ability. Moreover, not all families can move their parents in with them or afford to take care of them, and not all elderly members can access retirement savings, government benefits, or assistance programs. Even the economically sound have potential social concerns. If an elderly parent has to move to a new city because of living expenses or moving in with their adult children, how does he/she build a new social life? The Muslim community does not currently have the necessary institutions or level of support to serve this aging population, and existing non-Muslim institutions (e.g., senior living communities and nursing homes) are not built with Muslims' sensibilities and needs in

⁶ The US Mosque Survey 2020 defines a "mega-mosque" as being one with at least 2000 attendees at the weekly congregational service (i.e., jumu'ah prayers), and found that in 2020, 4% of American mosques could be categorized in this group (Bagby 2021a, 12). Three of the mosques interviewed for this article (labeled here as "very large") would be considered mega-mosques by this definition.

mind. How do we help our elderly age with dignity, regardless of their economic or social circumstances? The authors of this article propose the following role for mosques.

Mosques should ensure that spaces are accessible and open to people with disabilities and are hosting peer-support groups for caregivers, the elderly, parents, or those having gone through certain life events such as divorce, death in the family, and other traumatic circumstances. In addition, they must address any stigma associated with providing support services to these populations. Programs should be a joint effort between the congregants and their mosque with feedback loops that allow the full range of members to help shape the services offered.

Training and Technical Assistance

Continuous improvement should become an integral part of the mosque's administrative and program implementation culture. Imams, mosque leaders (e.g., board and executive members), and those individuals (paid or volunteer) who serve families should all have access to and expectations of evaluation, training, and support for improvement. This may seem daunting for some mosques. However, they can search out training offered through universities, government, or non-Muslim nonprofit hubs for basic soft and technical skills. These can be supplemented by training designed for Muslims and Islamic organizations (e.g., the Oaktree Institute), attending professional and academic conferences, and training in specific fields (e.g., the Muslim Mental Health Conference, the Peaceful Families Project, American Muslim Health Professionals, The Family and Youth Institute, Maristan, or the Islamic Social Services Association, USA). As a strategic planning and implementation component, mosques should have a documented and measurable training and development plan for paid staff and volunteers.

As for imam training, one expert suggested that American Islamic seminaries have a role to play in promoting educational programs for those involved in youth groups, as they must be sensitive to youth and young adults, and leadership training. As he pointed out, creating, facilitating, and supporting more training and support systems for imams, mosque leaders, volunteers, and staff is the responsibility of both individual mosques and national Islamic organizations. He noted that on the national level, there are not enough organizations and institutions that exist to help mosques learn best practices. More national efforts are needed to connect mosques so they can network and learn from one another, and access training that can be essential to their growth and improvement. The annual National Shura and In-Service Training for Imams, Chaplains, and Other Service Providers to the Muslim Community (organized by the Association of Muslim Chaplains, the Muslim Endorsement Council, and The Islamic Seminary of America Inc.) serves as just such a forum. The authors of this article suggest that more efforts need to be made in this vein, by perhaps incorporating these networking and training programs into existing popular national Islamic conferences and promoting them more publicly, creating new conferences for this purpose, and establishing more national online networks and forums for mosque leaders, imams, volunteers, and staff.

Imam and Community: Balancing Expectations and Responsibilities

Are we expecting too much from our imams or giving them enough support? What should be the agreement(s) among the imams, the mosques, and the communities they serve? Imams are often under tremendous stress and face pressure to serve many aspects of the community's needs that may be beyond what they were hired for and their capability for serving as a religious leader. AbuTaleb et al. (2024) describe the many expectations of the imams' role as follows:

Religious leaders are pulled in myriad directions when serving the needs of their congregations and communities. Worshippers look to them to lead prayers, officiate marriages, conduct funerals, and see to the needs of Muslim spiritual life. Students of knowledge seek education in their classrooms, congregations attend their sermons, and community members seek their religious rulings. Youth and parents look to them to understand and apply religious teachings in an increasingly challenging landscape. Congregants turn to them for counsel on their challenges, business decisions, and personal matters. Media and multifaith partners seek spokespeople for the religion and its adherents on the local, national, and global stage. Islamophobes and extremist Muslims alike viciously target them to discredit their balanced approaches and harass vulnerable Muslim populations. Students in universities and hospital patients turn to them to navigate their faith journeys. Through all of these roles and more, religious leaders are only people: they must earn a livelihood, pay their bills, raise families, and see to their individual needs as human beings. (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 97)

What is the community's responsibility for supporting the imam's continuous scholarly and leadership development when hiring one? Furthermore, some Muslim communities are unable or unwilling to pay him a living wage but often expect him to serve well beyond a typical work week. AbuTaleb and his team found that many imams had to rely on low-income food, housing, and health coverage support (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 60) and that "[g]enerally, the average religious leader is barely making ends meet and is financially unprepared for the future. Most will be unable to retire on their current track and these struggles are likely to be exacerbated as they age, obligations increase, and health deteriorates" (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 101). This expectation of extensive skills and background without offering a suitable financial package is frequently untenable and results in mutual burnout. In the same report, 39% of Muslim religious leaders reported that they experience medium to high levels of burnout, in large part due to stress from the job (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 86). Regarding financial compensation, the researchers point out that "[p]aying a living wage is an important Islamic religious obligation" (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 101) and that

Offering fair and timely compensation and avoiding exploitative business practices are essential qualities of a Muslim and a manifestation of our faith. Islamic texts teach that wages are a divinely protected right, and neither a favor nor an act of benevolence beyond what is due on the part of the employer. Among many other

verses, Allah says, ‘Give in full when you measure, and weigh with an even balance. This is fairest and best in the end’ [Qur’ān 17:35]. The Prophet Muhammad warned that he would be an opponent on the Day of Judgment to an employer who took advantage of someone’s labor but did not compensate him [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 2270]. These obligations are incumbent upon every Muslim engaging in commerce, and religious employers should embody the highest standards. (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 59)

To build the leaders that they need and want, the responsibility must be balanced among the imam’s duties, the community needs, and what the mosque can reasonably do to support both needs. This might be a reason that young men in the community do not want to become imams, as noted earlier in this article. After all, they can see the lack of support, training, compensation, boundaries, and work-life balance that imams may receive and realize that they would rather be there for their families and provide for them adequately. AbuTaleb and his team recommend that the Muslim community and Muslim institutions, such as mosques, work to make religious leadership positions, such as being an imam, into respected and desirable professions. They shared that, based on their research, this can be done by ensuring that the financial sustainability of this job is improved (via better salaries, benefits such as health and dental insurance, retirement savings options, vacation time and other time off, etc.), as well as working on non-financial factors of improving job satisfaction, such as increasing the professionalism and competence of mosque boards, the sense of community connectedness, allowing religious leaders more time with their families and supporting a work-life balance, promoting and respecting boundaries, and providing imams with more opportunities for professional development (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 100-102).

The mosque leadership, imam, and community all have responsibilities and expectations of one another; what is imperative in order to serve families is that there be fair and equitable compensation, clearly stated boundaries, and policies to ensure that all parties are served and protected in the work they do. The community and mosque leaders must “[s]crutinize the roles description and community expectations of religious leaders for boundaries, achievability, and sustainability” (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 99) and “[r]emember that we all share a responsibility before Allah to ensure that we are not breaking people and families in seeking our collective goals” (AbuTaleb et al. 2024, 99). How can we expect the imam to adequately support the community’s families when he is not given the time and resources to support his own well-being and his own family?

Although an American Muslim family might have many needs, is the imam the only person expected to help meet them? Communities need to be more realistic in this regard. This may mean hiring professional staff, finding more volunteers, or partnering with other mosques or social service agencies to ensure that families are nurtured and able to thrive.

What is a viable path forward? Before hiring a full-time imam, the mosque should have enough funds on hand to cover more than one year’s salary and benefits, including healthcare, as well as up-to-date policies and procedures to guide the imam’s engagement with the community and staff. Regarding insurance and other benefits (such as housing

allowances, subsidized school tuition, and wellness and psychological support), the authors of the Yaqeen Institute report on religious leaders provide some information on governmental programs available to institutions which can help provide some of this support to employees (AbuTaleb et al. 2024). Imams should negotiate in good faith and request paid sick leave, continued education, and training clauses. However, they must also be flexible enough to work in increasingly diverse mosques and remain grounded in Islamic faith and practice. As a collective, they should consider creating national professional organizations to state their needs and enable them to find support for their unique position. Such organizations may help provide imams with training programs and courses to supplement their religious training or partner with those organizations that already offer some of this training, offer mentorship and consultancy services that can connect junior and more experienced imams, help imams network with one another, provide mental health support designed specifically for imams by partnering with Muslim therapists, offer imams and mosques with guidance on professional standards for the job, and provide some level of oversight or accountability – or at the very least professional guidance for mosque leaders – aimed at those imams accused of wrongdoing.⁷ The imam must not be isolated from other imams’ professional and spiritual support. The North American Imams Federation/Fellow (NAIF), founded in 2004, seems to be a small step in this direction.⁸

Mosques: Positioning for the Future

As American Muslim institutions continue to grow and mature, we must explore and question what we need from our mosques. Are we overtaxing or expecting too much from them? One expert related what the three of them believe is every mosque’s core responsibility: “Masjids are the key. They are the most important ingredient for supporting and helping families grow strong in the Islamic faith and practice. They are the key.” Suppose we all agree that the crucial role of every mosque is to strengthen and maintain Islam’s heritage here by strengthening Muslim families. If we do so, what reasonable responsibilities and expectations should the community have? Is the mosque supposed to provide a wide range of direct services by itself, or act as a hub where education, convening, and coordination are core strategies, even though not every service is directly provided? Should there be a collective consensus on what and how mosques could be constructed and positioned in American Muslim communities and society as a whole? The organic nature of our mosques and institutions’ growth and progression is commendable; however, we may be at a stage where it is time to convene a collective discussion among national institutional leaders on how best to invest in the continued purpose, relevance, and viability of mosques in this country.

⁷ An example of a support system for imams exists in Egypt, where more senior imams supervise junior imams, and certain standards are put in place to allow for more work-life balance. For more information on this and how it compares to the job of imam in North America, see The Hurma Project’s podcast episode entitled “Imams as Counselors” (Mattson et al. 2021).

⁸ See <https://naifusa.org/>.

Collaborative Leadership: A Coordinated Community Response

If the community wants to avoid overtaxing mosques, then supporting healthy, thriving families requires a coordinated effort. For many mosques, this has meant a dedicated volunteer base, communal ties to local nonprofits and government agencies, and consistent interfaith work. However, mosques are often challenged with communicating and collaborating effectively with fellow mosques beyond Eid celebrations. Two mosques in this study mentioned this issue. One very small mosque shared that it has so little resources that providing the services is a struggle and that larger Muslim communities in the same state should lend some support: in addition to fundraising for and supporting Muslim causes overseas, they should think about how they can support less prosperous Muslim communities closer to home. A very large mosque spoke about how the many mosques in its area rarely work together, for each one tries to provide all the services by itself. There are other barriers as well: the distance between mosques, different perspectives regarding priorities, socioeconomic factors, and religious practice. While this may happen naturally as communities grow and divisions occur, it is short-sighted when it comes to addressing common needs and communal responsibilities. If only one mosque does well, but the others in the same region do not, how helpful is this for the local community? Muslims in the area will be underserved when they do not have to be. Mosque leadership should establish and maintain ongoing strategic dialogues with other mosques within their city or geographic region. Using their collective interests and power could increase the capacity of all the mosques involved as regards to sharing costs and resources for counseling, youth clubs, elder care, development activities, and other services. Intra-cultural dialogue with a shared vision will enable communities to collaborate among themselves to capacity, resulting in increased opportunities to support their member families.

In addition, a coordinated community response would include mosques working with and supporting local and national Islamic organizations that specialize in specific needs that the mosque cannot address. One example is Canada's Nisa Homes women's shelters. This national organization opens chapters across the country one-by-one with the help of local communities. It provides the community with a framework and support. Local volunteers and staff work with local mosques and members to make the project happen by purchasing homes to serve as women's shelters, fundraising for their activities, and providing professional services to those they serve, following the framework given by the national organization. Some national Muslim youth organizations in the United States follow a similar setup. Such organizations can potentially serve as a model for how families' many other needs can be met while involving, but not overtaxing, the mosque. For example, can a similar national organization be created to help communities organize social programs for its mosque's elderly congregants? Can such a set up eventually be expanded to help the elderly access social services (e.g., Social Security, Medicare, or Medicaid), or even perhaps one day include opening chapters where dynamic and vibrant Muslim senior homes and/or senior living communities can be established?

Directions for Future Research

While this study outlined current areas of support for families within mosques, strengths, challenges, and possibilities for the future, there are many other opportunities for

researching this topic further. A study on how African American mosques support families would help address one of the limitations mentioned in this article. Exploring some case studies can guide mosques on how to implement strategies that will improve their services (e.g., examples of successful collaborative relationships between neighboring mosques in supporting one community's families; and mosques that have clearly articulated and reasonable roles, expectations, and support for imams that allow him to address the community's needs and to have a personal life). Some of the issues discussed and potential solutions proposed can be dug into more deeply in future research. For example, what barriers prevent more resilient intra- and inter-cultural and intra-communal collaboration within the Muslim community? Can we dig deeper into the challenges that imams face; how they can be better supported; and the roles of mosques, national organizations, and Islamic seminaries in building these systems of support? The recent report by Yaqeen Institute cited in this article – *The Personal and Professional Lives of Muslim Religious Leaders in North America* – is one example of the further research that can be done to delve deeper into the challenges that imams face and possible solutions, but more is needed.⁹ Can we create more robust frameworks and standards to guide mosque leaders when engaging imams, staff, and volunteers, and when running programs and services? Regarding elderly care, can we more thoroughly investigate this age group's needs (e.g., how many Muslims live in senior living facilities or nursing homes, their unique concerns, and how they are currently being addressed)? Can we then use this to inform advocacy efforts for Muslims living in non-Muslim-run nursing homes and eventually inspire the establishment of Muslim senior living communities, while still keeping in mind the importance of family and adult children in elder care within the Muslim community?

Conclusion

Interviews were conducted with fourteen American mosques and three experts to explore the various approaches and programs mosques implement to support Muslim families in their communities. The mosque's role in supporting families is crucial and varies according to its size and capacity. All mosques provide religious and spiritual support to their community. Their role evolves and expands as they increase in size and capacity to offer additional services and programs that cover the spectrum of life-cycle events.

The article explores the strengths and challenges faced by mosques to support families. Large and very large mosques cited community members' generosity as a strength. The trust established by the mosque with its community, combined with communal donations and volunteerism, allows it to reinvest in the community to support services that directly benefit families of all financial backgrounds. Another strength mentioned of smaller and mid-sized mosques is community cohesion, or the sense of unity present in these ethnically and socially diverse communities. As one expert shared, we are in the beginning stages of a much more dynamic mosque that supports families.

⁹ The 2024 report by AbuTaleb et al. surveyed 205 religious leaders in North America in 2022 – including imams (the largest group of the sample, at 41.5%), resident scholars, religious directors, executive directors, chaplains, teachers, and independent scholars – to explore their demographics, job duties, job satisfaction, finances, family life, and mental health.

Although some mosques do not have a full-time imam, this person is essential to their communities' social and religious vibrancy. Religious instruction and ritual practice are typically done through volunteers, allowing mosques to focus on one of their core functions: religious practice and education. For those with a full-time imam, his role may run the gamut from religious instruction to providing family and marital counseling. While an imam's presence is typically welcomed, some growing communities have concerns about his impact on their community's unity. As his role is integral, his opinions and personality may create divisions. In one community, communal cohesion currently takes precedence over having a full-time imam. According to the US Mosque Survey 2020, American mosques are becoming increasingly diverse, with the ethnic, social, and cultural heterogeneity of mosque-going populations increasing (Bagby 2021a, 14). Imams who can serve such communities should be a critical factor in their selection and continued training, both reinforcing them in Islam's traditional elements of faith and practice and also grounding them in the American and American Muslim historical context and current reality.

The article illuminates the pivotal role that American mosques play in nurturing and supporting Muslim families. This research calls for continued exploration and appreciation of the mosques' many roles in serving families and communities.

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