

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

SETTING UP GOALS

Each Islamic center should set up plans for the future. Such plans should reflect the vision and goals of the center and serve the interests of the Muslim community.

Among these practical goals the following can be enumerated:

- 1- Providing a place for worship.
- 2- Providing social activities for the Muslims in the community
- 3- Providing education and learning for adults and children as well
- 4- Making plans for an Islamic school
- 5- In large urban centers with a Muslim community to provide adequate support, plans should be made for a college or university. Or at least collaborate with existing institutions to provide Islamic studies at a college or graduate level
- 6- Setting up a network of personal contacts and connections to the news media to provide correct information and to correct bias and misrepresentation of Islam and the Muslims.
- 7- Collaboration with religious and civic organizations in the community and working with them to solve and provide answers to current issues and problems
- 8- Organizing the Muslims in the community for political action, raising awareness of issues important to the community, making

connections and opening lines of communication with movers and shakers at the city, state and national level

- 9- Working with Muslim organizations in areas of education, social support, disaster relief and policy change
- 10- Setting up long term goals and objectives for the next 10-20 years.

TAPPING HUMAN RESOURCES

Numerically Muslims are few and represent a minority. As such they face tremendous obstacles and challenges. If the resources of the community can be tapped correctly, then this power can be used properly. As stated before Muslim diversity can be a source of strength rather than weakness. Many Muslims are professionals and well to do, and if challenged correctly can give and support worthwhile causes and institutions.

As an example to this problem of tapping into the potential strength of the Muslim community, I would like to relate how the debt of the Islamic school in Cincinnati was retired. After working hard to raise two million dollars, the debt stood at 2 more million dollars. The community was challenged by a committed Muslim patron to raise one million dollar and if this is accomplished, he will give a matching grant of one million dollar. A committee was formed and worked hard to identify members of the community who may be willing to give in this opportunity that will probably not repeat itself. Two levels of giving were envisioned: one level of \$ 25,000.00 and a second level of \$ 10,000.00. Several people took the lead and pledged the higher donation. After working hard for three months, we were able to raise \$ 850,000.00 from the community. It was not easy, and it took personal contacts and repeated appeals and arm twisting at times. It was interesting to hear the different excuses given, like I support too many causes; or I am building a mosque back home; or I have no children that go to school; or I never was convinced that the school was needed to begin with; or I do not like those running the school. One answer that was common is " God-willing I will give" and we never heard again from that person. Many refused to return phone calls or even answer the phone. What this project showed was the

differences among members of our community: some were committed and did not need to be reminded, as they knew and understood their duty and responsibility. Others gave lip service, and when the time for action came, they disappeared. Others even voiced objections and rather than helping, tried to stop or ruin this gallant effort.

In trying to research philanthropy and charitable giving, it became obvious that most of the money is collected from few individuals who are willing to give and help. Others are stimulated by their example and follow suit, though giving smaller amounts. We tried to have most members of the community participate, but soon realized that some will only make things worse and hamper rather than facilitate our plan. We also learned that there is no substitute for one to one contact. Each person on that committee took the responsibility of talking to and getting pledges from his friends and those whom he knows well and feel comfortable in talking to. But first he must give and set an example by giving and committing himself to the goal and vision of this project.

Muslims have been in America for a relatively short period of time and are not well versed in how this society runs and its dynamics. Most Muslims come from a different culture with different mind set and a different way of doing business. It is not easy to change and learn new ways. What Muslims lack above all is the willingness to organize and volunteer, because these ideas are not top priorities in our culture? But nothing gets done in America without volunteers, and nothing succeeds without a good organization. We are learning, and perhaps our children who are raised here will have a much easier time.

WORKING TOGETHER

The Qur'an tells us:

﴿ وَقُلْ أَعْمَلُوا فَسَيَرَى اللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴾ [التوبة: ١٠٥]

"And work for God and His messenger and the believers will see what you do" (At-Tawba 9 : 105).

This order to work involves both our work and good deeds as individuals, but more importantly working together as groups within our community, to make life better for everyone. We should put aside our personal egos and pride, and understand that it is not recognition or praise that counts, but it is the good work that is done. It does not matter who takes the credit, what really counts is the benefit that accrues to every person in the community.

This vision is difficult to achieve and accept. As human beings we want immediate results and want to see our work being appreciated by others. We fail to understand that what is really important is that God sees and knows what we do, and that God is the one we should please, not other human beings.

I have seen people put obstacles in the way of many who want to start something new that would benefit their community. They block their efforts because they did not lead that project themselves or because of envy or jealousy.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) answered questions in different ways when asked by different people, to illustrate that all the options he gave were correct and appropriate under different circumstances. There is more than one way to the truth. If I know of a way, or I have a certain understanding, others who behave in a different way, or have a different point of view may be correctly guided as well. It does not serve any purpose to be rigid or restrictive in the way we approach our religion. We should give people options and allow for different interpretation depending on the circumstances that we face.

The opinion of religious scholars who lived in a time and environment quite different from our time is not necessarily valid or applicable to our time. To insist on following their rulings does not make sense, for they spoke to the needs of their society and time. If they were living today and witnessed our current problems, their rulings will certainly be different. Why do we fault others with a different point of view or not give them credit or at least listen with an open mind to their logic and rational!

The biggest problem facing American Muslims is the tendency to shut

our minds when it comes to religious interpretation and the fear that we have no right to explore other options.

IDENTITY AS AMERICAN MUSLIMS

Many Muslims feel unsure and somewhat confused in their attempt to live as Muslims in a Western country. Those who migrated to America perform their rituals of worship like prayer and fasting in the same way they were back home. The difficulty they encounter is in giving charity, and their relationship with non-Muslims. Some concepts are different and to reconcile their religious teachings back home with their new life in America is not easy. Soon Muslims realize that they cannot apply religious dogma and must think critically and try to understand the wisdom and spirit of the divine order and how best to apply divine directions in their life here. In their attempt to rationalize their Islam, they may find themselves at odds with religious teachings they took for granted in their early life. At this stage the reaction of Muslims differ. Some stick to what they were taught and refuse to accept any other opinion as wrong or invalid. They develop a dichotomy: at work they are open-minded and rational, but when it comes to religious matters, they are afraid of doing wrong and would rather defer to "scholars" and their rulings. Others refuse to separate their identity or way of thinking, and begin to ask questions and search for the rational and validity of rulings they once accepted.

When these two methods of thinking clash several things happen. At times, Muslims who find comfort in accepting the teachings and religious rulings of older and well known scholars segregate with other Muslims of similar mind set. When challenged with new ideas they feel threatened and become uneasy. They refuse to listen to or associate with other Muslims whom they regard as misguided or dangerous. Some may become increasingly vocal in their opposition to any new idea and label such ideas as "Bid'a" (bad innovation in religion). Some even want to impose their own way of thinking and beliefs on others.

Since there are few American Muslim scholars, those who rely on religious scholars that lived centuries ago identify with these scholars.

They call them As-Salaf As-Saleh (The good righteous early Muslims), and they follow their example. They take whatever they said as the Gospel and defend their views with passion. They feel alienated from modern scholars and from any Western ideology, and feel threatened by such wrong and dangerous teachings.

More liberal Muslims, on the other hand, cannot identify with religious scholars who lived in a different time and different society. They read their views and consider them valid for their times but not always suitable for our times and our needs today.

This rift between rigid interpretation and more liberal interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah is going to get wider. The position of both groups is likely to get more polarized in the coming years. What will provide solution to the current division will be the emergence of a new Western understanding of Islam by Muslims who live in the West and who can provide answers suitable to our rapidly changing society. What is needed is a new understanding of the following:

- The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in a society where Muslims are the minority among a non-Muslim majority, and where the morals and values prevailing in society may be at odds, at times, with traditional Islamic values
- A changing of the fundamental view of how Muslims view the world and that they are the only people guided by God, and a more critical view to Christianity and Judaism as proper divine religions and not condemned. The attitude that some Muslims hold that Muslims are the only people guided nowadays and that everyone must be a Muslim otherwise he or she is doomed must be changed
- We need a more rational and scientific approach to financial transactions and not a rush to judgment by those who have no knowledge of finance or economics that interest is Reba and that it is unlawful and a sin.
- A new understanding of the roles that women play in society and how to ensure equality among the sexes and safeguard women's rights and their dignity. Such areas as work place, inheritance, testimony and place in the family must be reconsidered in a Western society

- We as Muslims need to learn work ethics and volunteer spirit and charitable giving to support institutions and worthwhile causes and not limit charity to the poor and needy
- We need to understand how to work together and support each other as organizations rather than criticize or cause division in the community

Some fear this change, and state that Islam cannot be American or Middle Eastern or Pakistani depending on where Muslims live. They are apprehensive of the emergence of such an American Islam or a European Islam. Some even accuse those Muslims who advocate a new understanding of Islam according to different societal needs that they are changing the religion. Accusations and stereotyping and putting labels on others is nothing new. Muslims and non-Muslims alike are guilty of such practice. When we fear something we tend as human beings to discredit the message by discrediting and finding faults with those who advocate the message.

Such change in our understanding of Islam and how it can be applied in a Western society is inevitable. It makes sense from a logical point of view, as well as from a religious point of view. If religion is to improve our behavior and allow us to evolve as human beings, then it must be practical and address our needs. If our needs are changing and our problems are different from our predecessors, then religion must provide answers suitable to our times. Our new problems cannot be solved by old ideas or by scholars who never witnessed our time or experienced our difficulties.