

Address at the Opening of the Garden City Mosque in Toowoomba

Sunday 30 March 2013

By

Dr Mustafa Ally OAM

Editor-in-Chief: Crescents Community News (CCN)

Assalaamuilaikum

Good morning and welcome to my town – I say my town because despite being based in Brisbane I have spent a great deal of the past decade just up the road.

Thank you to the ISOT for giving me the opportunity to say a few words on this very historic occasion not just for Toowoomba but for the Muslim community of Australia.

A basement room and then a couple of ever-expanding demountables by the grace of the University of Southern Queensland to these buildings – it has been quite a remarkable journey over these two decades, and a testimony to the hard work, tenacity, dedication and patience of a small team of people.

But what, for me, has been most remarkable of all, has been the way in which the ISOT succeeded, in a climate of donor fatigue and potentially hostile opposition, in overcoming all of these obstacles in the space of 12 months and bringing us to where we are today.

I vividly recall when Prof Shahjahan Khan first called me all very excited about this church that has just come up for sale. I have to admit that when I heard of the asking price and the time frame given to acquire it, I was a trifle sceptical at first. How could a small, regional, largely student-based community succeed in raising under a million in a just few months when other larger and longer established societies were struggling to even get extensions to their Mosques done.

But where there is a will, they say, there is a way!

What the ISOT achieved and how it did so is nothing short of a blueprint for others to learn from and adopt.

As Editor-in- Chief of Crescents Community News I followed and documented the progress of the society every step of the way on its journey to achieving their goal and this, to my way of thinking, has been the recipe for their success:

Treat what I say next as a Masterclass in project management and community engagement.

For a start you need a dedicated and enthusiastic organizing team led by a person with a vision and passion. To this end there could have been no better champion for such a cause than Prof Khan whose years of fighting for and winning over facilities and recognition for the Muslim students at the University are nothing short of legendary.

You need a strategy that identifies and embraces ALL the different and diverse Muslim communities. Here the society identified and rounded up all the movers and shakers around a table and bestowed them with the ownership of and responsibility for the project. The attendance at and success of the fund raising dinners, the weekly collections at the Mosques and the support of the communities both financially and in kind were as a direct result of this approach.

Next, you have to look beyond just the town or the state for support and here the organizing team went as far afield as Sydney and other cities and towns around the country with unexpected success.

You need to be transparent and open keeping the community updated at all times. I would receive weekly updates for CCN and so I put up a graphical thermometer showing the target amount to be achieved and the amount collected that week along with reports on the progress being made with the purchase.

The organizing team were very proactive with media releases to the local press with positive stories that gave an alternative narrative to some of the fear-mongering that was beginning to surface every now and then.

Another key ingredient to the success of the project was getting the support of the community and other religious leaders, the local politicians and community groups – re-assuring them that this new prayer and community facility was not going to be a threat to the environment or to anyone’s way of life but instead just another symbol and shining example of how a small regional town can be a beacon of hope to the rest of the state and country in the face of unfounded fear and misinformation.

I want to conclude with making dua that the ISOT will continue to grow from strength to strength, insha’Allah and to say that what you have achieved here goes far beyond acquiring a building – you have shown us that, despite the negativity that often rears its ugly head, that there is a huge groundswell of goodwill from the vast majority of people in our country – it just needs to be tapped.

Thank you.