

To Whom does a Mosque Belong?

Most Muslims visit mosques and are generally aware of the function, location and services that a mosque offers. However, many have no idea about the governance of their own mosque, nor the legal structure of its Management Committee, Trust or Directorship. Naturally, many people assume that the Imam of a mosque is the ultimate authority when it comes to deciding what services a mosque should provide. At many mosques though, the Imam's role is often limited to no more than leading the Salah, teaching the Qur'an and conducting lectures. It is actually the management committees, trustees or directors of mosques that decide everything else. The volunteers and people who put their hands up to fill these roles do an amazing job in ensuring a mosque continues to provide religious services to the ever growing number of worshippers. In light of this, it would be unfair to take this work away from these volunteers unnecessarily, or to detract from the good work that they do.

In my nearly five years of community service that I have performed within mosques, I have seen firsthand the good intentions of the many people who are involved in these committees. The majority are volunteers and they donate their time and effort simply for the sake of Allah the Almighty and the reward in the hereafter. Despite having the best of intentions though, sometimes the members of these committees can become quite closed to any new people and new ideas. A certain amount of this closed-off nature can be a result of their congregation only being interested in praying and then leaving immediately after. Some people choose to involve themselves with community services outside of their mosque and only maintain an informal or causal relationship with their mosque. Then there are others who simply don't wish to upset the status quo of their mosque committee or are too afraid to engage with it. These people are usually content enough with an occasional whine about how dormant mosques are in providing community services.

Since the early days of Islam and throughout the golden era of Islamic civilisation, mosques played a central role in the development of societies. Mosques served not only in addressing religious needs, but also as a central point in addressing wider social issues. More importantly, mosques were a place where the weakest of the weak were looked after by those who held positions of authority within the mosques.

Right next to the very first mosque of Islam, the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) established what was called an "As Suffah." Ibn Hajar—one of the great scholars of the past—described 'suffah' as a "sheltered place that was at the back of the Masjid of the Prophet. It was prepared as a place of residence for strangers who did not have homes or families." The people who took shelter there were mostly unmarried, orphaned, poor or destitute people who had no other place to go. These people were collectively referred to as 'Ashab al Suffa' and while they were at the suffahs they would be fed, clothed, sheltered and educated by the rest of the community. It is said that the Prophet Mohammad (saw) used to personally care for those who took refuge in his mosque. Until I started doing research for this article, I was unaware that Abu Huraira (ra)—the very well-known companion and narrator of numerous ahadith— was from the 'Ashab al Suffa'.

In the context of today's Australia, a suffah would be no different to a homeless shelter. However, to most committees and communities, the idea of providing a type of suffah is too radical and strange. In my time as President of the Holland Park Mosque I established a temporary homeless shelter in one of the buildings we acquired from a former church. We built a gymnasium beneath this building to attract young Muslims. It was built to provide a healthy alternative for those who may have gone astray or be at risk of straying into various evils and addictions. However, this gym idea did not sit well with some members of the community who frequent the Holland Park Mosque. They argued that it was not the function of a mosque to provide shelter to people, and one brother even stated "such scum should not be allowed into the mosque as they may have a negative impact on good people."

Despite me having the support of the Imam and most of the committee members for building this gymnasium, the brothers who were opposed to the idea lobbied their supporters and had me and some other members of the committee removed. The division that this created is now the subject of many rumours within our community and the clash of ideas has turned into a type of politics that would put even the most seasoned politician to shame. I don't feel that these brothers had bad intentions, nor do I have hatred for them. In fact, I believe such debates are a healthy and necessary way to bring about a change that will Insha'Allah bring us closer to our faith and duty as Muslims. However, such debates should include more Muslims and should not only be taking place between closed circles of supporters and opponents of any one individual.

I both request and encourage the members of our community to actively participate in the management of our mosques or at least, not to be afraid to approach and ask questions of those who are in charge of our mosques. In doing so, please be mindful of the fact that all of the people involved in mosque organisations are volunteering their time and effort for the pleasure of Allah and the hereafter. Most committee members are more than happy to accommodate polite requests, so long as we refrain from angry outbursts and/or slandering. We as a community cannot move forward by engaging in hostile accusations or rumours. The way of the Prophet (saw) and his companions was one of discussion, dialogue and consultation.

Sincerely,

Ali Kadri

Islamic Council of Queensland