

News Release: For Immediate Release
Source: Wilcox News Service
September 21, 2004

Indiana Muslim Community Pursuing Friendships with Non-Muslims

By Woodrow Wilcox

Leaders of the Northwest Indiana Islamic Center, in Crown Point, Indiana, encourage their members to build friendships with non-Muslims. Recently, non-Muslims were invited to travel with members attending the Islamic Society of North America convention in Rosemont, Illinois. The Islamic Society of North America (I.S.N.A.) is headquartered just west of Indianapolis in Plainfield, Indiana. The theme of the 41st annual I.S.N.A. convention was “Islam: Dialogue, Devotion & Development”.

Jamal Tarakey escorted this reporter to the event. Jamal Tarakey is from Afghanistan, but came to the United States as a teenager. He attended high school in Griffith and Munster, Indiana. Also, he graduated from Indiana University in Bloomington. Now, he operates a wedding and event video taping service, and he helps relatives run two other businesses in northwest Indiana.

Thousands of Muslims from North America attended the national convention. The convention was divided into three main areas: an area for seminars, a prayer area, and a bazaar area.

Most of the seminars were designed to help Muslims from other countries and cultures learn how to adapt to North America culturally, socially, and legally. In one seminar on political matters, the results of a survey of Muslims in America that was commissioned by several organizations, including the Council on American-Islamic

Relations, was published and explained. According to the survey, Muslim Americans think very much like their non-Muslim neighbors. The study found that the top four political concerns of American Muslims are (1) Civil Rights and non-discrimination issues, (2) education, (3) health and medical costs, and (4) Middle East or Israel-Palestine issues.

In 2000, most American Muslims supported George W. Bush for President. But, this year, about 45% of Muslim Americans are supporting John Kerry while the rest are divided among George W. Bush, Ralph Nader, and others. Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, and Green Party officials and representatives attended the convention to take every opportunity to explain why Muslim Americans should support their respective parties and candidates.

The bazaar area had over a hundred booths of organizations and merchants that serve the Muslim community. Various booths offered banking services, telephone services, clothes, furniture, jewelry, food, and vitamins. Even an anti-balding tonic called "HAIRBACK", and a dating service called "MuslimMatch" had booths in the bazaar.

Many of the booths offered toys, books and educational merchandise. Dolls were dressed in traditional Islamic clothing. Books and computer programs made learning the Koran or Arabic language easier.

Several bazaar booths promoted entertainment. One booth promoted a group of Muslim comedians who created a show entitled "Allah Made Me Funny". A group of American born Muslims called "DEBU" let people sample their music recordings. Fine Media Group promoted the November 14 scheduled release of their "Disney-like"

animated motion picture “Muhammad – The Last Prophet”.

The United States Department of Justice, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Muslim Legal Fund of America had booths in the bazaar for distributing literature and information to help attendees know their rights under the law. These booths attracted big crowds.

Many of the Islamic organizations in the bazaar sought donations for Islamic schools in America or for aid to Islamic communities in other countries. But, two organizations had different reasons for seeking donations. On August 24, 2003, arsonists destroyed the Islamic Center in Savannah, Georgia. The Savannah Muslims asked for donations to help rebuild their center.

The Zakat Foundation of America was fundraising to help American Indians in the southwestern United States. Hamil Demir, the president of the foundation, is from Kurdistan in Iraq. As a boy, he remembers his family and friends being hunted and harmed by both Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces and by Turkish forces. He especially remembers that both the Iraqis and the Turks discouraged Kurds from learning their native language. He believes that Native American Indians have been discouraged from learning their native languages, too. He wants The Zakat Foundation to demonstrate that Muslims want to be helpful friends to all Americans, including Native Americans.

You might be getting news and entertainment with a Muslim perspective soon. Various magazines were promoted at the convention bazaar including a magazine for Muslim women called “Azizah”. The Islamic Broadcasting Network and the American Muslim International Media Network promoted their radio via the internet programming.

Starting November 30 of this year, Bridges TV – American Muslim Lifestyle Network will offer tv programming by satellite and cable tv. Sound View Broadcasting, lead by its president, Shafquat Chaudhary, will start offering North American viewers programs from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan via satellite and cable television.

Many attendees who came from other countries spoke of how glad they were to be Americans. Syed Shah is originally from Pakistan and lives in Portage, Michigan. He said that before 9/11, sometimes Americans would visit his business and complain about this or that in America. He would tell them that they should try living in another country before they complain about America. Then, when he visited relatives in Pakistan, he overheard some young Pakistani men criticizing the United States of America. He walked straight to them and told them that he was a Pakistani-American. He told them that they had heard only one side—the wrong side. He told them that the United States of America had some faults and sometimes makes a mistake, but that it is still the greatest country on the Earth. A little later, one of the young men called Syed Shah “an American Taliban” for being so bold. Syed liked that comment.