Muslim Women in America: Characteristics, Implications, and Practical Steps for Ministry

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This article strives to acquaint the Adventist Church with Muslim women in the United States. It highlights the unique characteristics of this population and examines the implications for mission. Practical steps for ministry are given in the hope of encouraging Adventist women to reach out in friendship to Muslim women.

Characteristics of American Muslim Women

To understand Muslim women in the United States, it is necessary to examine two key aspects of their identity—first, the unique experience of American Muslims, and second, the influential role Muslim women play in America.

Muslims in America are Unique

With the exception of the temporary community of Muslim pilgrims from around the world during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the Muslim community in the United States is the most ethnically diverse in the whole world (Marion 2006). This fact alone should cause Adventists to take notice of American Muslims. “American Muslims, though largely by default, have become a microcosm of the global Muslim community” (Arif 2005). If the Church wants to have an impact on the greater Muslim world, it should consider beginning with American Muslims.

There are approximately 5.8 million Muslims living in every state in America (World Almanac 2001, 698). California has 20% of America’s Muslims, New York 16%, Illinois 8%, New Jersey and Indiana 4%, and Michigan, Virginia, Texas, and Ohio 3% each (Numan 1990).
Of these, 46% are women (Pew Research Center 2007:16). Approximately 65% of American Muslims are foreign-born, while 35% were born in the United States (Pew Research Center 2007:1). American Muslims come from over 75 different ethnic backgrounds (Maloof and Ross-Sheriff 2003). Many of these Muslims maintain close ties with their communities in their countries of birth.

Such diversity is changing the way Muslims in the United States view themselves. “While certain groups of Muslims are concentrated in certain parts of America, not one of these groups has an overwhelming majority over other groups. As a result, second and third generation Muslims have a much greater chance of forming a unique Muslim-American identity as compared to their counterparts in Europe” (Ahmad 2006). It is this emerging identity that makes Muslims in America different.

A recent survey (Pew Research Center 2007) highlights the unique traits of American Muslims. First, although many Muslims are relative newcomers to the United States, they are highly assimilated into American society and are often well educated and economically successful. They have a generally positive view of American society and subscribe to a decidedly American worldview: they believe in the American dream, see hard work as the key to success, favor adopting American customs, and identify themselves as Americans before Muslims. Religiously, many American Muslims see no conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. Most do not feel they are becoming less religious by living here; in fact, many report their faith and practices to be stronger. Finally, a relatively large number (21%) of Muslims in the United States are native-born Americans who have converted to Islam. African Americans form three-fifths of the converts to Islam (For helpful information on ministry to African American Muslims see Bauer 2005:40-52).

Many of these characteristics stand in contrast to those of Muslims in other Western countries, particularly in Europe (For an insightful analysis of British...
Muslims see Osindo 2005:53-83). Scholars are noting the implications of these differences. Ahmad (2006) believes this is the reason Muslims in the United States are less likely to support Islamic extremism, while Pipes (2004) predicts that “the creative thinking [among Muslims] will take place in North America, not Europe.” Starr (2007:22) notes that America’s constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and expression have created an atmosphere of toleration, allowing Muslims—and Christians—to take down their defensive barriers and embark on true exploration of faith and growth. Muslims in the United States thus have the potential to lead the way in calling the whole Islamic world to a deeper understanding of faith.

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This spiritual influence extends to the children as well. Muslim women are also playing influential roles in American society at large. Tayyibah Taylor, editor of the Muslim women’s magazine Azizah, reports that in the United States “the Muslim woman is well integrated into the workplace” (2007), citing examples of professionals and white-collar workers in a wide range of fields. In turn, Muslim women are interacting with Americans of various backgrounds and faiths, which provide opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas. Raised
to value *da’wah* (outreach; literally, “summons” or “call”), most Muslim women prove to be comfortable and adept at defending and explaining their faith. The fruits of these outreach activities—the growing numbers of American converts to Islam—add an important dynamic to the Muslim community in the United States. Reporter Michael Paulson sees native-born Muslim women playing an important role in defining Islam globally: “In modeling a more egalitarian form of Islamic culture in the US than in some parts of the world . . . they may influence Muslims worldwide” (2001).

It is in defining the Muslim American identity where women have perhaps the most significant influence, working as authors (Gull Hasan 2002, Dirk 2003, Afzal-Khan 2005, Abdul-Ghaftur 2005, and Jones 2002), spokeswomen, activists, and scholars (Webb 1999). Fawzia Afzal-Khan, editor of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, believes women are playing lead roles in this identity formation because “women’s voices are bolder in some ways, and [women are] more unafraid to voice those gray areas, to look at them and examine them because they’re less invested in power schemes” (Jones 2005:1).

This creative thinking by American Muslim women extends to the religious realm. For example, scholar Amina Wudud reinterprets the Qur’an from a female perspective; Major Shareda Hosein is seeking to become the Army’s first female Muslim chaplain; Professor Ingrid Mattson, a convert to Islam, is the president of the Islamic Society of North America; social worker Shahina Siddiqui is the principal author of the “Women Friendly Mosques” initiative (see the Women-Friendly Mosque document); and Dr. Ekram Beshir authors books on raising God-fearing children in the secular West (1998, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2008). Muslim women are not only very capable of deep spirituality; they are helping to determine the direction of Islam in North America. Therefore it can be expected that American Muslim women will become an influential force in spiritual matters in the wider Muslim world.

**Implications for Ministry**

If it is true that Muslims in America are unique and that Muslim women in America have influential roles, then the Church cannot afford to overlook American Muslim women as it fulfills its mandate to take the gospel to the world. This conclusion carries with it three implications for ministry.

*Muslim Women in America Can Hear the Gospel*

Many of our Muslim friends
come from places where the gospel has not been heard. I believe God has blessed the United States with the honor of being home to millions of Muslim women from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people for the purpose of blessing them with the gospel. “And He [God] made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27, NASB; emphasis added). Will the Church accept the privilege of responding to God’s sovereign plans within the Church’s own territory by gently pointing Muslim women who have come to the United States to God’s ultimate blessing in the Messiah?

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Muslim Women from America Can Take the Gospel to Unreached Groups

As the Church engages in the issues surrounding work with Muslim women in the American context, it is important to keep in mind the global context—the unreached people groups that are represented by many of these women—as well as Christ’s Great Commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19, NASB). If the Church recognizes the influential roles Muslim women play in their communities, it would do well to intentionally seek to equip Muslim women (and men) to take the gospel back to their native countries and initiate people group movements among the unreached peoples there. Not only will they be more effective at sharing as “insiders” in their own cultures and communities, but their work can also be furthered by the wealth of resources (financial, material, educational, structural, etc.) with which God has blessed America.

Ministry with Muslim Women Can Involve the Ordinary Laywoman

God has given the American Church the opportunity to be at the forefront of Muslim ministry. Because of America’s freedom of religion and expression, Christians do not face the
restrictions on sharing their faith with Muslims that are imposed in other parts of the world (Marion 2006). Such freedom is a blessing: not only does it allow open sharing of faith, but it also gives room for Christians and Muslims to explore new ideas, try out new approaches, and even make mistakes and continue to learn, without fear of governmental suppression, loss of life, or jeopardy to future ministry potential.

This should be good news for women in the American church. Ministry with Muslim women in the United States need not be confined to the professional clergy, those with years of training, or foreign missionaries. Laywomen who have a heart for blessing Muslims can play important roles in this work. Ministry with Muslims in general and women in particular is relational. At the risk of overgeneralizing, most women possess the exact relational skills that qualify them to minister with Muslims—skills in building friendships, prioritizing relationships over dogma, and meeting heart needs over argument needs. In addition, women—and not men—need to be the ones building relationships with Muslim women in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Practical Steps for Ministry among Muslim American Women

The challenge for the Church is to move beyond the statistics and begin meeting real Muslims. Following are some practical steps for building redemptive relationships with Muslim women, organized around commonly asked questions.

How Do I Find Muslim Women in My Area?

A good way to find Muslim women is to start by prayer walking our neighborhoods, which will help us to see the area and the people with God’s eyes (see Hawthorne and Kendrick, 1993). When I moved to a new city, I began prayerfully exploring my neighborhood, trusting that God would guide me to meet Muslim women. I saw Muslim women taking their kids to school and playing with them in parks and playgrounds, and I quickly identified the local mosque. I consulted http://www.zabihah.com/ for a list of restaurants in my area that follow the Islamic rules of halal (clean/unclean meats), and I attended ethnic community events and kept my eyes open for Muslim-run businesses.

God led me to my first close Muslim friend this way—seeing a sign with foreign writing above a Middle Eastern market. Behind the counter was a friendly-looking woman in a scarf.

How Can I Begin a Conversation with a Muslim Woman?

Many of us feel intimidated when we think of striking up a conversation with a perfect
stranger—a Muslim woman, at that. I find the example of Jesus and the Samaritan woman instructive (John 4:5-42). Jesus initiated a life-changing conversation by simply asking for help—“Give me a drink.” Modern applications can include asking about recipes, advice in buying spices or a scarf, or suggestions about good childcare options for those with children.

In the example of the woman in the Middle Eastern market, I offered to help her with English if she would teach me her language. I was taken aback when she answered in fluent English. However, she pulled a worn book from a shelf and explained that this was the yearbook of her son, who had been killed in an accident. Gesturing to the numerous messages written across the pages, the woman (whom I will call Nadira) turned to me with tears in her eyes and confessed, “I don’t know how to read . . . but I want to be able to read what my son’s friends wrote to him.” My heart broke for her, and I put my arms around this precious woman and promised that we would work on her reading skills together. Today, Nadira is like a mother to me and I her daughter.

Once I Meet a Muslim Woman, How Can I Build a Friendship with Her?

We must intentionally seek out situations where we can interact with Muslim women. This could mean regularly visiting Muslim-owned stores and restaurants, volunteering as a tutor, offering to baby-sit, or getting involved in refugee/resettlement programs. Many mosques have free Arabic classes; when I have approached sensitively and as a learner, I have been warmly welcomed to attend these classes. Those whom God is calling to full-time ministry with Muslim women might prayerfully consider selecting a career (or making a career change) that will give intimate access to Muslim women’s lives—for instance, social work, medicine, immigration law, and teaching English as a second language.

Because foreign-born Muslims do not have the familiar resources and support circles they had back home, there are many opportunities for us to
demonstrate Christ’s love in meeting their needs. For example, with Reema, a recent immigrant, I found many opportunities to help—finding a place for her to rent, helping her register for college classes, and helping her look for a job. Yet we also had fun, sharing recipes, going to the zoo and the beach, and breaking the Ramadan fast together. There were times when I was exhausted and felt like canceling our weekly visit. Surprisingly, it was these visits that often bore the most fruit. It was also on those days that I learned to be ministered to by Reema. It was rather a shock when I realized that Reema was no longer a ministry, she was a true friend!

What Can I Do to Prepare My Muslim Friend to Hear the Gospel?

In our friendship with Muslim women, we want to build a bridge of trust that will bear the weight of truth. One way trust can be built is by showing genuine interest in and respect for our Muslim friend’s culture and religion. We must intentionally seek to discover our Muslim friend’s worldview. As we learn to think within her frame of reference, we will better understand her and be able to share the gospel in ways that speak deeply to her life.

As outsiders entering the American Muslim community, we would do well to follow Larson’s model (1999) of “learner, trader, storyteller” instead of “teacher, seller, accuser.” Larson emphasizes that we should come ready to learn humbly from our new friends instead of assuming we know it all. This will give us the credibility to exchange experiences and insights with our friends instead of subjecting them to slick sales presentations. This, in time, will earn us the privilege of telling personal and interactive stories of God’s work instead of one-way lectures that judge the listener as not meeting our standards.

Our foundation of trust also grows when we respond to a person’s current needs instead of focusing on what we decide are her real needs. The Bible emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of the whole person, not simply the spiritual ones (see Jas 2:14-17). Christ himself always met people at their point of felt need. Repeatedly He asked what they wanted and then ministered to that felt need first (see Matt 20:20, Mark 10:51, Luke 18:41).

Likewise, identifying and responding to Muslims’ felt needs will build trust and open doors for further ministry. This was true with my friend Pinar, who was a secular Muslim more interested in college than spiritual issues. However, one day she called me, sobbing. “I need help from someone spiritual. Charissa, can I talk with you?” She poured out her heart about the crisis in her life and her
spiritual emptiness. She had asked friends from her country for a Qur’an in their language, but they had refused, ridiculing her about “becoming like an old grandmother and getting all religious.” God prompted me to recognize Pinar’s felt need—a Qur’an in her own language. It took me only a few phone calls to track one down, and Pinar received it with tears of joy and amazement. “My Muslim friends from my own country wouldn’t even lend me a Qur’an, but you—an American and not even Muslim—have given me one!” She was immediately open to studying the Qur’an together, and thus we embarked on a shared spiritual journey.

Unbeknown to me, Pinar began watching a Christian television channel and was attracted by the clear teachings from the Bible. One day she confessed, “Charissa, I’ve bought a Bible. Do you think that’s OK? Can we study it, too?” I assured her that the Qur’an urges Muslims to study the Bible if they have questions (Surah 10:95), and so we began our studies of the Bible. She was particularly drawn to the words of Jesus in the Gospels. “The Qur’an talks about Isa al-Masih [Jesus the Messiah],” she explained with emotion, “but the Bible tells me His actual words!” The compassion expressed by Christ touched her heart deeply, and she found herself in love with the Savior. Pinar now says, “I am a Muslim by culture and will always have that heritage, but I love Isa [Jesus], peace be upon him! I know that he was sent from God to reveal God to us, that he died for my sins, that he was raised for me, and that we’ll see him soon when he returns again.”

How Do I Talk About Spiritual Issues with My Muslim Friend?

For Muslims and Christians alike, spiritual growth is an ongoing process. With each successive stage, our Muslim friend is more receptive to various truths. Our task, then, is to be sensitive to where she is in her spiritual journey and to encourage her to take the next step forward. The process begins as we build trust through showing respect and meeting needs, progresses as we affirm shared truths, continues as we demonstrate spiritual credibility, holds steady as we share testing truths, and cumulates with fully acquainting our Muslim friends with the gospel.

As God demonstrates his love for our Muslim friends through our actions, opportunities will arise to talk about God’s work in our lives. Telling stories is an unthreatening and culturally appropriate way to share ideas and convey values, and it is essential for women with few or no literacy skills (Steffen 1999). We can also offer to pray for our friends when they share problems that they are facing—almost every Muslim
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woman will respond extremely positively to such offers. I have found wonderful opportunities for discussing spiritual issues by asking my Muslim friends to tell me about their faith.

_How Do I Handle Controversial Issues?_

During our conversations with Muslim women, we will face controversial issues, so here are four principles to assist us in dealing with them. First, as we realize that Muslims’ understanding of truth is progressive, we learn to share just what can be handled at the moment, knowing that as the relationship grows, we will have further opportunities to present new truth.

Second, we should seek to affirm what we have in common. For example, on my first visit with Reema, she asked what I believed. I chose to build common ground by giving an answer based on a Qur’anic text, Surah 2:177. “Well, Reema,” I said, “I believe in one creator God, a coming day of judgment, the angels, the Holy Books, the prophets, giving of what we earn to charity, prayer, and living a healthy lifestyle by not drinking alcohol or eating foods like pork.” Reema instantly affirmed, “You believe like we do!” In Reema’s eyes, I went from being a potential polytheist and religious antagonist to a fellow believer seeking truth with her.

Third, we must avoid arguments about religion, for the spirit produced in such interactions will never produce the fruit of righteousness. An Afghani proverb affirms this point: “If you pressure me, I will not follow you to heaven; however, if you are kind and respectful to me, I will follow you anywhere—even to hell.” We may need to bite our tongues on controversial matters. Personally, I refrain from discussing sensitive topics unless I am asked a sincere and direct question about such matters.

A fourth principle in dealing with controversial matters is to follow unswervingly God’s leading as to when to raise sensitive issues with our friends. I learned to trust God’s directives when working with my friend Reema, even when I feared that doing so might overstep the boundaries of friendship. I had been invited to celebrate _Eid al-Adha_ (the Feast of Sacrifice commemorating Abraham’s
willingness to offer up his son and the “Tremendous Sacrifice” with which God ransomed him, Surah 37:107). During my visit, Reema and her husband got into such a terrible argument that they refused to stay in the same house. It was in this awkward moment that God asked me to speak up. Praying for wisdom and the right words, I took Reema and her husband aside individually and said, “To follow the example of the blessed Prophet Ibrahim on this day, God is asking you to let go of something you are holding very tightly—your offense and refusal to forgive. But God has promised to provide you with something even better. Are you willing to believe the generous Sacrifice Giver and yield your hurt?” Two hours later, God had restored the relationship. Reema thanked me and said, “You’ve shown us what a true Muslim really is.” I know there is much more for Reema to learn about the Tremendous Sacrifice, but for now I have seen the Sacrifice at work in her life.

**Conclusion**

Building friendships with Muslim women in America can be a tremendous blessing to the Church. Our lives can be enriched by new friendships, our dependency on God tested and deepened as we regularly find ourselves “out of our depth,” and our understanding of God’s saving grace broadened. Working with Muslims will force us to re-evaluate our ways of thinking and show us blind spots in our theology, worship, concepts of church, etc. As our hearts are knit with our Muslim friends’ hearts, we will find ourselves doing whatever it takes to be prepared to together meet Jesus. However, of greater importance is the difference the gospel can make in the lives of Muslim women in America and Muslims as a whole throughout the world. The American church cannot afford to miss the opportunity to bring the gospel to this strategically important segment of society, recognizing the potential spiritual impact that Christ-filled Muslim women will have on their communities in the United States and even to the ends of the earth. Will we be
willing to respond to this challenge and follow God’s guidance in reaching Muslim women in America?

Works Cited


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