

Learn. Build Community. Hang Out.

city sundays and america's
islamic heritage museum

by Virginia Avniel Spatz

America's Islamic Heritage Museum (AIHM), in Historic Anacostia, shares the history of Muslims in America and promotes cross-cultural understanding around Islam. City Sundays, a new series of gatherings around town, is based in Islam, "open to all ethnicities, genders and faith traditions." The two entities are fostering a diverse, new worship community.

HISTORY AND MISSION

America's Islamic Heritage Museum is a project of the Ward 8-based nonprofit Collections & Stories of American Muslims, established by Amir Muhammad in 1996. AIHM has occupied the former Clara Muhammad School, itself a part of DC's Muslim history, since 2011. In addition to permanent and temporary exhibits the museum offers a variety of cultural programs.

AIHM is also the site of Islamic Relief USA community days. Muslim vol-



LSMYO (Lauren Schreiber and Muhammad Y. Oda), Community Day at AIHM, Oct. 11. Photo: Spatz

unteers from the greater DC area offer residents of Ward 8, and all who stop by, clothing and school supplies, nutrition support and medical screenings, warm meals, and entertainment. While information about Islam is available, and Muslim prayers are conducted inside during these outdoor events, the focus is not religion but neighborliness.

Religiously focused events are also held at the museum. City Sundays is an emerging ministry which meets there frequently. It is led by Muslim scholar Suhaib Webb and student chaplain Maggie Siddiqi, with a host of volunteers and a plan for collective decision-making. Webb hopes to gather Muslims who "feel in need of community that represents their social and religious context," welcoming fellow seekers interested in learning from an Islamic perspective.

City Sundays rotates between AIHM and other sites as part of a strategy to bridge communities, across quadrants and beyond. Varying location, Webb explains, presents "an opportunity for people from different ethnic and economic backgrounds to develop spiritual camaraderie."

EXTRA FABRIC NOT REQUIRED

City Sundays organizer Lauren Schreiber welcomed Oct. 25 participants to "learn, build community, and hang out." "Extra fabric is not required," Schreiber added, gesturing toward her headscarf. "Come as you are."

Welcoming all, AIHM encourages those who know little about Islam to participate in all its programs (and to join worship, if they so choose).

AIHM has no dress code. Still, fitting in is a common worry, Webb says. "People arriving tonight said, 'I don't think I dressed right,'" Webb told the crowd. "But those days are over."

Throughout the evening Webb stressed the importance of diversity and respect in Islam. The ultimate goal, he mentioned several times, is intimacy with the Divine, not any form of intimidation. The community's goal should be learning "based more on empathy than on who's right or wrong."

EMBRYONIC, ORGANIC MINISTRY

City Sundays does not center around "an orthodox religious service," Webb explains. This allows the "embryonic ministry" to engage people with a variety of backgrounds. Formal prayers can be intimidating, he adds, both to people of different traditions, who might "feel they're expected to know" what to do, and to Muslims who do not know how to perform the liturgy. Moreover, the new group does not want to begin by adopting a particular culture's approach to prayer.

The Oct. 25 gathering launched a new monthly series devoted to reading and explaining an Islamic text, community prayers, spoken word/art, and opportunities for networking and friendship. The first study text, the 9th century "Treatise for Seekers of Guidance," is Islamic, Webb notes, but the values are universal. Moreover, while Webb – a recognized scholar with degrees from the US and Egypt – plans to prepare materials for study, he encouraged participants to explore the text on their



City Sundays at America's Islamic Heritage Museum, Oct. 25. Photo: kicreativestudios.com



Imam Suhaib Webb addressing City Sundays, Oct. 25. Photo: kicreativestudios.com

own and to join with a small group of strangers for learning and discussion.

Siddiqi opened the program with an activity encouraging participants to learn one another's names and giving people an opportunity to share their reason for coming. General participation was encouraged throughout the evening. In a later interview Webb applauded spontaneous responses to his teaching and expressed delight at "that point - one we try to achieve - when the conversation shifted to two people in the audience addressing one another, separate from me."

In addition to the text study, Khalil Ismail, a Baltimore-based lyricist and vocal artist, shared several pieces with Islamic themes. A former student in the Clara Muhammad school, he had also organized the entertainment for the Oct. 11 community day and expressed gratitude to Amir Muhammad for bringing him back where he "started."

Ismail said later that he believes in music as an important medium for bringing people together. At the community day he watched music and the spoken word attract and unite non-Muslim locals and Muslims from a variety of communities. Through interfaith work he is convinced that "the language of music has the power to deliver otherwise difficult messages to the universe and aid in the efforts to increase understanding among races, tribes, and religions."

PRAYER AND RELATIONSHIPS

City Sundays gatherings are monthly now, with plans for more frequent meetings in the works. Meanwhile Webb and Siddiqi also hope to arrange opportunities for informal discussion and counseling.

After the Oct. 25 program many of the evening's 100-plus participants joined evening (Maghrib)

prayers. The formal Arabic service was conducted in traditional shoulder-to-shoulder lines, with male and female worshippers in separate rows. This was followed by a period of communal prayer, primarily in English.

Participants shared concerns ranging from individual - issues of health, family, and livelihood - to local, national, and international. Notably for Washington, supplications for conflict areas and crisis situations were short, apolitical, and to the prayerful point. Siddiqi led brief prayers for each concern in English and then closed with communal prayer in Arabic.

Webb told participants early in the evening that the goal of City Sundays is not to change the world or even the city, but to foster individual growth and build relationships. In a later interview he added that he envisions City Sundays as "a free zone, a safe place for participants to express themselves We're working on breaking down human barriers within our own community and hoping that will benefit the city, too."

The next City Sundays is Nov. 24, 7-9 p.m., at Busboys and Poets, 1025 Fifth St. NW. Visit www.SuhaibWebb.com or find "City Sundays" on Facebook for more details.

America's Islamic Heritage Museum, 2315 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE, is open Tuesday-Saturday, 11:00 a.m.-5:30 p.m., and Sundays 12:00-5:00 p.m. Visit AIHMuseum.org or call 202-610-0586 for details on exhibits and events.

Virginia Avniel Spatz participates in a range of Jewish and other worship communities. She participated in the Hartford (Ct.) Seminary's "Building Abrahamic Partnerships" program and has worked on interfaith and inter-denominational projects. She blogs on faith topics at songeveryday.org. ♦

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