EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE MUSLIM AMERICAN SOCIETY AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, ESPECIALLY THROUGH THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDIGENOUS MUSLIM AMERICANS

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this age of intense polarization between liberal freedom and political correctness, on the one hand, and the demagoguery of religious extremists and politicians, on the other hand, there is unending argument, strife, and brinkmanship threatening the peace of our civil society. Religion is frequently used to polarize parties instead of bringing humanity together and invoking the better angels of human nature. Rather than helping bring agreement via dialogue, religion is used to create enemies. Religion is being used to wage war and evoke fears instead of establishing peace and building fruitful alliances. Interfaith dialogue represents a meaningful way to bring parties together peacefully in a way that resolves conflicts and creates friendships. Additionally, interfaith dialogue allows for spiritual sharing and spiritual companionship which opens pathways of communication that lead to opportunities for greater mutual respect and shared understanding.

A July 2004 Special Report by the United States Institute of Peace presents a method for evaluating interfaith dialogue programs. It suggests a theory of social
change whereby teachers involved in dialogue can impact change in the society.¹ This thesis will test this hypothesis by conducting an analysis of interfaith dialogue between The Muslim American Society and The Catholic Church, especially through the Focolare Movement. The Muslim American Society was the name of the largest indigenous Muslim American community led by the late Muslim leader, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed.² Focolare is an international Catholic and predominantly lay community founded and led by the late renowned leader, Chiara Lubich. Specifically, this thesis will apply the suggested analysis to assess and evaluate the meetings and interfaith dialogue between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and his associates.

The foundational concept for this thesis is to analyze material resulting from this dialogue drawn from articles reporting and evaluating the meetings of the dialogues and from the testimonials of the participants. This analysis will allow scholars to understand why the dialogue was successful. Specifically, source materials for this thesis are drawn from articles written that historically document the meetings, programs, speeches, and nature of the relationship between the Imam, his associates, and different representatives of the Catholic Church. A number of the articles are written by my thesis mentor, John Borelli. Additional sources include articles from


² Muslim American Society was the name of the community association of Muslim American mosques led by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed at the time of the interfaith dialogues, which are the subject of this research. After a naming dispute with an unrelated non-profit organization, Imam Mohammed formally changed the name to the American Society of Muslims.
Muslim Journal, transcripts of lectures by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, interviews of participants, as well as those who participated in subsequent interfaith dialogues between the communities. Using the special report of the United States Institute of Peace to provide a methodology for evaluation, this thesis will apply this analytical method to the various meetings and dialogues between the two general parties. Conclusions and implications will be drawn from the analysis.

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3 These were informal interviews conducted with verbal consent from the participants. The verbal consents included how the participants wished to be identified. Edited transcripts of these interviews are found in the appendices.
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Thank you,

Tariq S. Najee-ullah
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INTRODUCTION

In this age of intense polarization between liberal freedom and political correctness, on the one hand, and the demagoguery of religious extremists and politicians, on the other hand, there is unending argument, strife, and brinkmanship threatening the peace of our civil society. Religion is frequently used to polarize parties instead of bringing humanity together and invoking the better angels of human nature. Rather than helping bring agreement via dialogue, religion is used to create enemies. Religion is being used to wage war and evoke fears instead of establishing peace and building fruitful alliances. Interfaith dialogue represents a meaningful way to bring parties together peacefully in a way that resolves conflicts and creates friendships. Additionally, interfaith dialogue allows for spiritual sharing and spiritual companionship which opens pathways of communication that lead to opportunities for greater mutual respect and shared understanding.

The late leader of the Muslim American Society, prominent religious scholar, and philosophical theologian, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (1933-2008), was among the most important figures regarding establishing Al-Islam in America for the last hundred years.\(^1\) While he is most well-known for bringing the largest contingent

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\(^1\) Muslim American Society was the name of the community association of Muslim American mosques led by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed at the time of the interfaith dialogues, which are the subject of this research. After a naming dispute with an unrelated non-profit organization, Imam Mohammed formally changed the name to the American Society of Muslims. In September 2003, Imam Mohammed resigned as the leader of the American Society of Muslims. He continued to teach through his Chicago-based ministry and charitable organization, The Mosque Cares until his death in September 2008. Today, the Mosque Cares is led by Imam Mohammed’s son, Wallace Mohammed II. Wallace Mohammed II continues the annual conventions, programs, and charitable works of his father. In addition to supporting these annual efforts, the community formally known as the American Society of Muslims now operates as an independent association mosques. Today, there is national regionally-based
of African Americans into the mainstream Muslim community worldwide, his impact on American Islamic culture is immeasurable. He laid much of the foundation for what Muslim immigrants to America and their descendants are now beginning to embrace more regularly today in response to the intensely xenophobic political climate of what the media designates as “Trump’s America.” What is lesser known is that beginning in 1995, Imam Mohammed did something astounding and profound in the world of interfaith dialogue. Imam Mohammed, along with key members in his association, began building a relationship with the Catholic Church that would culminate in a highly visible relationship with Pope John Paul II.

In early twentieth century, the Catholic Church had a history of favorable and respectful scholarship relating to Islam and Muslims. After the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Church softened its messaging and began direct outreach to Muslims worldwide. The series of meetings and dialogues with the Muslim American Society was one of the most successful connections made with Muslim Americans at that time. Relationships were established between the Muslim American Society and various organizations within the Catholic Church including the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Relations. Relationships were also established with Catholic lay communities, especially the Focolare Movement. The Focolare Movement,

leadership. Consensus is generated by a body of Imams and representatives called the Convenors of Imams Associated with the Community of Imam W. Deen Mohammed. This group of Imams and representatives make press releases, statements, community announcements regarding religious holidays, and convenes to address community concerns.
founded by the late Chiara Lubich, was the most significant burgeoning relationship. The groundbreaking interfaith meetings conducted over this five-year period have yet to be academically researched and evaluated fully.

A July 2004 Special Report by the United States Institute of Peace presents a method for evaluating interfaith dialogue programs. It suggests a theory of social change whereby teachers involved in dialogue can impact change in the society. This thesis will test this hypothesis by conducting an analysis of interfaith dialogue between the Muslim American Society and the Catholic Church, especially through the Focolare Movement. Focolare is an international Catholic and predominantly lay community founded and led by the late renowned leader, Chiara Lubich. Specifically, this thesis will apply the suggested analysis to assess and evaluate the meetings and interfaith dialogue between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and his associates.

**Review of Related Literature**

The foundational concept for this thesis is to analyze material resulting from this dialogue drawn from articles reporting and evaluating the meetings of the dialogues and from the testimonials of the participants. This analysis will allow scholars to understand why the dialogue was successful. Specifically, source materials for this thesis are drawn from articles written that historically document the meetings, programs, speeches, and nature of the relationship between the Imam, his associates,

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and different representatives of the Catholic Church. A number of the articles are written by my thesis mentor, John Borelli. Additional sources include articles from Muslim Journal, transcripts of lectures by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, interviews of participants, as well as those who participated in subsequent interfaith dialogues between the communities.³

**Procedure**

Our thesis, based on this research, is interfaith dialogue can create lasting positive relationships across faith communities based on spiritual sharing and spiritual companionship. Our research tests this hypothesis by conducting an evaluation of the impact of interfaith dialogue between the Muslim American Society, the Catholic Church, especially the Focolare Movement based on articles written documenting the meetings, programs, speeches, and nature of the relationship between the Muslim American Society and different representatives of the Catholic Church including Focolare. Using the special report of the United States Institute of Peace to provide a methodology for evaluation, this thesis will apply this analytical method to the various meetings and dialogues between the two general parties. Conclusions and implications will be drawn from the analysis.

Specifically, the research methodology will apply the analysis to assess and evaluate the meetings and interfaith dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. In order to measure accurately the impact and

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³ These were informal interviews conducted with verbal consent from the participants. The verbal consents included how the participants wished to be identified. Edited transcripts of these interviews are found in the appendices.
effectiveness of these dialogues, qualitative research questions were developed based on the July 2004 Special Report by the United States Institute of Peace and best practices of the latest qualitative research and evaluation methods.

After reviewing relevant literature on the subject matter, it was determined that the focus of the research should be on prominent members of the indigenous Muslim American community of Imam W. D. Mohammed since very little had been written from this perspective in academic publications. Five well known members of the indigenous Muslim American community of Imam W. D. Mohammed were interviewed. They agreed to have their interviews recorded and transcribed for research purposes. The transcripts were coded and evaluated to provide results and conclusions that measured the impact and effectiveness of the dialogue. Future implications of the research was also considered.

Interviews were conducted with Imam Earl El-Amin, Imam Ronald Shaheed, the late Sister Amatullah Sharif, Sister Laila Muhammad, and Dr. Mikal Ramadan. Using the special report of the United States Institute of Peace to provide a methodology for evaluation, this thesis will apply this analytical method to the various meetings and dialogues between the two general parties. Conclusions and implications will be drawn from the analysis.

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4 These were informal interviews conducted with verbal consent from the participants. The verbal consent included how the participants wished to be identified. Edited transcripts of these interviews are found in the appendices.
CHAPTER 1
HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR CATHOLIC-MUSLIM RELATIONS

This chapter provides a brief history of the evolution of the Catholic Church’s views on engaging with Muslims in the twentieth century. This chapter also provides a historical context and background of the community of African Americans that would become the Muslim members of the future Muslim American Society. In doing so, this chapter offers a brief historical narrative of time spanning the arrival of enslaved West Africans in America with a focus on the lives and conditions of African Americans in the twentieth century. This narrative also addresses aspects of the freedom struggle of enslaved Africans, the Civil Rights Movement, and other efforts for liberation towards realizing greater freedoms for African Americans. Additionally, this chapter briefly discusses the history of African American Catholic communities in America. Finally, this chapter points to the significant foundation for future dialogue provided by the Catholic Church’s groundbreaking Second Vatican Council. Vatican II would prove to be a landmark in shaping the future of Catholic-Muslim relationships.

The Islamic Genetic Memory among Enslaved Africans in America

African Americans arrived in the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which enslaved ten million plus Africans and subjugated them to the peculiar institution of slavery in the Western European colonies in the Americas and
Caribbean.\(^1\) Allan Austin projected that at least ten percent of the enslaved were West African Muslims.\(^2\) African Muslims enslaved in the Americas brought with them a rich legacy of religious, cultural and literary traditions and traces of advanced civilizations.\(^3\) According to Rudolph Ware, there was a rich legacy of Islamic education, “embodied knowledge,” and a sense of history that survived the slave trade and continues to thrive in West Africa today.\(^4\) Embodied knowledge is a term Ware uses to describe the West African classical Islamic tradition that true knowledge is held in the human body as a flesh made Word in contrast to the Christian teaching of Word being made flesh through Jesus Christ.\(^5\) This Muslim legacy found its way into the culture of enslaved Africans in various forms based on findings from both Austin and Diouf.

In many ways, there existed an Islamic “genetic memory” that survived subconsciously amongst the descendants of the enslaved Africans even after memories of West African Islamic culture had long passed. For examples, the highest priority to education for the future as well as the collective community responsibility for


\(^5\) Ibid., 253-254.
education maybe an innate legacy from the West African Qur’an schools and Islamic institutions. This cultural tradition survived in the establishment of the Negro normal schools, historically black colleges and universities, and the community organs of financial support for these institutions, such as, the “Black church,” the United Negro College Fund, and other fundraising efforts that garner support from the collective community of African Americans even today.

Great Muslim abolitionists and revolutionary anti-colonist fighters of the Senegambia region, Sulaymaan Baal and Abdul Qadir Kan among others, established a genetic precedent of African religious teachers leading revolutionary movements. Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, later Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Elijah Muhammad continued in this same vein. In fact, many of the ideals embraced by educators, freedom fighters and civil rights leaders are similar to the ideals of the West African Muslim educational societies. There persisted a resiliency, efficacy and fearless determination to accomplish aims.

A Muslim legacy remains, perhaps inherited subconsciously by descendants of enslaved Africans in America. Author and scholar Sylviane Diouf writes, “Islam brought by enslaved West Africans has not survived. It has left traces; it has contributed to the culture and history of the continents; but its conscious practice is no

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6 Ibid., 242-254.
7 Ibid., 110-162.
8 Ibid., 110-162.
more.”

Diouf argues that the imbalance of men to women brought over during the slave trade, a war on literacy among slaves, and an aggressive suppression of tribal religious expression as reasons for this lack of conscious survival among descendants of enslaved African Muslims. Diouf also notes that while not explicitly Islam, many practices survived in the musical melodies, songs, spiritual rites, cultural rituals, words and phrases amongst descendants who practice Christianity, Vodun, Santeria, Candomble, and other rites.

Proto Islamic movements, like the Moorish Science Temple of Noble Drew Ali in 1913 and the Temple of Islam by Master Fard Muhammad in 1931, led to Islamic revival among descendants of enslaved Africans in America. Their teachings would blend Islamic language and aspects of Islamic rituals with black liberation theology echoed in Biblical teachings that resonated with African America Negroes of the time. Diouf cautions against drawing a direct linear connection between the unconscious survival of derivative Islamic practices of enslaved West Africans and theses proto Islamic movements as “no hard evidence so far shows any direct connection between the two groups.”

Intangible connections and similarities are apparent between the enslaved African Muslims of the past and the African American Muslims today, such as the presence of a tenacious spirit and determination for community success,

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10 Ibid., 252-257.

11 Ibid., 259-274.

12 Ibid., 278-279.
relentless pursuit of independent education, striving to retain identity despite dire circumstance, and even the presence of veiled women and turban wearing men. ¹³ Even so, no clear correlation between the blood descendants of the known enslaved West African Muslims and African Americans that joined these early movements can be clearly historically demonstrated. ¹⁴

**Enslaved Africans Experiences with American Christianity**

As Diouf notes, Africans were early and significant members of the Church since Christ Jesus walked and preached in ancient Palestine. Early Coptic and Ethiopian Christians were responsible for preserving much of the early Gospels and sacred traditions that were at risk during Roman prosecutions of the early Christian Church. Stories of African Christians, monastics, and holy men and women constitute early historical writings. Christianity spread southward from Ethiopia into parts of West Africa through trade and various expeditions. It is evident that West Africans had a familiarity with Christianity and the existence of African Christian communities. West African communities held strong spiritual and religious beliefs manifested in their cultural traditions. This deeply religious devotion was even evident in the community of enslaved Africans who populated American plantations. On the plantations, enslaved Africans expressed a rich blend of sacred religious traditions with The Christian religious practices they were often forced to adopt in America. Rich Negro

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¹³ Ibid., 277-283.

¹⁴ Ibid., 277-283.
spirituals embodied historic rhythmic West African chants and dhikrs, but now expressed in English.  

This mixing of African spiritual expression through Biblical Christian theology was best embodied in the black preacher. Accompanying the preacher were musicians or singers drawing the congregation into lively hymns. Plantation owners used the leadership of the black preacher to quell rebellions, to maintain order, and to provide spiritual instruction that demanded strict obedience of slaves to their earthly masters. As black preachers grew in their understanding of the Bible, it sparked a desire for justice, freedom, and rebellion against their oppressors. The infamous Nat Turner insurrection, the most well-known slave revolt in American history, was led by the black preacher Nat Turner. Black Christianity produced a type of liberation theology that contributed to the protest movement and would later fuel the civil rights movement.  

**African Americans and the Catholic Church: A Brief History**

Having been primarily evangelized by Protestants, the majority of the enslaved Africans embraced Protestant denominations of Christianity. What is not often discussed is the significant black Catholic community which started with the enslaved Africans in America.  

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15 Ibid., 259-274.


Catholic Lord presided over Maryland. Catholic planters in the colony purchased enslaved Africans to work their plantations. Jesuit priests, inspired by Saint Peter Claver’s work with enslaved Africans in Colombia, sought to convert the enslaved to Catholicism. Georgetown University was founded by the first bishop of Baltimore, John Carroll. Many of Georgetown’s enslaved Africans embraced the Catholic faith.

Catholic faith thrived in Georgetown’s community of free blacks. Slave owners who allowed their slaves both self-manumission and opportunities to earn personal funds, by hiring themselves out to others for pay, created avenues for some slaves to earn enough funds to buy their freedom. After securing freedom, free blacks would remain in the area as skilled laborers for hire earning enough money to purchase the freedom of their family members. Significant pre-Civil War era communities of free blacks existed in Baltimore, Georgetown, New Orleans, and Saint Louis among other Catholic colonies. Saint Augustine’s Parish, in Washington DC, was founded in 1858 by a Catholic community of free blacks and is one of the oldest black parishes in the United States.

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19 Ibid., 5-36.

Benedictine Fr. Cyprian Davis, primary author of black Catholic history, left a tremendous legacy of work and literature at the time of his passing in May 2015. In his article, “Brothers and Sisters To Us: The Never-Ending Story,” published in *America*, Fr. Davis discussed the emergence of a “congress movement” of black Catholics at the end of the nineteenth century. Lincoln Charles Vallé, a Negro Catholic, had written an article for *America* in 1924 entitled “The Catholic Church and the Negro.” In it, Vallé described the struggle of the fledgling black Catholic community for support from the institutional Catholic Church for the development and acceptance of black Catholic leadership for Negros and a commitment to evangelize freed Negros in America.

Although passionately argued for by Vallé, his dreams of a blossoming black Catholic community with black leadership and even with its own rite was never to be realized during Vallé’s lifetime. Davis’ article highlights this aspect in “the never-ending story” portion of his title. Quoting John Deedy, Davis wrote:

The American Catholic Church did not leave its mark on the civil rights movement, but neither did its failures cost the church the interest or loyalties of

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23 Ibid., 319-21, 334.

24 Ibid., 319-21, 334.

25 Ibid., 319-21, 334.
the American black. It never had them… (it) had never particularly concerned itself with the American black.  

While this may have been the vantage point of white Catholics historically, Davis notes that blacks have been a part of Catholic American history since the Spanish, French, and English Catholics settled in Florida, Maryland, Louisiana, and southwest America. This community of black Catholics has grown in America. In fact, Davis notes that Vallé’s dream did eventually come to light in the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, a fraternal organization of black priests. 

This history is not without its tensions. As a case study, Davis discussed the story of the Catholic Imani Temple at Anacostia in Washington, DC, founded by Father George Stallings in 1989. Fr. Stallings, an ordained priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, established the Imani Temple as a new parish, but without official approval. Fr. Stallings was actually exemplifying the same spirit of earlier black Catholic leaders like Vallé who had sought the establishment of their own African American rite or “semi-autonomous jurisdiction for black Catholics in the United States, a church united to Rome but with its own hierarchy.” In addition, Davis wrote, “the notion of a bishop with nationwide jurisdiction over black Catholics had first been suggested at the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866.” 

Washington’s Saint Augustine Parish, Baltimore’s Saint Peter Claver Parrish, and New

26 Ibid., 319-21, 334.
27 Ibid., 319-21, 334.
28 Ibid., 319-21, 334.
29 Ibid., 319-21, 334.
Orleans’ Knight of Peter Claver are all pivotal historic communities for black Catholics in America.\(^{30}\) A point worth noting is how all this reflects the consistent powerful human drive for freedom of spiritual and religious expression, autonomy, self-governance and independence among African Americans. This is a common thread in African American religious communities in America, among black Catholics, black Protestants, and black Muslims.

Keeping in mind the theme of interfaith dialogue as it relates to the thesis, note the attitude of Catholic Paulist founder Isaac Hecker during this time period towards Muslims. Hecker visited Egypt and was briefly exposed to Muslims and Islam during his Nile river voyage circa 1873.\(^{31}\) According to his written journal, Hecker noted that:

> The Arabs have a gift for prayer. We Christians might learn from them a lesson on this point and not asmall one either. For prayer is the beginning of all other graces…For these Arabs whom we have learned to despise pray at all times, in whatever they do, whetherin the shops, or on the vessel, or in the streets, or on the banks of the river; anywhere and at all times you will see them kneel down, rise, prostrate their foreheads against the earth or floor, sit on their heels with their arms resting on their knees and their faces turned toward Mecca and their eyes up to heaven.\(^{32}\)

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His journal writings also note that Hecker read his copy of the Qur’an while on this journey through Egypt.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{African Americans in the Twentieth Century: Social Conditions, Civil Rights Movement}

Between the time that Isaac Hecker was reading his Qur’an on the Nile river in 1873 and the election of Pope Paul VI in 1963, African Americans were experiencing quite a difficult time in the United States of America.\textsuperscript{34} They were grappling with what scholar W. E. B. DuBois coined “The Negro Problem.”\textsuperscript{35} Enslaved Africans in the states in rebellion against America were freed by President Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and the subsequent 1865 Union victory over the Confederate army ending the Civil War.\textsuperscript{36} All slaves in the United States were freed by passage of the thirteenth amendment.\textsuperscript{37}

The end of slavery did greatly improve the immediate conditions of formerly enslaved Africans in America and their descendants.\textsuperscript{38} However, after the brief reconstruction period, the horrors of unjust sharecropping, debt peonage, voter disenfranchisement, murderous lynching, and racial terrorism by the Ku Klux Klan

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Du Bois W. E. B., \textit{The souls of black folk: essays and sketches} (Fawcett Books, 1961), 1-5.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Franklin, \textit{From Slavery to Freedom}, 208.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 218.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 221-246.
\end{itemize}
plagued the community. Additionally, the terrible crimes of rape, murder, and wanton destruction of property, denial of human rights, and violation of every sense of human dignity became routine in the lives of the newly freed African Americans. 

In addition to the injustices of slavery and later segregation, African Americans also endured brutal dehumanization through a type of psychological propaganda based on widely held false stereotypes about their inherent laziness, incompetence, criminality, brutality, savageness, dim-witted intellect, and a subhuman essence. Blanket stereotypes reinforced by the pseudo-sciences of eugenics were used to legitimize both the institution of slavery and institutional segregation. Internationally acclaimed writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, succinctly summed up the many injustices suffered by descendants of enslaved Africans in America in this statement from his acclaimed article on reparations in *The Atlantic*:

250 years of slavery. 90 years of Jim Crow. 60 years of separate but equal. 35 years of state-sanctioned redlining. Until we reckon with the compounding moral debts of our ancestors, America will never be whole.

African Americans, called Negros, turned to faith for strength during these difficult times. During slavery, apart from the few years after the Nat Turner slave

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39 Ibid., 247-263.

40 Ibid., 247-263.


42 Ibid.

revolt, African American preachers could preach to their black congregations, often with a white man from the plantations in attendance.\textsuperscript{44} The black church eventually developed into a pillar of African American life and the fight for freedom. From abolitionists Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman to educators Booker T. Washington and Mary McCloud Bethune, many African American leaders were inspired by their faith to rise up and seek justice.\textsuperscript{45}

A “Great Migration” of thousands of Negros to the North, fleeing southern lynching and repression in addition to seeking better job opportunities, before and after World War I, created racial problems in the northern states.\textsuperscript{46} Even though both the north and south offered little refuge from racial discrimination and poor treatment for Negros, African Americans could find jobs in the northern cities as Pullman porters, factory workers, and other labor jobs. This lead to a substantial middle class of African Americans and expanding opportunities for greater education and stability for an increasing number of African Americans.\textsuperscript{47} These professionally trained African Americans began working towards legal solutions to their suffering and unjust treatment.\textsuperscript{48} Baltimore attorney, Thurgood Marshall, led a team of lawyers advocating for Civil Rights of African Americans in a series of legal cases throughout

\textsuperscript{44} Franklin, \textit{From Slavery to Freedom}, 136.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 264-294.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 383.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 381-425.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 464-468, 492-499.
the country. At the same time, African Americans, in their churches and local communities, were organizing themselves to resist racial discrimination. This resistance took many forms including non-violent resistance, political agitation, and eventually separatist Black Nationalist movements. Formal and informal organizations followed various avenues in pursuit of justice. These groups included W. E. B. DuBois’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), Ida B. Wells anti-lynching campaign, A. Phillip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, James Farmer’s Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.), and many others.49

Dr. Martin Luther King was perhaps the best and most well-known American figure of the Civil Rights Era. He gained international acclaim, having won the Nobel Peace Prize on October 14, 1964.50 Pope Paul VI received Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in audience at the Vatican on September 18, 1964. This was a shift for the Church, as previously, the Church had tried to stay away from provocative national movements. 51

Pope Paul VI and The Second Vatican Council

After his election, Pope Paul VI set a tone almost immediately for the direction Vatican II would take moving from its first year into the remaining three years that it

49 Ibid., 464-468, 492-499.

50 Ibid., 495-497.

would meet. In his initial address to the Fathers of Vatican Council II in Rome, September 29, 1963, Pope Paul VI stated the following with regard to a new Esteem for other religions:

The Catholic Church looks into the distance, beyond the confines of the Christian horizon;…Look therefore beyond your own sphere and observe those other religions that uphold the meaning and the concept of God as one, creator, provident, most high, and transcendent, that worship God with acts of sincere piety and upon whose beliefs and practices the principles of moral and social life are founded….the Catholic religion holds in just regard all that which in them is true, good, and human. Moreover, in order to preserve religious sentiment and the worship of God in modern culture – the duty and need of a true civilization – she is in the forefront as the most valid supporter of the rights of God over humanity.52

After the next session of the council unfolded, for the setting of his next message, Pope Paul VI visited The Holy Land in the village of Bethlehem, where the Gospel says Jesus was born. In January 1964, Pope Paul VI was the first sitting Pope to do so ever. In this sacred land, Pope Paul VI issued his “Message to the World” which expounded on his earlier sentiments. In the sections titled “Mission of Friendship” and “A Greeting to Those Who Profess Monotheism,” Pope Paul VI stated:

This means that the mission of Christianity is a mission of friendship in the midst of humanity, a mission of understanding, of encouragement, of promotion, of elevation, indeed of salvation We once again wish to affirm….We address this reverent greeting in particular to those who profess monotheism and with Us direct their religious worship to the one true God, most high and living, the God of Abraham, the supreme God…We Christians, informed by revelation, understand God as existing in the three Divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; however, we celebrate the divine nature as one, as

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one the living and true God. May these peoples, worshipers of the one God, also welcome Our best wishes for peace in justice.\textsuperscript{53}

In August 1964, before the third session of Vatican II began, in his encyclical \textit{Ecclesiam Suam}, Pope Paul VI stated, “Then [we refer] to the adorers of God according to the conception of monotheism, the Muslim religion especially, deserving of our admiration for all that is true and good in their worship of God.” \textit{Ecclesiam Suam} 107, (August 6, 1964).\textsuperscript{54}

Some of the most powerful explicit Catholic statements about Muslims are found in the pronouncements and documents from the Second Vatican Council.\textsuperscript{55} One portion of \textit{The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church} reads:

\begin{quote}
But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among whom are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day. \textit{Lumen gentium} 16, (November 21, 1964).\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

The most substantial statement is in the \textit{Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions}. The third section addresses relations with Muslims:

\begin{quote}
The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, who is living and subsisting in himself, merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth… In the course of centuries there have indeed arisen not a few quarrels and hostilities between Christians and Muslims. But now this Sacred Synod pleads with all to forget the past, to make sincere efforts for mutual understanding, and so to work together for the preservation and
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[Ibid.]\textsuperscript{53}
\item[Borelli, \textit{The Catholic Church and Islam}.]\textsuperscript{54}
\item[Ibid.]\textsuperscript{55}
\item[Ibid.]\textsuperscript{56}
\end{footnotes}
fostering of social justice, moral welfare, and peace and freedom, for all humankind. Nostra aetate 3, dated (October 28, 1965).  

This movement was shared by other members in the Church. Indigenous bishops from Africa and Asia living as minority Christian communities in majority populations of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others urged the Second Vatican Council to include more favorable language regarding Non-Christian religions.  

In 1961, the Missionary of Africa, priest Josef Cuq, a specialist on the religion of Islam, established networks with other missionaries to give voice to interreligious interests.  

In November 1963, Father Georges Anawati, Dominican scholar from the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies in Cairo, lectured on “Islam at this Time in the Council” at the Roman Dominican college, Angelicum, while Vatican II was only beginning to address interreligious relations beyond Jewish relations.  

While interreligious dialogue was not the only focus, for the first time, the Church issued specific guidance on interreligious dialogue acknowledging Jews, Muslims, and others. This signaled a shift towards openness and interfaith dialogue with non-Christian faith communities all over the world.  

What began with Pope John XXXIII for Vatican II to heal relations among Christians expanded with Pope Paul VI

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58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Borelli, The Catholic Church and Islam.
to reconciliation with members of other religions. The fullest and most recent account of these interreligious developments at Vatican II is by John Borelli.  

**The Black Muslim Movement: The Nation of Islam, Hon. Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali**

Dr. King, Thurgood Marshall, the N.A.A.C.P., the “Black Church,” and the Civil Rights leaders pursued non-violent resistance through legislation, marching, and appealing to the goodness in European American whites. While this approach appealed to many professionally educated, middle class blacks and many whites, working class African American community felt that these methods were too timid for the blatant, violent injustices and too slow for results. During the depression era, a marginal number of these discontented blacks chose Communism as the political vehicle to voice their discontent with the poor treatment African Americans received. Communist political efforts failed to ever gain significant traction with the majority of African Americans. There were still other African Americans that felt that the mainstream efforts of leaders like Dr. King did not represent them and sought religious organizations as a refuge.

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64 This interesting movement among African Americans is another story but not immediately relevant to this thesis. See Franklin, 387-389.

65 Ibid., 387-389.
Commenting on the religious organizations appealing to this class of “disinherited” blacks during the Civil Rights era, historian John Hope Franklin wrote, “as far as new religious institutions in the postwar years were concerned, none attracted more outside attention or more dramatically pointed up the theme of African-American alienation than the Nation of Islam.” The Nation had emerged as a religious movement of significant influence despite the relatively small size of its following in comparison to the population of African Americans of that time. While his disciple Malcolm X would later gain an international reputation as the national spokesman for the “Black Muslim” movement, the driving force behind the Nation of Islam was a small statured man from Sandersville, Georgia who was born Elijah Poole, later renamed Elijah Muhammad by the group’s mysterious founder Fard Muhammad. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad led the Nation of Islam pushing a militant program of self-reliance, economic independence, and racial separation as the saving grace for black people of America in response to white racism.

Television journalist Mike Wallace introduced the Nation of Islam to America in a special television program titled, The Hate That Hate Produced. In the 1959 five part New York public television broadcast, Newsbeat misrepresented Elijah

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66 Ibid., 424-425.

Muhammad as a cult leader who preached hatred and violence.\footnote{Michael Saahir, \textit{The Honorable Elijah Muhammad: The Man Behind the Men} (Indianapolis, IN: Words Make People Pub., 2011), 36, 264.} His teachings advocated racial separation as the only solution for America’s race problem. He taught that white people were a race of devils which could not be trusted to solve the race problem.\footnote{Ibid., 264-275.} The rhetoric of Elijah Muhammad’s message was perceived as inflammatory and hateful by whites and blacks alike. However, a closer look at Elijah Muhammad’s actual teachings, when studied and taken in their historical context, reveals that Elijah Muhammad was not a man of violence, but a man of non-violence.\footnote{Ibid., 264-275.}

First, Elijah Muhammad was not the author of his theology or strategy to challenge the American system of racial prejudice and injustice. Elijah Poole was introduced to this Black Islamic theology by a teacher with an ambiguous past in Detroit, Michigan named W. D. Fard.\footnote{Ibid., 264-275.} Fard went by many names including Wallace, Fard Muhammad, and W. F. Muhammad. Elijah Poole was a sincere believer in everything that Fard taught him. Fard renamed Elijah Poole Elijah Muhammad, and Elijah built the Nation of Islam. Fard deposited in Elijah a theological ideology that contained an aggressive social reform strategy coupled with a powerful commitment to the poor, the downtrodden, the uneducated, and the Great Depression era African Americans who had migrated North fleeing Southern persecution.\footnote{Ibid., 264-275.}
Second, the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, while provocative, were non-violent. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad once stated, “Not one of us will have to raise a sword. Not one gun would we need to fire. The great cannon that will be fired is our unity.” Elijah Muhammad established a paramilitary male membership unit, the Fruit of Islam, and taught them not to carry weapons or provoke violence. They were trained only for self-defense, not for offensive tactics. Elijah also taught Muslims not to fight in wars on behalf of White or Christian governments, but only for a holy war called by Allah. Later during the Vietnam era, Muhammad Ali would be vindicated by the Supreme Court for his refusing to be drafted into the U.S. Army on religious grounds, based on a review of these teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

Elijah Muhammad’s teachings were potent doses of self-help, positive self-image, and much needed self-esteem for the damaged psyche of descendants of enslaved Africans in America. Elijah Muhammad taught that the black man was a god; whites were the devil by nature; blacks should love themselves, love their skin, love their African hair, and love their own culture above embracing other races. These

73 Ibid., 264-275.
74 Ibid., 264-275.
76 Ibid., 179, 315-319.
messages were the exact opposite of those depicting black devilish inferiority, white angelic superiority, ugliness of black natural physical features, and supreme beauty of natural white physical features in film, media, and even in product marketing. Elijah’s teachings also counteracted society’s negative stereotypes of criminality, laziness, incompetence, ineptitude, and imbecility of all African Americans. 

At its height, the Nation of Islam boasted over 175 independently owned temples in the United States and the Caribbean, thousands of acres of farmland in Michigan and Georgia, an independently published national newspaper, numerous businesses, including restaurants, cleaners, bakeries, groceries, a trucking company, and hundreds of thousands of followers.

As the national spokesman for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Minister Malcolm X drew international press attention. Minister Malcolm was shrewd at promoting his message and the Nation as he knew how to couch his religious rhetoric in short provocative, Black Nationalist, political statements. Malcolm X broke with the movement shortly after making unauthorized insensitive comments regarding the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963. Malcolm later embraced the

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79 Ibid.


81 Malcolm X and Alex Haley, The autobiography of Malcolm X: with the assistance of Alex Haley; Foreword by Attallah Shabazz; Introduction by M.S. Handler; Epilogue by Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 238-250.
traditional teachings of orthodox Islam after making the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964.\textsuperscript{82}

Just as he began to get footing in his movement, Malcolm X, also known as El Hajj Malik Shabazz, was brutally murdered in February 1965 in New York City’s Audubon Ballroom.\textsuperscript{83} It was presumed that he was murdered by disgruntled members of the Nation of Islam.\textsuperscript{84} However, due to the heavy involvement of federal agents and other covert operatives in this age of J. Edgar Hoover’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), this point never been completely settled.\textsuperscript{85} The late historian Manning Marable raised this question of who actually was responsible for killing Malcolm most recently in his magnum opus on the life of Malcolm X, “Malcolm X, A Life of Reinvention.”\textsuperscript{86}

The Year 1965: The Raging Sixties, A Changing America

The year 1965 was a pivotal year which set a significant foundation for the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the African American Muslim community. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council was concluded by Pope Paul VI. Many important statements from the Church indicated a clear shift towards ecumenical and

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 348-365.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 470-480.
interreligious dialogue. The *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, the *Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae)*, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, and the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* firmly planted seeds of opportunity that would later bear fruit.  

While members of the Second Vatican Council would not have necessarily considered America’s “Black Muslims” in their pronouncements on Muslims in *Nostra Aetate*, their works would prove pivotal in establishing the framework that would bring members of this community into dialogue with the Catholic Church exactly thirty years later.

Conditions for African Americans were also changing for the better. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted by Congress. The law was the most comprehensive legal attempt at racial justice against discrimination in American history. The law opened new employment and educational opportunities for African Americans by establishing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), outlawing discrimination in federally funded programs, and allocated funding for assistance in desegregation of schools. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 also passed, providing federal protections against State disenfranchisement of African Americans voting

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87 Borelli, *The Catholic Church and Islam*.

88 Ibid.

89 Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*.

90 Ibid.
While African Americans made many gains, there was notable backlash from hardline southern European Americans that felt too much was changing all at once.\textsuperscript{92} Unfortunately, Congress’s enactment of the Civil Rights Act did not automatically change the deep seated racial attitudes in the country. Segregationists shifted from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party after this legislation was passed. The Republican Party embraced a new “southern strategy” which encouraged segregationists to join their movement.\textsuperscript{93} President Kennedy and Medgar Evers had been assassinated in 1963. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. Both Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated in 1968. Amidst the assassinations were violent riots in major urban cities throughout the country.\textsuperscript{94} Revolutionary militant groups like the Black Panthers sprouted during this time. America was amid a season of violent and radical change.\textsuperscript{95}

Despite the violence and turmoil, some African Americans began to fare well economically and politically.\textsuperscript{96} There were more black members of state legislatures

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
and the United States Congress. At the same time, the passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act in 1965 opened immigration to non-European nations, ending the discrimination based on national origin which had favored Western European migrants and excluded non-European immigrants. America’s exclusive black-white demographic would forever be changed. Many Muslims from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East would begin immigrating to America, changing the predominate Black Muslim narrative of the era. It is this American setting which sets the stage for Imam Warith Deen Mohammed to ascend as Chief Minister of the Nation of Islam.

97 Ibid.


99 Ibid.
CHAPTER 2
IMAM WARITH DEEN MOHAMMED,
A MAN OF PEACE AND DIALOGUE

In the first 100 days of his presidency, President Trump has put forward two restrictive travel ban, on immigrants to America from seven Muslim majority nations. According to Georgetown University’s Bridge Initiative, Islamophobia, hate crimes, and xenophobia have never been higher. Republican politicians have suggested the logical framework for such legislation and legal positions are for the benefit of America’s Homeland Security as a matter of safety, security and prevention of violence.\(^1\) Despite all of these efforts, ISIL, Al-Qaeda, and sympathizers with militant anti-United States so-called Islamic movements are still committed to strike terror and fear in the hearts of Western powers.

In this context, now more than ever, it is prudent to examine the benefits Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s leadership offers our current circumstances. Academically, approaching an intellectual leader of this magnitude is through examining his works, writings, as well as sharing what others have written about him. This author intends to provide accurate scholarship that is faithful to the original sources as well as to provide contemporary interpretations and insights that are appropriate, including this author’s interpretation of the most significant moments and events that are pertinent to this research and academic discussion at hand. This research paper examines the interfaith activities of the late Imam W. Deen Mohammed, also known as Wallace D.

\(^1\) Andrea Stone, "Peter King Schedules Fifth Muslim Radicalization Hearing," The Huffington Post, (last modified June 13, 2012).
Muhammad, while also seeking to understand how he viewed Islam, Muslims and non-Muslims.²

Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s visionary leadership and Qur’anic teaching transformed a social reform movement, with a non-violent yet radical Black Nationalist separatist ideology, into a community that now loves the virtues of America and strives to improve her shortcomings by actively participating in civic engagement, public service, social justice, interfaith relations, non-profit works and educational and business initiatives, and positively contributing to the greatness of America as a vibrant righteous Muslim religious community.

Raised Inside The Nation of Islam

*The New York Times* has reported that Imam Mohammed was the leader of the largest pluralistic religious community with a significantly important Muslim population in America with followers of his community “rang[ing] from 500,000 adherents to more than 2 million.”³ Mohammed was the seventh son of Elijah Muhammad, the master architect of the Nation of Islam. He was born, raised and educated in Elijah Muhammad’s movement, which taught Islamic self-reliance along with black supremacy and Black Nationalism.⁴ At its height, the Nation of Islam boasted over 175 temples in the United States and the Caribbean, thousands of acres of

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² Imam Mohammed publically stated that he changed the spelling of his last name from Muhammad to Mohammed because “Mohammed” is how it was spelled on his birth certificate.


⁴ *USA Today*, (September 9, 2008).
farmland in Michigan and Georgia, a self-published national newspaper, numerous businesses including restaurants, cleaners, bakeries, groceries, trucking company and hundreds of thousands of followers.\(^5\)

Mohammed was a friend and advisor to both Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. In the 1950s, while serving as the head minister in the Nation of Islam’s Philadelphia temple, fellow ministers noticed that his teachings differed from those of his father. Having learned Arabic from Jordanian, Palestinian, and other Muslim immigrant teachers in the Nation of Islam’s school, Muhammad’s University of Islam, Mohammed was able to study and read the Qur’an in Arabic. His teachings differed from Elijah Muhammad in that he did not teach that Master Fard Muhammad was divine. This led to his first excommunication from the Nation of Islam.

Wallace was jailed in Minnesota in 1961 for refusing induction into the United States armed forces for religious reasons seven years earlier, in 1954. The time away from the hectic life of a Muslim minister in prison allowed Wallace the freedom to study and develop his thoughts independently of the Nation of Islam.\(^6\) After his release from prison, Mohammed’s preaching continued to differ from his father’s teachings, which led to him being excommunicated again. Mohammed worked as a welder, cab driver, painter, and held other jobs during his excommunications from the Nation of Islam.

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Islam to support his family.\textsuperscript{7}

While working as a welder, Mohammed was invited by Muslim college students to perform the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Mohammed saved the needed funds and made the Hajj pilgrimage. At one of the Hajj sites, Arafat, Mohammed was summoned to meet with Pakistani Islamic reformer, Maulana Maududi. Maududi told his followers in Mohammed’s presence that Black Muslims in America were learning Islam independently and did not need to be confused by introducing them to foreign customs.\textsuperscript{8} This pilgrimage affirmed Mohammed’s thinking and his views of Islamic religious teaching.

After a period of excommunication, Mohammed returned to the Nation of Islam in late 1974 with the blessing of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. The sequence of events over the next few months seemed more like a dramatic movie script than actual fact. Elijah Muhammad had moved from his Chicago headquarters to Phoenix, Arizona, presumably for the health benefits of the warmer climate. Speculation about Elijah being in poor health had been circulating around for months. Elijah was expected to rebut these rumors with a strong showing during his public address at the Nation’s annual Savior’s Day convention scheduled for February 26, 1975 in Chicago.

In dramatic fashion, Elijah Muhammad passed away on the eve of February 25, 1975. In a closed council with Muhammad’s family, chief ministers and

\textsuperscript{7} New York Times, (September 10 2008).
\textsuperscript{8} Mohammed, Return to Innocence, 1-13.
representatives of the Nation of Islam, Wallace was selected as the Chief Minister of the Nation of Islam. Wallace Muhammad delivered a historic, strong, and powerful closing address of the Savior’s Day convention. Demonstrating unanimous support for his leadership, the chief ministers and national representatives of the Nation of Islam physically hoisted Wallace onto their shoulders after his speech. This symbolic passing of the torch of leadership to Minister Wallace garnered thunderous applause by all in attendance. Over the next three decades, Imam Mohammed worked diligently to re-orient the thinking of the Nation of Islam to be consistent with orthodox Islam.

**Gradual Movement Towards Mainstream Al-Islam**

The measured change in religious ideology from black supremacy and nationalism to embracing Islam’s international creed of universal brotherhood did not happen immediately. The process was slow and deliberate starting with re-educating the membership. In 1976, Chief Minister Mohammed introduced for all in the membership new mandatory lessons entitled *The Teachings of W.D. Muhammad*. Distributed throughout the temples and schools, these new lessons were impressively bound, hard cover text books with accompanying workbooks and versions for adults and children.

Between the pages of these texts were vivid cartoon illustrations that visually conveyed the meanings and messages of Imam Mohammed’s teaching. The illustrations introduced Arabic writing, emphasized the Holy Qur’an, universal brotherhood with all Muslims of the world, and the traditional observance of Ramadan.

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9 Ibid.
Not all these changes were new to the Nation of Islam. Members of the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad professed common brotherhood with Muslims of the East and observed the month of Ramadan in December. While Elijah Muhammad and his ministers had chiefly taught from the Bible, the Qur’an was held high as the Holy Book of the community. Imam Mohammed elevated the importance of the Qur’an and shifted the Nation of Islam’s observance of Ramadan to the appropriate Islamic lunar calendar month.

Organizational Challenges and Legal Problems

In 1975, the Nation of Islam was structured like a paramilitary organization complete with soldiers in the Fruit of Islam (FOI) and in Muslim Girls Training (MGT) regiments. These neatly uniformed units organized, trained, and disciplined new members once they were accepted officially into the Nation. While these organized regiments were essential for driving the success of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s economic program by selling newspapers, fish, etc., disgruntled temple ministers and FOI captains could potentially use their influence over their units to resist changes from headquarters in Chicago or to operate shadow operations that were not in line with national leadership. In a strategic move to eliminate these shadow operations, Imam Mohammed eliminated some of the mandatory requirements for the FOI and MGT. Once implemented, Mohammed’s strategy initially reduced the significance of the FOI and MGT, and then eventually disbanded the regiments.11

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At the time Imam Mohammed was making these structural changes, J. Edgar Hoover’s now publically known counter intelligence program (COINTELPRO) had fully infiltrated all areas of the Nation’s organization with informants. Although the FBI program officially ended in 1971, the gathered information, now available from the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the Freedom of Information Act, makes clear that these same tactics were still used to target groups that the FBI deemed subversive or threatening to the United States government.\(^{12}\) In addition to the FBI’s informants spying on him and the Nation of Islam, Mohammed also had to contend with jealous ministers and others who opposed his new direction for the Nation of Islam.

Elijah Muhammad had died without a will, and this created other problems for Imam Mohammed. According to reports, funds collected from all the Nation’s members were sent to the Chicago headquarters (Temple No. 2), and placed in an account for the “No. 2 Poor,” which had served as a general fund for the entire Nation of Islam. The fund also served as a charity for those in need among the “Lost Found” or general population of non-white people living in the wilderness of North America and around the globe.\(^{13}\) Shortly after the Honorable Elijah Muhammad passed away, Imam Mohammed and a few other descendants presented signed affidavits that these funds were not the personal property of Elijah Muhammad but belonged to the Nation

\(^{11}\) Ibid.


\(^{13}\) This author’s research shows the Nation of Islam had temples in the Caribbean as well as relationships with members in Central America, South America, and nations in Africa.
of Islam. Months later, other heirs challenged these affidavits contending in probate court that these funds were indeed Elijah’s personal property.14

**Early Progresses**

For the first fifteen years of his leadership, this probate battle would take its toll on the community. In addition to the aforementioned changes, Imam Mohammed introduced a new community flag, which replaced the previous star and crescent with an open Qur’an. The new flag clearly illustrated the new direction for the community. The background of the flag was red symbolizing the life blood of humanity. The center of the flag was an open Qur’an with the Muslim double witness of faith “There is No God but God and Muhammad is God’s messenger” written over the book’s binding in gold Arabic letters. Finally, the Qur’an’s open pages are drawn like rays of sunlight emanating from a horizon of a divine guiding light.15

To ensure the community’s focus remained on the Qur’an, Imam Mohammed even changed the language that the Nation of Islam used to describe themselves and African American people. He introduced the term “Bilalian” to replace “Negro,” “black” or “Afro-American.” He crafted the term “to free the minds of a people; to move beyond the trappings and limitations of colorism and racism; to enable them to see themselves as slave servants of God alone; to follow the moral arc of Bilal ibn

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15 Ibid.
In Islamic history, Bilal ibn Rabah was an enslaved Abyssinian, who embraced Islam, was freed by fellow Muslims, and became a close companion and preferred muezzin (prayer caller) of Muhammad the Prophet. Imam Mohammed believed Bilal’s story of liberation through Islam metaphorically paralleled the African American story.

Although the term “Bilalian” never fully caught on outside the community, Imam Mohammed changed the newspaper names from *Muhammad Speaks* to *Bilalian News* in 1976. Towards the end of 1976, Mohammed also changed the name of the Nation of Islam to the World Community of Islam in the West. This would be the first of many more name changes for the organization.

One of the more controversial changes was the lifting of the restriction that barred other races from attending the Nation of Islam, allowing whites to enter and embrace the faith. Although few did embrace initially, whites were no longer taught to be exclusively devils. Imam Mohammed taught that in scriptural language, the term devil was a mentality that could develop in any person regardless of race due to weak thinking, lies, deceit and immoral behavior.

Such drastic changes required constant education. Imam Mohammed increased the frequency of his lectures scheduling nationwide addresses almost weekly and utilizing live telephone hook-ups to connect the nationwide community. He often spoke for four or more hours at a time. A weekly radio show also spread the new

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message to an increasing audience as well. Publications soon followed as Imam Mohammed published *As the Light Shineth from the East* in 1980 and *Prayer and Al-Islam* in 1982. *As the Light Shineth* unlocked the mysterious symbols and esoteric language encoded in the Nation’s mythological teachings, while pointing the way to the Qur’an and Al-Islam as the sources of clear spiritual and moral guidance.\(^{17}\) *Prayer* introduced the community to the five daily Muslim prayers or *salat*. It is quite possible that this text was the first Muslim American Islamic jurisprudence text, a *fiqh* book, in the English language.

Imam Mohammed used his influence in the African American community to offer practical solutions to the social decay and moral decadence plaguing the black community. In 1977, he rallied with many national black leaders for a series of meetings, titled “C.R.U.C.I.A.L.,” to discuss the “crucial issues of drug addiction, violence, immorality and other forms of blight in African American communities.”\(^{18}\) These meetings culminated in a December 1977 audience with President Jimmy Carter to address these social concerns. Imam Mohammed was also able to impress upon President Carter the strength of his religious ideas and universal teachings of Al-Islam.\(^{19}\) He expressed to President Carter “that he saw his responsibility to

\(^{17}\) Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth*, 9-39.


\(^{19}\) Ibid.
government the same as he saw his responsibility to fathers and mothers in the community: ‘to call them back to spiritual development.’”

Such a meeting of a representative of the Nation of Islam with the President of the United States was not possible just two years earlier when the Nation of Islam was seen as separatist. In addition to religious changes, Imam Mohammed embraced American democracy and encouraged patriotism in a bicentennial address. While highlighting the spirit of universal human freedom in our nation’s founding documents, Mohammed was critical of the moral decadence and systemic abuses of democratic power by many political leaders. He preached civic participation, public service, and military service as a way to invest in the fabric of American society and hold leaders accountable.

In a clear departure from what the Nation of Islam taught previously, during the bicentennial year 1976, Imam Mohammed picked up the American flag while addressing the community and carried it through the mosque in Chicago. He instituted an annual parade and community celebration on the Fourth of July to be called “New World Patriotism Day.” These parades were interfaith and intercultural events, led my Mohammed, which included non-Muslims, Native Americans, Christian groups, labor unions and others.

Nationwide community observances were held in Chicago, Atlanta, Kansas City, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Miami, and Washington, DC. Each year

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20 Ibid.
themes were selected drawing attention to social ills affecting the African American community. The first New World Patriotism Day theme was “We Are at Peace With All People.” He added the American flag to the cover of the community newspaper. Mohammed later instituted community political initiatives such as the Coalition for Good Government and Muslim Political Action committees.

As a result of the meeting with President Carter, Al-Islam was added as the third official religion of the United States, in that it opened doors for Muslim chaplains in all branches of the Armed Forces, prison system and other federal systems. Community members were now free to pursue careers in the military, public service, law, politics, and state, local and federal governments. Community members’ contributions to the American political system resulted in members becoming the first Muslim mayors, judges, politicians, council persons, chaplains, servicemen, and eventually two Muslim United States Congressional Representatives.

Imam Mohammed also introduced traditional Islamic dietary requirements. After introducing the Qur’an and teaching prayers, Imam Mohammed organized the production of halal food from the Muslim farms. Imam Mohammed also encouraged taking on Arabic names from the Qur’an, especially names associated with attributes of

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21 Ibid.


23 Rasheed., Evolution of a Community, 10-33.

24 Ibid.
God. Louis Farrakhan became Abdul-Haleem Farrakhan. Minister Luther X became Na’im Akbar. The community became the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, and its members began observing the Muslim Friday jumu’ah prayer service and removed the chairs from the main temple. The institution of prayer brought in members from the international Muslim community, mostly immigrants who were no longer barred or reluctant to enter the African American mosques.

Eventually, some community members viewed Imam Mohammed’s continuing changes as abandonment of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s program and mission. Others saw the abandonment of the struggle for freedom, justice and equality for African American people in pursuit of alliances with foreign Muslims. To say that not everyone was happy would be an understatement.

In late 1977, Imam Abdul-Haleem Farrakhan left the community, embraced his former name and title, Minister Louis Farrakhan, and restarted his version of the Nation of Islam in an effort to ensure that all that Elijah Muhammad had worked so hard to establish was not going to be abandoned. Silas Muhammad also formed another Lost Found Nation of Islam that reflected his understanding of Elijah Muhammad’s teachings. There would be others who would leave the community at

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
one point or another to start their own effort, but Louis Farrakhan and Silas Muhammad were the most notable to restart efforts to reestablish the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

While some longtime members and supporters were becoming disenchanted with Imam Mohammed’s new vision, the transitioning community also faced other challenges. The organization of the Nation of Islam and its business administration had created a tremendous debt by the time Elijah Muhammad had passed. The centralized organization had many gaps, easily exploitable by those with access to funds or business profits. Imam Mohammed reorganized this centralized leadership structure by turning over control of many businesses and community temples to the community owners, managers and members who had been supporting these institutions. The probate case of Elijah Muhammad’s estate further complicated the redistribution of community property, authority, responsibility and accountability to local imams and community members at-large. In 1982, Judge Henry Budzinski overturned the ruling in favor of the heirs forcing forfeiture of all funds that had been previously released to the World Community of Islam in the West.

Many community properties and businesses were lost. Minister Farrakhan purchased a few of the homes of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and many other properties to prevent all from being lost. Some have suggested that a backdoor agreement with the heirs dissatisfied with the direction of Imam Mohammed’s

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 29.
leadership was a major reason for Farrakhan’s breaking from the community. This author’s research shows this is speculation that cannot be verified or substantiated.

Not one to lose hope or abandon his post, Imam Mohammed continued to forge ahead. He renamed the community to reflect the focus of his message during the transitional periods from Black Nationalist thinking to a universal, spiritual, religious community. The community name had changed from the Nation of Islam to World Community of Islam in the West to the American Muslim Mission. The community newspaper also changed from *Muhammad Speaks* to *Bilalian News* to the *American Muslim Journal* and finally to the *Muslim Journal.*

**Imam Mohammed Embraces Interfaith Dialogue**

Alongside these internal changes, Imam Warith Deen reached out to the interfaith community. Members of other religious groups were beginning to take notice of Imam Mohammed. The opening pages of *As the Light Shineth from the East* cites a quote from Dr. John Taylor of the World Council of Churches on Warith Deen Mohammed,

He stressed the need for interracial, intercultural, and interreligious encounter; he spoke of Islamic respect for Jesus, and expressed the hope that Christians would visit his Community for its new series of jubilees. He said that Christian and Muslims should together witness to religious values and that we should stop being concerned with labels, adding that he wanted to see Christians as better Christians and Muslims as better Muslims rather than trying to convert each other.33

32 Ibid.

33 Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth*, 1-3.
Senior Rabbi Joshua Haberman of Washington Hebrew Congregation said of Mohammed:

He called for cooperation instead of strife between Jewish, Christian, Muslim leaders and people. He called for cooperation with a common front against drunkenness, and against the ever progressive destruction of the family in the United States. And we are with him all the way in this fight. It’s our fight as well. We think that the combined moral power of the major faiths should be felt more in our society.  

Father Lawrence Parkhust, resident priest of Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Flint, Michigan spoke of Mohammed:

I believe that he is a genuine and vital religious leader … I believe that his power to do what he has done in such a short time is a power that comes from God. In lecture appearances all over the world, he has stated his strong resistance to any form of leadership that hides the truth and rips off the people…He has managed to help change much in the attitude of those who would deny proper opportunity to women today. He shows how our common faith is one that commands us to stand against political or religious injustice or disservice to truth in whatever form. He is a sign of our times, a sign of the direction in which God is leading us all.

Imam Mohammed Challenged Racial Religious Thinking with C.R.A.I.D.

Much more can be said about the interfaith efforts of Imam Mohammed. During the “Ethnic Survival” and “C.R.U.C.I.A.L” series of meetings in 1977 with other African American leaders, Imam Mohammed focused on addressing “ancient scriptural symbolism and its effect on modern-day scriptural and religious interpretation.” Furthermore, he elaborated on how “colors in scripture triggered

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
racist influences in religious society.”

In his discussion of images in religion and racism, Imam Warith Deen expressed, “the strongest wedge between non-Caucasians and Caucasians is a Caucasian image of God on the cross.”

Imam Mohammed moved to Oakland, California, as head of the newly named American Muslim Mission. As “Chief Imam,” Mohammed was focused on *dawah*, meaning the teaching and propagation of Al-Islam through preaching and example.

Momentum built from his earlier efforts had led to the development of the “Committee for the Removal of All Images that attempt to portray Divine” (C.R.A.I.D.). This was the first major community-wide interfaith effort. Major C.R.A.I.D. rallies were held all over the country.

The result of the C.R.A.I.D. efforts was opening of conversations with many African American church leaders. Distinguished Psychologist, Na’im Akbar, then founder and head of the Office of Human Development for the Nation of Islam, promoted these ideas to the Association of Black Psychologists. This eventually

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
resulted in passage of an official resolution by the Association on the negative psychological effects of racial images of the divine.\textsuperscript{43}

At the height of the efforts, many black church leaders did remove racial images of God from their churches.\textsuperscript{44} Some replaced the Caucasian images of Jesus with an African American image of Jesus while others simply refused. Mohammed used this initiative to address deep seated stigmas around race, religious imagery, and sacred symbolism. He also further educated African Americans about authentic Islamic teachings on race, images, and the community’s views on these topics. Overzealous members were more confrontational in their promotion of CRAID which greatly differed from Mohammed’s intended approach. For a number of reasons, the C.R.A.I.D. efforts disbanded after 1984.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{An Ever Growing Community}

After losing the probate court battle, Imam Mohammed returned to the collective efforts in economics programs that more closely mirrored his father’s efforts. Unlike the Nation of Islam’s No. 2 poor fund, the American Muslim Mission Committee to purchase One-hundred thousand commodities Plus (AMMCOP) was established to pool community resources in several local chapters.\textsuperscript{46} The move to transfer masjid administrative duties and responsibilities to local imams allowed Imam

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Rasheed., \textit{Evolution of a Community}, 10-30.

\textsuperscript{45} Mohammed, S., “The C.R.A.I.D. Committee of Atlanta” (video), 1983.

\textsuperscript{46} Rasheed., \textit{Evolution of a Community} 29-31.
Mohammed to propagate his message broadly.  

Imam Warith Deen declared “the key to economic development is getting your life in order.” He encouraged personal responsibility and “the need to reflect critically on one’s situation and address it with the best knowledge, found in Islamic leadership.”

**Imam Mohammed Receives Political Recognition**

During the 1980s, Imam Mohammed’s message had begun to catch on permanently with the membership. New members were embracing the message and working to implement it in various ways. Construction of Masjid Bilal in Cleveland, Ohio, was completed, the first masjid built from the ground up by African American Muslims. Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton recognized the leadership of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and the efforts the American Muslim Mission to usher citizens down a path towards economic progress. Imam Ronald Shakir in Baltimore opened a session of the state legislature with the Muslim prayer, *Al-Fatiha*.

Imam Mohammed would later give the invocation on the floor of the United States Senate on February 6, 1992. In 1993, Warith Deen addressed national leaders

48 Ibid., 30-31.
49 Ibid., 30-31.
50 Ibid., 31-33.
51 Ibid., 31-33.
52 Ibid., 31-33.
53 Ibid, 44.
at President Clinton’s Inaugural Interfaith Prayer Service in Washington, DC, stressing the importance of faith communities working together for the betterment of humanity. In 1995, “he addressed a conference of Muslims and Reform Jews, and participated in several major interfaith dialogues with Roman Catholic cardinals. He continued to lecture weekly all across America and travel extensively internationally.

Imam Mohammed on Desert Storm

Imam Mohammed’s international profile grew even larger after he expressed public opposition to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, as part of a delegation of American Muslim leaders and scholars to Saudi Arabia discussing the increasing tensions in the Gulf war. Mohammed’s rationale for this stance was that “Al-Islam supersedes nationalism.” On the issue of Palestine, Imam Mohammed was firmly against Israeli abuses of authority and settlement building. Regarding violence, Imam Mohammed, now a U.S. representative member of the Supreme Council of Masajid, a Saudi Arabian based organization, “urged the Palestinians to reject any idea that is in conflict

54 Ibid, 45.
56 Chicago Tribune, (February 10, 1993).
57 Ibid.
58 Rasheed, Evolution of a Community.
59 Ibid.
with the Qur’an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad” in their struggle for freedom, justice, and equality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.60

**Imam Mohammed and Pope John Paul II**

Imam Mohammed greeted Pope John Paul II in 1996.61 This meeting, to some, seemingly arranged in the heavens, was the result of “an accidental convergence in Baltimore in August 1995.”62 Imam Warith Deen Mohammed met both Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore and Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The Pontifical Council is the office that was created by Pope Paul VI to implement Vatican II’s *Declaration on The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* throughout the Catholic Church.63 John Borelli, a former member of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, recounted this event at his 2007 Isaac Hecker Lecture. Building on the good spirit from the simultaneous visits of Imam Mohammed and Cardinal Arinze to Baltimore in August 1995, Borelli worked with Imam Mohammed’s associates to plan a series of accompanied meetings or dialogues for mutual understanding between Catholics and associates of W. D. Mohammed. The dialogue lasted for several meetings. When Pope John Paul II visited Baltimore later

60 Ibid.


62 Borelli, *The Catholic Church and Islam*.

63 Ibid.
in 1995, Imam Mohammed asked Cardinal Keeler for a meeting. The cardinal felt that the already heavily scheduled visit was not the best occasion. Cardinal Keeler asked Imam Mohammed for patience. Imams Earl and Eric El-Amin participated in an interfaith even on that papal visit to Baltimore.

In October 1996, Imam Mohammed and several of his associates accompanied Cardinal Keeler to Rome at the cardinal’s invitation. Imam Mohammed and his associates met with several Catholic officials and others promoting interfaith understanding, but the event which made the lasting impression was the meeting with Chiara Lubich’s Focolare Movement. In return, Chiara Lubich visited Harlem, New York, in 1997, met with Imam Mohammed, and gave an address at Masjid Malcolm Shabazz. This led to an invitation to Imam Mohammed to attend and give one of the closing prayers at the Interfaith celebration of Jubilee Year 2000 on October 28, 1999 and again greeting His Holiness John Paul II. In this brief prayer, Imam Mohammed focused on the unity of humanity under the Creator. He also urged working together to promote goodness throughout the world as one of the major aims of religion.

In the mid-90s, Imam Mohammed’s community was thriving. The Wall Street Journal estimated a 200,000 member community with 700 mosques, up from 80,000

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
members and 250 temples in 1975’s Nation of Islam.\textsuperscript{69} Other estimates placed the community size close to 2 million members.\textsuperscript{70}

**Reconciliation with Minister Farrakhan**

While there remained a mutual respect between Minister Farrakhan and Imam Mohammed, there had been no true public reconciliation. In 1999, while ailing from prostate cancer, Minister Farrakhan reached out to Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, and the two began the process towards reconciliation.\textsuperscript{71} As reported in The *Chicago Tribune*, “It was major news in the African American press when Imam Mohammed and Mr. Farrakhan appeared together in Chicago in 2000.”\textsuperscript{72}

**Post 9/11 Insights**

Immediately after September 11, 2001, Imam Mohammed’s major message was one of caution to the Muslim faithful who attended his Friday *jumu’ah khutbah* on September 14, 2001.\textsuperscript{73} He encouraged modest dress but advocated men and women not wearing traditional Islamic dress for fear of persecution. He also spoke out strongly against the actions of the terrorists or moral grounds from the Qur’an.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{69} *Wall Street Journal*, (July 9, 1999).
  \item \textsuperscript{70} *New York Times*, (September 10, 2008).
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} *Chicago Tribune*, (September 10, 2008).
  \item \textsuperscript{73} *Jumu’ah khutbah* is Arabic for “Friday sermon.” As a pillar of faith, Muslims are required to pray five times daily. On Friday, they are required to congregate during the early afternoon hour for a congregational this *jumu’ah* sermon and prayer service.
\end{itemize}
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As transcribed, Mohammed expressed:

I will love this for G-d. I will love this for Muhammed, the Prophet. **And when people disgrace their claim to be followers of the word and disgrace their claim to be followers of Muhammed, the Prophet, by going to such extremes where they are no more human, they are monsters.** They are just machines carrying out a horrible act. We have to let our hearts go only to G-d and His messenger and to the decent Muslims who live and respect the religion as it should be respected. **So don’t let yourself sympathize with the terrorists, not in any way.** Don’t say, “Well, it wouldn’t have happened, if such and such had happened.” No, they are the ones that had their tests. The Middle East is a test for them and they failed their test, got off their Muslim life and behavior and they got into the behavior of demons, suicidal demons.74

Imam Mohammed later gave a public interview on the tragic events of 9/11 on the television program, “Tony Brown’s Journal.” Regarding other public statements against 9/11 demonstrating unity with faith communities, Mohammed joined Bishop Tod Brown, Chairman of The Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, in signing a joint statement with him and four other Muslim leaders in the United States.

**Muslim American Society and Beyond**

The community had now become the Muslim American Society and later the American Society of Muslims. Imam Mohammed would eventually resign from community leadership altogether and focus on his Islamic dawah efforts and education of those members associated with his leadership through his non-profit The Mosque

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This was how he remained with the community until his passing on September 9, 2008.

Thanks in large part to the pioneering efforts of Imam Mohammed, an indigenous Islam had sprouted and is growing in this western environment, offering hope for an even brighter future. The U.S. State Department uses American Muslim “hip-hop envoys to Muslim countries around the world” to create a more positive impression of America. Indigenous American Muslims have also developed lasting interfaith relationships and have become productive contributors to every facet of American society. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s prayer at the Vatican in 1999, Chiara Lubich’s address at Harlem’s Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, the election of two Muslims as United States Congressional Representatives (Keith Ellison, Minnesota; Andre Carson, Indiana) as well as the existence of numerous American Muslim judges, lawyers, doctors, policemen, firemen, chaplains, military servicemen, engineers, teachers, nurses serving as productive citizens contributing to American society offer hope that Muslims in America may spark of a renaissance in the East, the original home of Al-Islam, that will transform the future of Christian-Muslim relationships.

75 Ibid.

76 Aidi, interviewed by NPR Staff, March 16, 2014.

77 Borelli, The Catholic Church and Islam.
This author’s analysis of how Imam Mohammed transformed the radical thought of the Nation of Islam from black supremacy to Al-Islam as a universal faith that peacefully embraces humanity, gives an example for solving today’s turmoil.

Recently, seventeen American states have passed constitutional amendments outlawing sharia law. The chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security has held five hearing on radicalization within the Muslim-American community as a threat to safety, security and the prevention of violence. Imam Mohammed’s pursuit of interfaith alliances using the Qur’an and life example of Muhammad the Prophet provides strategy for countering radicalization from Muslim extremist groups today. Studying his teaching and methodology offers insights and presents additional non-military solutions to the problems we Americans face in this age of terror. Dr. Yvonne Haddad summed up Imam Mohammed’s contributions for the Chicago Tribune after his death, “He single-handedly re-educated many of the imams schooled by the Nation of Islam, restoring their American patriotism and the original teachings of Islam…He will be remembered as a person who brought the Nation of Islam carefully and consistently into mainline Islam.”

Imam Warith Deen Mohammed passed away on September 9, 2008. His tremendous lifetime of works “left the Muslim American community a blueprint of leadership that, if Muslim Americans would embrace and follow, could become

78 Stone, Peter King.
79 Chicago Tribune, (September 10, 2008).
beneficial and a beacon of light for the American society and the world at large."\textsuperscript{80}

Imam Mohammed’s work is a sign of what can be accomplished with strong faith, broad vision, hard work, and adherence to fundamental, simple, universal truths and human values.

\textsuperscript{80} Salahuddin Muhammad, \textit{America's Imam: Warith Deen Mohammed's Interpretation of Islam in the Milieu of the American Society} (unknown), 48-49.
CHAPTER 3

THE DIALOGUES

The interfaith dialogues established between the Catholic Church and the Muslim American Society were partially possible due to the monumental shift in the Church’s approach to Non-Catholics and Non-Christian, resulting from the Second Vatican Council. While Catholic scholars such as Louis Massignon, Monsignor Paulo Mulla, and Fr. Felix Pareja and many others had embraced the study of Islam and taught accurately about Islam, the Church did not have an official structured path for dialogue with Muslims and other Non-Christians until the Second Vatican Council.¹ The Second Vatican Council produced statements which demonstrated a clear shift towards ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The most relevant portions of the Vatican II documents for this chapter are: the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio), the Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate).² In 1964, Pope Paul VI established a special department of the Roman Curia for relationships with members of other faiths entitled the Secretariat for Non Christians. This signaled a positive beginning for future Muslim-Christian dialogue. Later, in 1988, Pope John Paul II renamed the department the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.


² Borelli, The Catholic Church and Islam.
Pope John Paul II was vigorously committed to fulfilling these pronouncements from Vatican II. In 1985, Pope John Paul II appointed Cardinal Francis Arinze to head the Secretariat for Non Christians, later the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988. Cardinal Arinze was responsible for accomplishing the goals of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). The mission and goals of PCID included promoting mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of others religious traditions, encouraging the study of religions, and promoting the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.

From 1987 to 2003, Dr. John Borelli was the Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He was responsible for coordinating and overseeing interreligious dialogue with Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus in the United States of America. While serving in this role, John Borelli was contacted by two members of the Muslim American Society, Earl and Eric El-Amin.

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3 Ibid.


5 Ibid.

6 Borelli, The Catholic Church and Islam.

7 “Edited Interview with Imam Earl El-Amin," interview by author, September 18, 2016.
The El-Amin brothers had been very active with interfaith dialogue in Baltimore since the mid-1980s. Their work brought them in close contact with the Catholic Charities and other Catholic organizations in Baltimore. The El-Amin brothers had obtained John Borelli’s contact information as a key point person for developing further interfaith opportunities with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The brothers informed John Borelli that Imam Warith Deen Mohammed would be in town for a special community event in August 1995. John Borelli was in the process of inviting Muslims to attend a special address by Cardinal Arinze on August 9, 1995, at the offices of Catholic Relief Services in Baltimore. He invited Imam Mohammed and his associates to be among the guests at the event.

**The First Meeting: August 9, 1995**

Dr. John Borelli, a consultor to Cardinal Arinze’s office in Rome, had requested Catholic Relief Services to host an address by Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore. Cardinal Arinze’s address was entitled “Interreligious Relations in a Pluralistic World.” John Borelli also worked with the Archbishop of Baltimore,

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Borelli, *The Catholic Church and Islam*.

Cardinal William Keeler, in scheduling the address at the Offices of Catholic Relief Services. ¹³

On August 9, 1995, Cardinal Arinze gave a thorough history of the Church’s efforts and works in interreligious dialogue with Muslims in the years since Vatican II. ¹⁴ Cardinal Arinze discussed the necessity of interreligious dialogue, especially given that Islam and Christianity are the most widespread religions in the world. He ended with an appeal: “Fellow believers in God…it is expected of us that we do not waste the opportunities for interreligious relations which the good God offers us.” ¹⁵ After the address, John Borelli and Cardinal Keeler had arranged for Imam Mohammed and his associates to visit the Cardinal’s Residence in Baltimore. ¹⁶ This new friendship between Cardinal Keeler and Imam Mohammed was blossoming into a working relationship.

**Getting Acquainted: Four Meetings 1995-1996**

After the initial August 1995 meeting, Bishop John Ricard, an African American auxiliary bishop of Baltimore, hosted a series of meetings between members of the Muslim American Society representing the Ministry of W. D. Mohammed and

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¹³ Ibid.


¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Borelli, *A Remarkable Coincidence.*
the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB). \footnote{Ibid. The NCCB became the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2001.} One meeting was held in 1995. Three meetings were held on January 25, April 30, and July 10 in 1996. \footnote{“Report from the Dialogue between the Ministry of Warith Deen Mohammed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops,” John Borelli to Imam W. D. Mohammed and the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, July 19, 1996, United States, Washington, DC.}

Eventually, the meetings were co-led by Bishop John Richard and Imam Earl Abdul-Malik Muhammad. The subjects covered primarily included areas of cooperation between the faith communities, educational programs, local interfaith dialogue events, and the possible issuing of joint statements regarding shared religious and moral values in American society. \footnote{Ibid.} During one of the meetings, Imam Earl Abdul-Malik Muhammad and Bishop John H. Ricard discussed sin and forgiveness. Those in attendance reached a deeper level of exchange through this discussion. \footnote{Ibid.}

For the July 10, 1996 meeting, Bishop Ricard hosted Imam Earl El-Amin, Imam Eric El-Amin, with Mrs. Beverly Carroll, Director of the NCCB Secretariat for African American Catholics, Dr. Borelli, and Fr. J. Augustine DiNoia, Director of the NCCB Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices. The dialogue members proposed having further dialogues for a three to five-year period to explore the role of religion in American society. \footnote{Ibid.} As a result of these meetings, an agreement was reached to organize a formal dialogue on the topic of “religion in America,” to
emphasize the contributions of Catholics and Muslims to American life. Though a well-designed program for dialogue, it was never pursued after Imam Mohammed’s visit to Rome. Rather, associates of Imam Mohammed participated in the ensuing regional Catholic-Muslim dialogues, beginning in 1996 in Indianapolis, then beginning in New York in 1998, and then beginning on the west coast in 2000.

**First Visit to the Vatican: October 1996**

During his initial August 1995 meeting with Archbishop Cardinal Keeler, Imam Mohammed requested to schedule a meeting the Pope John Paul II during his October 1995 visit to Baltimore. Cardinal Keeler suggested his Baltimore representatives come to the event, while he suggested that Imam Mohammed instead accompany him to meet the Pope in Rome at a later date. Cardinal Keeler also surmised that the Muslim American Society would be a good match for interreligious dialogue with the Catholic lay community, Focolare, headed by Chiara Lubich. The initial introduction would happen once the trip to Rome took place.

On October 2, 1996, Cardinal William Keeler introduced Imam W. D. Mohammed to Pope John Paul II at the weekly Wednesday Public Audience.

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23 Ibid.

24 Borelli, *A Remarkable Coincidence*.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Borelli, *Relations with National Conference of Catholic Bishops*. 
Mohammed and his delegation of associates were received by Cardinal Arinze and the Staff of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. They were later received by Cardinal Etchegaray and the staff of the Pontifical Council for Justice. The Muslim American delegation afterwards met with the faculty of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and toured St. Peter’s Basilica, The Sistine Chapel, and the Vatican Library.

After visiting various Pontifical offices at the Vatican, Imam Mohammed and his associates were introduced to Catholic lay communities. Imam Mohammed delivered a lecture on his visit to the Community of Sant’Egidio. The Sant’Egidio is a prominent Catholic association which promoted political and religious reconciliation in Africa. Between visits, the Muslim delegation performed their mid-day prayers at the Rome Mosque and met the imam and director. Incidentally, according to Dr. Borelli, on Friday, October 4, 1996, Imam Mohammed and his associates went to St. Peter’s in the morning and to the Rome mosque in the afternoon.

On October 5, 1996, Imam Mohammed and his delegation were received at the Focolare Center at Castel Gandolfo, for a presentation and dinner with the Focolare Community. Accompanied by Bishop Ricard, Imam Mohammed met with Natalia

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
Dallapiccola and Enzo Fondi, directors of the Focolare Center for Interreligious Dialogue. Imam Mohammed also met Sharry Silvi and Julian Ciabattini, directors and representatives of the Focolare Movement in the United States. Although Chiara Lubich was unable to attend this event, Imam Mohammed invited her personally to Masjid Malcolm Shabazz in Harlem, New York.

On January 28, 1997, representatives of the Muslim American Society participated in a public program of dialogue in LaCrosse, WI, with Bishop Raymond Burke of LaCrosse. On February 22, 1997, representatives of the Muslim American Society participated in a public program in Wilmington, DE, with Bishop Michael Saltarelli of Wilmington among the participants.

**Building Relationships with The Focolare Movement 1997-1998**

On Sunday, May 18, 1997, Imam Mohammed and Chiara Lubich, Founder of the Focolare Movement, met in a public program at the Masjid Malcom Shabazz in Harlem. Over 200 Muslims and members of Focolare were in attendance. This

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33 Borelli, *A Remarkable Coincidence*.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Borelli, *Relations with National Conference of Catholic Bishops*.

37 Ibid.


39 Ibid.
was a tremendously powerful moment of international significance.\textsuperscript{40} After this meeting, Chiara Lubich initiated a pact which Imam Mohammed accepted.\textsuperscript{41} Chiara Lubich’s words were, “Let’s make a pact, in the name of the one God, to work unceasingly for peace and for unity.”\textsuperscript{42} Imam Warith Deen Mohammed responded, “This pact is made forever…May God be my witness that you are my sister. I am your friend and I will help you always.”\textsuperscript{43} This was more than a simple exchange of words between the two leaders. The pact demonstrated a sincere aspiration for Muslim and Christian communities to work collectively towards peace. This powerful moment cemented the hearts of these great religious leaders and weaved a fabric that would forever bind the two communities.

There were subsequent meetings with Imam Mohammed and/or his representatives from the Muslim American Society at the Focolare’s Mariapolis in Hyde Park, New York. In June 1998, a large delegation of members of the Muslim American Society were invited to Italy to the third Annual Meeting of Focolare and Muslim Friends of the Focolare.\textsuperscript{44} Muslims were represented from over twenty-four

\textsuperscript{40} Sharry Silvi, "Such a Powerful Moment: At Chiara's side that day in Harlem," \textit{Living City}, May 2012.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} TheCleanGlass, \textit{Imam W. Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich}. 
countries. The largest delegation of Muslims was from the United States, representing the community of Imam W. D. Mohammed. 45

Imam Mohammed Delivers Prayer at the Vatican
Interreligious Jubilee before Pope John Paul II: October 1999

In late October 1999, Imam W. D. Mohammed and delegation of members of the Muslim American Society were hosted at a Friends of the Focolare event in Rome. 46 Chiara Lubich spoke on the theme of Prayer, Meditation, and Union with God. She expressed to the audience, “Prayer is the breath of the soul.” 47 Imam W. D. Mohammed had been invited to offer a prayer at the Interreligious Assembly Jubilee at the Vatican, attended by Pope John Paul II. 48 The Interreligious Assembly was held from October 25 through October 28, 1999. During the closing ceremony, Imam W. D. Mohammed gave prayer on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica. 49 What follows are Imam W. Deen Mohammed’s words on this occasion:

With the Name of Allah, The Merciful Benefactor, The Merciful Redeemer, we dearly regard this invitation to take part in this Vatican Interreligious Gathering. Servants of God from the Heavenly faith communities of the world, we are joining one another here at the Vatican in Rome with His Holiness John Paul II because Muslims, Christians, Jews and others share basic values and a belief in a virtuous life that wants justice and peace for all….We thank Allah for this occasion for leaders from the Great Religions to meet here in this Holy City of the Catholics, hosted by His Holiness Pope John Paul II, their leader who has our delegation among his many Muslim well wishers and fervent

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Borelli, *A Remarkable Coincidence.*
49 Ibid.
admirers. I have devoted my whole life to building bridges. Inclusion was in my heart; I wanted that and I think my father conditioned me to want that. That is, not to be separated but to be with all good people. I wholeheartedly accept and embrace with you the idea of unity, mutual sharing, and love for one another. We have to be conditioned to have peace. God has given us the requirements that we have to meet for a life of faith in him. And when we meet these conditions, we do have peace. There are many convincing signs everywhere. Those with open eyes, belief and faith, will see them and will hear sounds everywhere that goodness is no the rise. We are living in a time of revival, a revival of the true life that God put into the human souls, when he created the first person. A new world of faith community is on the rise.50

Speaking to the historical significance of this event, Imam Ronald Shaheed, a pillar of interfaith dialogue in the Muslim American Society who was in attendance remarked:

The meeting at the Vatican for the inter-religious assembly in 1999 was probably the most profound experience I had because of all of those different religious leaders and everything that was there, plus the Catholics. I think there was in the audiences, maybe, they said, they felt quarter of a million people in the audience. When you look out all you could see was people out there in Vatican Square. Plus they had Vatican television was filming it and they were shooting it out across the world… That was most impressive. Yeah. It was a good day. It was an excellent day. I mean, you couldn't have asked for a better weather and the spirit for interfaith was there. You’ve got all these religious, more than 22 religious leaders from across the world. You even had Native American tribal leaders who were there from the United States. Of course, Pope John Paul II, he was an older man and in the eighties … he sat there quietly and the only time that he got up was when Imam finished talking. Imam was the only one who went over to him and he kissed him on his right cheek I think and then on his left shoulder. He kissed him on his right cheek and you could tell they were talking and then they shook hands and hugged each other; then Imam kissed him on his right shoulder, then he went back to his seat…and of course the Dalai Lama was there, Chiara Lubich. All the great leaders they were there. Religious leaders.... to me it had world implications for [the] future [of the] world. That's how I felt. I felt that this was a picture of what it could be and should be like. Respect for all religions. Respect for all attempts to understand

the reality of God that the religions represent and even though it was in the Vatican, it wasn't a quote-quote Catholic thing. It was a religious thing.  


After the October prayer at Saint Peter’s, Imam Mohammed joined Chiara Lubich in Amman, Jordan at a Friends of the Focolare event. He spoke about his meeting with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican side by side with Chiara Lubich. The relationship between communities continued to blossom. Members of the Muslim American Society and Focolare were having local interfaith dialogues and building friendships across faiths.

In September 2000, members of Focolare addressed the community of Imam W. D. Mohammed during the public address portion of the annual Muslim American Society convention The efforts culminated in an interfaith convention style program on November 10-12, 2000. The title of the event was “Towards the Harmonious Living of the Human Family: Faith Communities Together.” The program was held with great participation from the Muslim American Society and Focolare community in Washington DC. Chiara Lubich and Imam W. D. Mohammed were in

52 Ibid.
53 TheCleanGlass, ”Imam W. Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich.”
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
attendance. The thoughts, sentiments, and experiences of those involved in these meetings will be explored in the chapters that follow.

57 Ibid.
There were several interfaith meetings over a five-year period that require further research and evaluation. The research methodologies employed here were general qualitative guided interviews. The questions were developed based on an analysis of a July 2004 Special Report by the United States Institute of Peace, which detailed a method for evaluating interfaith dialogue programs.  

This chapter tests this hypothesis by conducting an analysis of the interfaith dialogue between representatives of the Catholic Church, notably Focolare, and the late Muslim American leader, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, and his associates. Specifically, it applies the analysis to assess and evaluate the meetings and interfaith dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Muslim American Society. In order to measure the impact and effectiveness of these dialogues, qualitative research questions were developed based on best practices of the latest qualitative research and evaluation methods.

Using this evaluation methodology, this chapter will apply this analytical method to the various meetings and dialogue between the two parties.

After reviewing relevant literature on the subject matter, it was determined to focus the research on prominent members of the indigenous Muslim American

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58 Garfinkel, What Works?.

community of Imam W. D. Mohammed, since very little had been written from their perspective in academic publications. Five well known members of the indigenous Muslim American Society were interviewed. They agreed to have their interviews recorded and transcribed for research purposes. The transcripts were coded and evaluated to provide results and conclusions that measured the impact and effectiveness of the dialogue. Future implications of the research will also be considered.

The material of this chapter is from the articles that historically document the meetings, programs, speeches, and nature of the relationship between Imam Mohammed, the Muslim American Society, and different representatives of the Catholic Church, including the Focolare, a number of which are written by my thesis mentor, Dr. John Borelli. Additional sources include articles from the Muslim Journal newspaper, transcripts of lectures by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, and interviews of living participants in the meetings. Interviews were conducted with Imam Earl El-Amin, the late Sister Amatullah Sharif, Dr. Mikal Ramadan, Sister Laila Muhammad, and Imam Ronald Shaheed.

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60 The Muslim American Society was the name of the community association of Muslim American mosques led by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed at the time of the interfaith dialogues which are the subject of this research. After a naming dispute with an unrelated non-profit organization of the same name, Imam Mohammed formally changed the name of the organization to the American Society of Muslims.
Developing Qualitative Research Questions

The United States Institute of Peace’s study provided recommendations on how to determine effectively and measure the impact of interfaith dialogue. Participants in the study were interviewed and evaluated from the inception until the end of the process. They responded to interview questions, which examined their attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs about other religions; information about the frequency and quality of interfaith interactions they had experienced; and what attitudes participants had towards the idea of peaceful interaction with other religious communities. Using the qualitative research interview questions, participants were evaluated on their attitudes before the dialogues began, during the process of the dialogues, and after the dialogues had ended.

Since an active evaluation of the inception and process of these past dialogues is not possible, research for this chapter extracted information about the attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, goals and intentions of the faith leaders involved in these dialogues based on their writings, speeches, addresses, memorandums, and lectures. In some instances, they answered direct questions or had specific comments and references to this dialogue experience. Such explicit feedback was essential to the success of this research project.

A complete copy of the research questions can be found in the appendix. The specific questions which will be analyzed for this section of the chapter are as follows:

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
1. Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammed pursued this dialogue?
2. What do you think his intentions were?
3. What do you think Imam Mohammed/Chiara Lubich/Pope John Paul II hoped would result from these dialogues?
4. What did Imam Mohammed’s meeting at the Vatican with Pope John Paul II mean to you?\(^\text{63}\)
5. What did Imam Mohammed’s meeting with Chiara Lubich of the Focolare movement mean to you?
6. In your opinion, were these dialogues successful? Why? Why not?
7. In your opinion, were these dialogues effective? Why? Why not?
8. Was this experience beneficial to you? To our communities?

**Pope John Paul II: His Holiness’ Approach to Dialogue with Muslims**

During the course of researching this thesis, no explicit remarks regarding the thoughts of Pope John Paul II concerning these specific dialogues were found. However, Pope John Paul II delivered countless speeches and written documents that clearly expressed his intentions, goals, and thoughts relating to interreligious dialogue. The following section of this chapter shares selected quotes from Pope John Paul II regarding interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. Pope John Paul II, to a symposium on “Holiness in Christianity and in Islam,” Rome, May 9, 1985, stated:

All true holiness comes from God, who is called ‘The Holy One’ in the sacred books of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Your holy Qur’an calls God ‘Al-Quddus,’ as in the verse: ‘He is God, besides whom there is no other, the Sovereign, the Holy, the (source of) Peace’ (Qur’an 59, 23). The prophet Hosea links God’s holiness with his forgiving love for mankind, a love which surpasses our ability to comprehend: ‘I am God, not man; I am the Holy One in your midst and have no wish to destroy’ (Hosea 11:9). In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:48), Jesus teaches his disciples that holiness consists in assuming, in our human way, the qualities of God’s own holiness which he has

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\(^{63}\) The author notes that according to Vatican tradition, Imam Mohammed’s visit to Rome constituted an official greeting of Pope John Paul II, not an actual meeting. If other unofficial meetings took place, they were not recorded in a manner that could be sourced for this thesis. The research questions developed did not explicitly reflect this distinction.
revealed to mankind: ‘Be holy, even as your heavenly Father is holy.’

In his address to the young Muslims of Morocco, August 19, 1985, John Paul II orated:

Christians and Muslims have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. We live in the same world, marked by many signs of hope, but also by multiple signs of anguish. For us, Abraham is a model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness. We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection. . . .

During his address at the General Audience, September 9, 1998, John Paul II, delivered the words:

It must first be kept in mind that every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose precisely from this primordial openness to God. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God’s Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions.

In his Message for World Day of Peace, January 1, 2002, John Paul II stated:

In this whole effort religious leaders have a weighty responsibility. The various Christian confessions as well as the world’s great religions need to work together to eliminate the social and cultural causes of terrorism. . . . This is a specific area of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation, a pressing service which religion can offer to world peace…. *No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness:* This is what in this message I wish to say to believers and unbelievers alike, to all men and women of good will who are concerned for the good of the human family and for the future.

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64 Borelli, *The Catholic Church and Islam.*

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.
In a formal address to the Islamic Leaders of Senegal, Dakar, February 22, 1992, John Paul II orated:

We Christians and Muslims must be people of dialogue. As I have often said, and as the bishops of Senegal have repeated, this commitment to dialogue means, first of all, “a dialogue of life,” a positive acceptance, interaction and cooperation by which we bear active witness, as believers, to the ideals to which God has called us….But our commitment to do God’s will leads us beyond the task of living together in harmony. Modern life has many problems. In dialogue, we who believe in the goodness of God have a special duty to address the problems of our people and search together for solutions which can make modern society more just, more human, more respectful of the rights, dignity and human freedom of each individual.68

It is evident in his messages that Pope John Paul II sought to establish mutual respect, peaceful understanding, and mutual spiritual growth through his promotion of interreligious dialogue. At the same time, Pope John Paul II was bringing faith communities together to work as one towards solving the worlds’ problems.

**Imam Warith Deen Mohammed’s Remarks on the Dialogues**

During the course of researching this thesis, interviews, speeches, lectures, and writings containing the thoughts of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed concerning these specific dialogues and relationships with representatives of the Catholic Church and with Focolare were found. The following section of this chapter shares selected quotes from Imam Warith Deen Mohammed regarding interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims in an effort to understand better his intentions, goals, and thoughts relating to interreligious dialogue.

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In a transcript of his comments from an event with the Focolare at Castel Gandolfo in Rome from June 1998, Imam Mohammed stated:

As-Salaamu Alaikum.  Bismillahir-Rahman Nir-Raheem. (With G-d’s Name, The Merciful Benefactor, The Merciful Redeemer).  Was-salaatu was salaamu Rasooluhul Kareem. Ma’bad (The prayers and peace be upon our noble Messenger, and what follows of this salute…).  Allah, Subhana wa Ta’Ala (the Most High), says to us in the Qur’an, “Kanna-nas ummatan wahidah, the whole humanity, all people were one community.”  We are to understand that as a community of people on this earth that is now global.  And again, we are beginning to see man as one community, one global community.  That community came out of one ancestor, and that is Adam, peace be upon him.  Both the Qur’an and the Bible say that…

This is really G-d’s way of telling us, revealing to us, that our destiny is to again become as we were in the beginning, one community; that in the end human beings will identify themselves as one people, the human family, and will accept to be one human family on this earth.  This is what the Focolare are stressing.  That is the real support for our unity.  **We can’t unite on the basis of the Qur’an because they have their own scripture. But we can unite on the basis of our common creation. We are common creation made by G’d, in our humanity. That means in the best of our human life. Our evolving, progressing human life, that’s that humanity. In that, we are the same….**

At the occasion of the Focolare event “Encounters in the Spirit of Universal Brotherhood” in Indianapolis, Indiana, Imam Mohammed expressed the following regarding interfaith dialogue, universal brotherhood, and the importance of religion:

Religion has great influence. Most of the people of the world, whether they think of it consciously or not they are religious. They are religious and there is fear of God in all of us. Sometimes we’re cut off from it, we’ll lose it. We are not even aware that the fear of God is in us but the fear of God is always in most of us until death, and after, I believe, also. The fear of G-d is in us. If we can show a picture of religion that gets the attention of those who are weak in faith because of the troubles in the world, the troubles that the world makes for

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69 Warith D. Mohammed, "Imam W. Deen Mohammed's comments on His visit to Rome with the Focolare Movement" (address, 3rd Annual Meeting of Focolare and Muslim Friends of the Focolare, Focolare International Center, Castel Gandolfo, Italy, June 14, 1998).

70 Ibid. Bold emphasis appears in the original transcript.
their own personal lives, their family life, their religious life or family life, I think we can reach them with a picture of religion that will make them think again, rethink their own disposition, their own mind-set, and come from a bad disposition to a better disposition where they will respect their own life more. They’ll come back to a sense of personal value as a human being as that special human being that God Himself created and put in the Garden before the world spoiled everything for us. They will come back to that, God willing, and as a result of just being conscious of Chiara Lubich’s worldwide movement and Imam W. D. Mohammed’s ministry and those many that supported me nationwide and some outside of the country, also, that they will be touched by that and they will start to say, “Well, religion is good, and religion does have a role in the world to change it for the better; and religion can reach me, though I have lost faith in my religion, I’ve lost faith in my church, or I’ve lost faith in my mosque.” Religion can reach them and they will wake up again. That is my prayer that it will touch many who belong to God, to a religion. They belong to a church or to a mosque but they are just lost because they are disappointed and the world has disappointed them. We have failed locally as Imams and church leaders. We have failed too, to present a picture that can get their attention, their admiration and their respect. I think that is what we are doing together. May God be with us always.71

In an unpublished interview by Imam Ghani on June 28, 2006, Imam W. D. Mohammed offers his thinking leading up to the invitation to attend an audience with Pope John Paul II in Rome:

I met with more than one of them [world leaders and religious leaders]. Again doing things of G-d. In the religious experience people who were searching for themselves wanted to discover where they should be in the world under G-d. People who are searching for their destiny under G-d if they have had a liberator, I don’t want to point to myself in this way but I have to, if they have had a liberator he has been fortunate to be put in circumstances where that liberator talks to the top ruler in the land. Joseph of the Bible and Yusuf the same Joseph of the Qur’an, Moses, Muhammad peace be upon them, Jesus Christ. Anyone who was important for G-d for leading people’s lives they had to meet with the top rulers because G-d knows the little boy needs to meet with the big men so he could see what is to them… I thought it was possible but really I thought I would be rejected. My thoughts of me being rejected were

71 Warith D. Mohammed, "Comments by Imam W. Deen Mohammed" (address, Encounters in the Spirit of Universal Brotherhood, Indiana, Indianapolis, April 22, 2006).
much stronger than my thoughts that I would be welcomed to the Vatican and be in the presence of the Pope John Paul II. But I said to myself I heard that Rev. Jesse Jackson was the guest of the Vatican one time. Just on the strength of him being accepted, my friend, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, I said I’m going to make a try, and I did. So I expressed my desire to make a visit there and someone may say and I can understand the question being asked, “Why would the son of Elijah Muhammad and a Muslim want to go to the Holy See, Rome, Italy, the Vatican? And be a guest or a visitor visiting the Pope of Catholicism of the Catholic Church or the Catholic world under the Roman Catholic Church?” So I knew it would be looked at as strange and people would wonder why, but do you know what I said to myself? “If the Honorable Elijah Mohammed’s son is accepted in the Vatican to have an audience with the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, that is going to make news everywhere and it is going to say, “He is different. He does not dislike nor have anything against Christians. He visited the Pope.” And it turned out to be much more in it for me than what I thought would be in it for me. It became much more than I expected. But just alone was enough for me. I said, “If I could just have it hit the news that I visited the Pope and made the visit there as a Muslim who came in friendship to speak with the Pope and have an audience with the Pope, that if it is known it is going to free my community to move throughout the United States and be more accepted by Christians. It is important. This is a Christian country. It is extremely important that we go in friendship and move friendly through these United States with our Christian brothers and sisters.”72

This eye opening interview offered keen insight into Imam Mohammed’s sincere religiously inspired strategy to engage and build friendships with the Christian community. The interviewer asked a follow up question as to whether Imam Mohammed embraces dialogue to help heal the hurt African Americans have experienced while also engaging others who may still harbor hurtful ideas. Imam Mohammed answers:

For Christians, Christ asks no less of the followers of Christian[ity] and for Muslims, our G’d, Muhammad our Prophet asks no less of us; that we have a heart that can have room in it for every person on this earth, for all people.

72 Imam W. D. Mohammed, "IWDM on Relationship with Catholic Church,” interview by Imam Ghani, June 28, 2006.
Strong language is used in both Books, Bible Qur’an, urging us to become charitable and open hearted where our hearts open up to accommodate all people, welcome all people. But I have to say this, also. I’m a product of my African American people’s experience, as a people coming from slavery to freedom. I am a product of that road and that experience and that has worked positively in me to connect me with all human being, because the issue is not how they treat a certain color. The issue is how they treated human beings and all people are human, do you see? So I am the fruit of Islam and the fruit of the African American experience at the same time.  

There are many more insightful remarks from articles, speeches, lectures, and interviews that convey Imam W. D. Mohammed’s thoughts and ideas relating to the dialogue experience. It is quite evident that he was driven to pursue such dialogues out of his commitment to the religion of Al-Islam and living in sync with the model Islamic example of Muhammad the Prophet, who built interfaith alliances throughout his mission.

**Chiara Lubich’s Remarks on the Dialogues**

During the course of researching this thesis, speeches, lectures, and writings containing the thoughts of Chiara Lubich concerning these specific dialogues with Imam W. D. Mohammed and the Muslim American Society were gathered. The following section of this chapter shares selected quotes from Chiara Lubich regarding interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims in an effort to better understand her intentions, goals, and thoughts relating to interreligious dialogue.

On the blessed day, May 18, 1997, at Harlem, New York’s Malcolm Shabazz

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73 Ibid.

Mosque, Chiara Lubich expressed the following words to the audience of hundreds of Muslims and Focolare members packed to capacity in the mosque’s musallah prayer hall:

I have been asked to speak about unity in the experience of the Focolare. A better subject could not have been chosen because the ideal that the Focolare lives is precisely unity. And its goal is to bring into the world that unity which generates peace and promotes universal brotherhood. Unity is the “charism” – that is, the gift of God – that underlies all that has come to life under the name Focolare. The world today is filled with tensions: between rich countries and poor countries, in the Middle East, in Africa. There are wars and threats of more conflicts. And yet, in spite of everything and quite paradoxically, today’s world is longing for unity, and therefore peace. Countries are trying to unite. The World Conference on Religion and Peace seeks to unite all religions in working to promote peace. Within Islam, we see a strong tendency toward an evercloser collaboration on an international level. In Christianity, different churches feel the need to move toward unity after centuries of mutual indifference and even conflict. In the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council spoke repeatedly about unity. Years of Islamic-Christian dialogue are leaving their mark on history. One example of this was the historic meeting between Pope John Paul II and 50,000 Muslim youth in Casablanca, Morocco.  

How could we bring about unity? We found the key in that moment in Jesus’ life which for us Christians is the greatest sign of love; that is, when he suffered on the cross for all the sins of the world, to the point of feeling forsaken by God. And we felt urged to live as Jesus did, to imitate him by taking upon ourselves, in a way, all the sufferings of humanity. From then on, wherever there was suffering, wherever we encountered divisions or traumas, we felt that that was where we belonged: to bring love into divided families, between generations, among divided churches or where there are tensions between believers and nonbelievers. And we saw that unity was reestablished and there was a rebirth of hope, joy, and peace…We discovered that all religions teach love of neighbor, though in different way. Benevolence and compassion, or at least nonviolence, are present in many religions. Almost all of them have the so-called Golden Rule which says: “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” An ancient Islamic writing says, “None of you is a

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75 Chiara Lubich, "One Pact, One People: Wherever we are in the world, we are together," Living City, May 2012.
believer until you desire for your brother or sister what you desire for yourself.” This love would be enough to bring all humanity together into one family…

When Chiara was asked about her relationship with Imam Mohammed, she replied:

I feel at ease with him because it seems to me that the Lord has put him next to us, as he has put us next to him, perhaps for a plan of love of his, which we will be able to understand in as much as we go ahead in our communion and by working together.

On October 25, 1999, at the Friends of the Focolare event at Castel Gandolfo in Rome, Chiara Lubich spoke on the theme of Prayer, Meditation, and Union with God.

What follows is an excerpt of her words to the audience that evening:

Prayer is an essential element of one’s spiritual life. Without it, there is no true spiritual life. We can live without eating, but not without breathing, and prayer is the breath of the soul. I am well aware that I am speaking to believers in God who know what prayer is. Indeed, I believe we could say that Islam is the religion of prayer, not only because prayer, which you do five times a day, is one of its five pillars, but also because every verse of the Qur’an, if said with faith, is a prayer. Just think of the Sura that opens the Qur’an: “In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful! Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe…You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path” (Qur’an 1:1-7). Prayer is something essential to our very being, to being human. We are truly ourselves if we pray. Prayer is our relationship with God. And because we have been created in the image and likeness of God, we are capable of a personal I-Thou relationship with God. We have understood that prayer is an integral part of human nature also through our contact with brothers and sisters of other religions. We discovered profound experiences of prayer in them which bear witness to a secret, but effective, action of God that impels human beings to pray. And the same

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76 Ibid.

applies to us Christians. We are brothers and sisters of Jesus; he is our model when it comes to prayer. In fact, he didn’t only preach, work miracles, and call disciples to follow him; he often immersed himself in prayer. There are many prayers which enrich our life as Christians.78

In another passage of the address, Chiara Lubich expresses how seeking God through prayer inspires love of your neighbor:

Generally speaking we do not seek God and we do not find him, first of all, in the depths of our heart or in nature. We find him by loving our neighbor. Only in this way are we guaranteed unity with him. We find him alive and vibrant in our hearts. In turn, unity with God leads us to go out to our fellow human beings; it helps us to make our love for them something which is not superficial, but rather deep, full, complete; it always includes the readiness to give one’s life.79

These profound statements help us understand the thinking of Chiara Lubich and her approach to these dialogues.

Analysis

Upon evaluating their collective words and works, it is quite evident that Pope John Paul II, Imam W. D. Mohammed, and Chiara Lubich were divinely inspired souls with hearts full of sacred love for humanity. Each had remarkable experiences, which embedded tremendous deep seated faith in their souls. Their individual faith journeys and perspectives provided each with a passion to work towards openness, love, peace, mutual respect, and appreciation of shared human dignity.

Within their faith communities, they attracted significant followings and promoted peace and understanding internationally. Their works individually helped

78 Chiara Lubich, "Prayer, Meditation, and Union with God" (address, 3rd Annual Meeting of Focolare and Muslim Friends of the Focolare, Castel Gandolfo, Vatican City, Rome, October 25, 1999).

79 Ibid.
bring people together, both within and outside their individual faith communities. Each leader demonstrated an active openness to dialogue with those outside of their faith traditions. Each leader also was committed to promoting common good by encouraging different faith communities to come to a shared common understanding without compromising their sacred beliefs and values.

Analysis of the meetings demonstrated the following key areas of focus that seemed consistently important. First, the statements from each leaders indicates the importance of establishing a common faith in God, the creator of all. Second, the statements indicate the importance of having a sacred love for all humanity. Third, these leaders demonstrated a mutual respect of the sacred traditions of the other faiths. Fourth, in their speeches and writings, the leaders indicated a high appreciation of the discipline, character, and moral standards each faith provided to its adherents. The final point, the leaders also expressed hopefulness that faith communities could work together for common good, uniting in service for God’s pleasure by serving humanity.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

Findings

In this chapter, the author will present findings based on evaluation and analysis of the facts using the selected evaluation methodology. Conclusions and implications will be drawn from the analysis and presented herein.

Thoughts from Members of the Catholic Church

John Borelli’s many writings on the interreligious dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Muslim American Society indicate that these dialogues fulfilled many aspects of the Second Vatican Council’s outreach to Non-Christians. 1 From the initial August 1995 meetings of Cardinal Arinze, Archbishop Cardinal Keeler, Imam Mohammed and his associates, a deep relationship developed between the two communities that furthered the goals as advocated by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. 2 The meetings also opened up a very fruitful relationship between Imam Mohammed and Chiara Lubich. 3 This created a wonderful opportunity for interreligious dialogue and engagement to develop between members of the Muslim American Society and members of Focolare. 4

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1 Borelli, The Catholic Church and Islam.
2 Ibid.
3 Borelli, A Remarkable Coincidence.
4 Ibid.
In addition to developing interreligious relationships between communities, there were tangible outcomes from the dialogue. Imam Mohammed was honored with the Annual Luminosa Award for Unity by the Focolare Movement in Mariapolis on August 17, 1997. Imam Mohammed signed off on the Joint Statement issued by Catholic Bishops and Muslim Leaders in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Other significant benefits were the fact that Imam Mohammed met Pope John Paul II at the Vatican on two occasions in 1996 and 1999. In October of 1999, during the Interreligious Assembly, Imam Mohammed delivered a prayer on the steps of Saint Peter’s Square at the Basilica before an audience of tens of thousands. Additionally, there is a continued positive relationship between the community of Imam W. D. Mohammed and the Focolare that continues to thrive even after the leaders have physically departed.

Regarding his sentiments about the encounters, John Borelli indicated that witnessing Chiara Lubich and Imam Mohammed speak together in Harlem was a “remarkable coincidence…due to a God-given set of circumstances” in reference to Baltimore 1995. John Borelli was in attendance when Imam Mohammed again

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5 Borelli, The Catholic Church and Islam.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Borelli, A Remarkable Coincidence.
traveled to Rome in October 1999 and prayed with Pope John Paul II. He was a firsthand witness to Imam Mohammed delivering a prayer at the closing ceremony in Vatican City at the Interreligious Assembly before the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The theme for the assembly was Towards A Culture of Dialogue. Remarking on this amazing event, Dr. John Borelli wrote:

In October 1999, at the interreligious assembly convened in Rome by Cardinal Arinze as a preparatory event for the celebration of the Great Jubilee Year 2000, Imam Muhammad offered prayers on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica during the closing service. I was told that it was the first time that a Muslim offered a prayer in any formal way in the precincts of St. Peter’s. An American Muslim prays in a public service at the central spot in the Vatican. I was pinching myself again.  

In a conversation preparing this material, John Borelli responded to the statement that Imam Earl El-Amin and Archbishop of Baltimore William Lori recently met with Pope Francis in March 2016, by expressing that the impact of these dialogues are still happening today. He suggested that this visit sends positive assurances that the seeds planted by this dialogue are continuing which is a good thing.

Thoughts from Members of the Focolare

According to his biography, William Neu has been an active member of the Focolare for over forty years. He has held various leadership capacities within the U.S.

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Focolare communities. Mr. Neu has been responsible for interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. In a 2012 article that he penned for the Paulist Fathers newsletter, *Koinonia*, William Neu recorded his thoughts on the relationship between Imam W. D. Mohammed and Chiara Lubich.  

William Neu recalled the times he used to run past the well-guarded Chicago National House of the Nation of Islam’s leader, Elijah Muhammad. He also recalled being surprised that Elijah Muhammad’s son was leading the organization towards orthodox Sunni Islam after Elijah’s death in 1975. As a Midwest Focolare representative for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, he was encouraged to seek out a notable Chicago imam by both Archbishop of Baltimore, Cardinal William Keeler and by Natalia Dallapiccola, the Focolare International Director for Interreligious Dialogue.  

Upon engaging with Imam W. D. Mohammed, the humble Chicago imam who was highly recommended, William Neu was surprised that this was the same internationally renowned leader of the over two million African American Muslims. He was also impressed with how quickly Imam Mohammed embraced sincere dialogue with the community. William Neu writes of this occasion:

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11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
After reading a biography of the Focolare’s foundress, Chiara Lubich, he asserted during his second visit that her insights about the unity of the human family were for everyone, not just for Christians. He stressed his own clear identity as a practicing Muslim, and asked us to confirm our Catholic identity; I understood that he was seeking authentic dialogue with faithful, convinced partners, not confusing syncretism or superficial irenism.  

Imam Mohammed and his associates visited Castel Gandolfo during his first visit to the Vatican in 1996. Although he did not meet Chiara Lubich at that time, he relished the opportunity to invite her to the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz in Harlem, New York.

Bill Neu expressed his thoughts regarding this trust extended by Imam Mohammed:

When I considered afterwards that he was inviting a 77-year-old Catholic Italian woman whom he had not yet met personally, to speak to 3,000 of his followers, I realized that Imam Mohammed was a man who sincerely and faithfully tried to follow God, regardless of the possible human consequences. It seemed an enormous risk; when Chiara entered that mosque’s prayer room on May 18, 1997, I asked myself, and even more, I asked God, “How can this be…?” Dr. Borelli, a rabbi and many Focolare members were among the audience of 3,000 Muslims. Through a translator and through a public address system outside the building, Chiara simply shared her experience of radically living the Gospel in the midst of World War II’s destruction, an experience of death and resurrection, of God’s intervention, of the hundredfold. It resonated with this audience beyond anything anticipated. It was a miracle of this charism from God, and attributable to the purity and openness of these followers of Imam Mohammed. Afterwards, Chiara and Imam Mohammed sealed a pact to give their lives for universal brotherhood. (Coincidentally, Imam Mohammed died 11 years later in 2008, just 6 months after Chiara’s death).  

As mentioned in the previous chapters, there have been many subsequent encounters between the Muslims of Imam W. D. Mohammed’s community and the

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.
Focolare communities. Bill Neu writes with great excitement about his sentiments regarding the positive outcomes of this relationship:\textsuperscript{16}

When he personally shared about this developing friendship with the Holy Father afterwards, the Pope was welcoming and encouraging. This relationship was also important in the aftermath of 9/11, when we welcomed these brothers and sisters, and identified with their precarious position in the U.S. in that moment. I am personally very grateful to have participated in this historical friendship, evidently a work of God. When Imam Mohammed once asked me to improvise a few words at a banquet in Washington, DC, I acknowledged what seemed to reflect God’s unmistakable grace - the good, prayerful, charitable, intelligent imams associated with him from all over the U.S. Many of my personal friendships with these imams and members of their communities, have the same depth and authenticity that I find in my graced relationships with committed Christians. I am convinced that God has a plan for this particular people which is sincerely striving to follow him. And in our common effort to seek and submit to God, to work for the unity of the human family, we really are brothers and sisters together. In this process, these friends have acquired a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Catholic Church as well. In fact, they often encourage their Christian colleagues and neighbors to get to know their Christian faith better, possibly through the Focolare’s charism for unity.\textsuperscript{17}

Much has been written and recorded by members of the Focolare regarding their thoughts and sentiments relating to these dialogues. Most echo William Neu’s sentiments.

\textbf{Thoughts from Members of the Muslim American Society}

Interviews were conducted with Imam Earl El-Amin, the late Sister Amatullah Sharif, Dr. Mikal Ramadan, Sister Laila Muhammad, and Imam Ronald Shaheed, five

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
prominent, well known members of the Muslim American Society. They agreed to have their interviews recorded and transcribed for research purposes. The interviews were quite revealing of the tremendous impact of the dialogues. This section of the chapter provides summaries and selected quotes from members of the Muslim American Society regarding interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. These quotes directly express their intentions, goals, and thoughts relating to interreligious dialogue as well as how they benefited from the experience.

All of those interviewed were from interfaith families. The majority of those interviewed had converted to the Islam from Christianity, joining the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam. Laila Mohammed is the granddaughter of the Elijah Muhammad and daughter of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. While she was born a second generation Muslim American, she also had family connections with Christian relatives. Every interview subject had familiarity with Christians on a personal, family, social, and professional basis.

Not everyone was excited or eager to participate in the Muslim American Society’s interfaith dialogue with the Catholic Church and the Focolare. The majority of the participants expressed verbal or physical apprehension to the dialogues initially. The interviews revealed that the African American experience with racism, discrimination and the legacies of slavery had created a deep sense of distrust towards

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18 The Muslim American Society was the name of the community association of Muslim American mosques led by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed at the time of the interfaith dialogues which are the subject of this research. After a naming dispute with an unrelated non-profit organization of the same name, Imam Mohammed formally changed the name of the organization to the American Society of Muslims.
Europeans and whites. So despite having a familiarity with Christianity, having a love and trust in Imam Mohammed’s leadership, and being urged to participate by Imam Mohammed himself, there were many members of the Muslim American Society who did not understand the purpose of these dialogues or the relevance to their struggles in America. Laila Mohammed addressed this specifically:

My father, I should preface it with this, he raised me to be a thinker and to respectfully question and so I said, "Why you want us to do this with these Catholics and these white folks?" So that's what I asked him and he [said], "I just think that we would have a good experience," and he said, "Because of the love." Then he said publicly, and privately, because of the relationship of African Americans and Caucasians that we can perhaps heal or do something to positively affect the process of moving past slavery. It has done that. I can say for sure for me. There's this young activist and she says that Black folks aren't prejudiced. Because I always say, "Well yeah I'm prejudiced." But she says that you have to have a certain setup to be prejudiced. We're just responding to a condition….In my response to the condition I would tend to be very shy or very standoffish with Caucasian people. Questioning. My relationship with the Focolare, especially the Focolare here in Hyde Park in Chicago, where I lived up until a month ago, I don't feel that way. They have helped me to stop seeing a color before I see the character. We have become so close, the women at the Focolare House in Hyde Park, until I have told my children, "If my family or if we're not around and you need something, go to the Focolare House. That's our family, too."

In spite of this initial apprehension by some members, all those I interviewed greatly valued the experience of traveling to Rome and building meaningful relationships with Focolare. Dr. Mikal Ramadan expressed his thoughts in this manner:

That [Nation of Islam] had an effect on us, that pushed us forward and also did a little brain damaging. Imam Mohammed corrected that. He said, you are a part of the human family. The family of Adam. Your faith is Al Islam. He just taught us the religion of Al Islam. This, the Focolare, brought it all the way back around. You had to put down all of that, "Black man is God", which you

put down already but it swept out what might have been retained in the heart. It swept it out, swept it out. Brought it around full circle.  

It's all been a great blessing for Allah. I thank Allah because I feel like I lived a dream. I don't know in terms of anything else professional I would want to do, this is it. Practicing medicine. In terms of the time period and living a time frame in human history, having lived right at the time that I lived, coming from Christianity to the Nation of Islam to Imam Mohammed to the relationship with the Focolare, seeing all of that and having been - thank Allah - expanded. Each time Christianity, I was expanded, Nation of Islam expanded me, Imam [Mohammed] just took it to another level. And Imam saw how this would expand us, too. To come through all of this and to come back with a different view of Christianity in awe, after every coming out of it. The feeling of it that we had from the Nation of Islam, having come through this, this just put the cherry on top.  

Of the five members the author interviewed, two of those interviewed were with Imam Mohammed at these dialogues. The others got involved with the dialogues at a later date. Their previous interfaith experiences and comfort with Christians contributed to and translated into a general sense of comfort with the dialogues. Amatullah Sharif worked as a secretary for both the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. She expressed her thoughts on the dialogues as follows:

[John Paul II] was totally historic, he was like the son of the honorable Elijah Mohammed had the opportunity to meet with the Pope of the Catholic [Church]. It was historic to show the levels that we've come from and how Imam Mohammed his, this is my opinion, but how his understanding of the religion and the [Qur’an] and his performances and him as a leader went from there all the way up to here. Went from his, Martin Luther said, a mountain top and it was such an honor that he was most humble and to be there and so for that and it dignified our community, it dignified us….Well again to align ourselves with like-minded people. He had a respect for the Pope. That Pope

20 "Edited Interview with Dr. Mikal Ramadan," interview by author, September 2, 2016.

21 Ibid.
and this Pope, they're a little different than the others. They were reaching out to the Muslims, they reached out to us to try to better understand about us and not just to tolerate us, you know. And but to better understand and see the similarities, with us and the Christianity part, and this Pope was very progressive. I mean he went everywhere, he was very progressive. I can't really say what Imam's intentions were. I don't know but I know it was all good, for the better, for us and again it dignified our community. And it showed our interfaith responsibility and just like the Qur'an says if Allah wanted all of us to be one thing but he made it so we wouldn't hate one another but that so that we would learn about one another.22

When asked if the dialogues were beneficial, Sister Amatullah Sharif said:

I do [think so]. Because today the dialogues continue. The association with the Focolare continues. It may not be all over the place, but there are groups of people in the community who continue to uphold the legacy that we have with them. And these people are sincere. It was so interesting. We never felt like we were being proselytized and we never proselytized them. But when you get their literature you'll see they always have something in there about Islam or Imam Mohammed and you can feel from the heart that they were sincere. So and here again, as he's told us before, it doesn't take like a whole crew of people, you just have those sincere folks that keep the hope alive so to speak. And I think eventually, while I may not see it in my time, but I think that young adults and young people coming up, I think they want to continue the legacies and it's there, the seeds are there, always there. Yeah. It's a good thing, it was a good thing… On a scale of ten I'd rate it’s a 15. It's historical. We've done so many firsts. You know Imam giving invocation for the senate was a first. The Vatican was the first, you know it's just so many things…There were so many things pioneering.23

Twenty years after the 1996 introduction to Pope John Paul II at the Vatican by Archbishop of Baltimore Cardinal William Keeler as part of the delegation of Imam W. D. Mohammed, Imam Earl El-Amin was introduced to Pope Francis by Archbishop


23 Ibid.
of Baltimore William Lori in March 2016. Imam Earl El-Amin noted “that was one of the historical highpoints of our community, as well as the international Muslim community. Spending a whole week meeting with leaders of the Vatican and Focolare allowed us to establish and maintain those relationships today.” Reflecting on his experiences, Imam Earl El-Amin stated:

And the irony is I stood on the steps of Saint Peter’s in March of this year. Twenty years ago, I was here with Imam Muhammad was part of the initial delegation. And 20 years later, 20 years later, I'm back with the interfaith delegation. So that speaks volumes to me about his vision. About Imam W. D. Mohammed... To meet two different Popes in my lifetime is unbelievable. Not me, I'm talking about the work that Allah blessed us to be able to do with the vision this man had. Most people don't even get it, even in our community. So I think a lot, and when I have the opportunity to answer question sometimes you think, "That's enough for tonight" I can ask him thousands of questions about things, because we wanted to know. And his vision, his vision in my heart and my mind is pristine. I know what his vision is. I know what his vision is. I know what he wanted, because I had numerous conversations with him about it.

When asked why Imam Mohammed pursued these dialogues when he did, Imam Earl El-Amin expounded, “I think Imam Mohammad pursued these dialogues solely based on understanding the mind and traditions of Muhammad the Prophet in our time, space, reality here in America.”

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25 Ibid.

26 “Edited Interview with Imam Earl El-Amin," interview by author, September 18, 2016.

27 Ibid.
Imam Ronald Shaheed traveled with Imam Mohammed to all of the events in Rome and has been a prominent figure in these dialogues. He shared his profound insights and thoughts about the dialogues. Imam Ronald Shaheed was tremendously honored and appreciative of his experience. He was sensitive to the fact that many common religious followers are never presented with opportunities to experience all of the world coming together in unity and peace. He appealed to the audience of world religious leaders to rely the powerful impact of the message to their followers in a brief address during his participation in the Friends of Focolare event hosted during the Interreligious Jubilee in October 1999.

On the historic significance of descendants of enslaved Africans in America having an audience with the Pope, Imam Shaheed expressed:

So it's five Imam's and Imam Mohammed. That makes six. As I was walking up a hill, when the Pope has his Wednesday audience it's packed. People come from all over the world and that's every Wednesday and it was packed. Here's these six black men walking up going to have a seat on the same level as the Pope up there where he has his canopy. I said to myself, I said, "You know what, it's my understanding that at least one pope blessed the ship that was coming to take our ancestors to become slaves in the Americas. Now here is six, representing freedom, black men, descendants of those slaves, walking up the hill to be in dialogue with the leader of the Catholic Church. That wasn't lost to me is what I'm saying. It was a profound experience to me. What really brought it home to me was I looked at the people as we were coming up the hill and I saw the love and respect on their face. I saw some people were crying. I still remember that. They were crying tears and I don't know what they knew because I didn't get a chance to talk to them but you can tell when people either appreciate something you're doing or not. I saw appreciation on these people's faces and like I said some of them were crying. I think that it was a kind of a

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29 Ibid.
closure thing. Imam maybe uses, talk about the freedom movement and how it's continuing. Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglas, all of them represented contributions to the freedom movement and he connected Elijah Muhammad and himself in that freedom movement. For us to be in Rome with the leader of the Catholic Church and to get that kind of reception, talking about our leader, it was kind of a closure thing. I thought about it. I think it informs my thinking in my relationship because you know, Imam said that we live in a Christian country right? Now wouldn't it make sense for us to have good relationships with our Christian neighbors? Don't events like that help us have that?\textsuperscript{30}

Remarking on what he reasoned Imam Mohammed’s hopes were for the dialogue with Pope John Paul II, he shared, “He wanted a picture. He wanted a picture to be presented to the world of him embracing Pope John Paul and the Catholics. He wanted that picture to go around the world. He knew that if he did that, the Pope being the leader of the Catholic world, it would make its rounds in the Catholic circle but it would also make its rounds outside. Let it be known that Christians are not automatically our enemies.”\textsuperscript{31}

Regarding the relationship with the Focolare, Imam Ronald Shaheed posited:

I believe is going to unfold and people in the future are going to be writing and talking about these occurrences and their value for where human society has advanced. Chiara Lubich was a white woman leading a group of white women in the Catholic Church. That movement ended up to be not just women, but men too and got all races across the world involved in. She joined hands with W. Deen Mohammed who led a group that used to be blackness and they say all white people was devils. Right? Now W. Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich are gracing as a picture of how men and women could respect each other, how different races could respect and how different nationalities, all of that.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} “Edited Interview with Imam Ronald Shaheed,” interview by author, September 3, 2016.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
Imam Shaheed also related a private conversation where he sought deeper understanding about Imam Mohammed’s relationship with Chiara Lubich.

I just said Imam, give me your commentary on Chiara Lubich and he said, "She is an inspired woman. I believe she is inspired and I believe that God has lifted her above all women on earth." That's what he said about her. Like I said this was a private conversation. There was nobody else in the conversation. He saw her as a genuine article. We went on trips in her town where she lived in and everything and you can tell by, especially the women, the men too, but more importantly the women. When you interact with them, they channel Chiara Lubich, no doubt about it. I don't think they were even aware of it as much but the way that God blessed them and teach them to grasp a certain character and disposition as a believer you should see it, it's something special.  

More details were shared in the course of the interviews which have been edited and transcribed in the appendix. What is evident is that these dialogues greatly positively impacted members of the Muslim American Society who participated.

While Imam Izak-El Pasha of Harlem’s Malcolm Shabazz Masjid was unavailable to be interviewed for this thesis research, an interview in Living City magazine captured his ideas relating to the meeting between Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich at his mosque in May 1997. He described the meeting as one of global impact based on the international impact of the two noble leaders of the Word of God.  

He stated the historical significance of the mosque and the role it has played in the “history of Al-Islam and the revival of the African American people in the U.S., bringing them to the doorway of understanding of Al-Islam from W. D.

33 Ibid.

Fard, to his mother and father (Sister Clara Muhammad, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad) and to himself, Imam W. D. Mohammed.” Speaking of the pact between Chiara Lubich and Imam Mohammed, Imam Pasha stated:

The pact made between Imam W. D. Mohammed and Chiara Lubich is not a local matter; it’s a matter of international influence…The light of their work will continue to produce in my opinion good and nothing but good. Whether those who follow them hold on to their light or not, their work was given to them by the inspiration that God gives. The light of that work, I don’t believe can be put out, and their pact will continue to impact upon people’s lives. Whoever reads about them, whoever studies and looks at their life achievements, in my opinion they will be inspired to share the genuine love that these two persons left for humanity to build upon. We believe that God has given them the Paradise for their works. May God’s peace be upon them and upon us.35

Imam Mikal Saahir of the Nur-Allah Islamic Center in Indianapolis was also unavailable to be interviewed for this thesis research. However, his article in the Focolare publication Living City magazine captured his ideas relating to the meeting between Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich and the relationship between the communities. He expressed how he grew to deeply appreciate her teachings:

This Art of Loving as expressed by Chiara, was to be practiced and given generously:

- To be the first to love,
- To love everyone
- To love concretely, and
- To make yourself one with the other in their joys and sufferings.36

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35 Ibid.
Imam Mikal Saahir’s article expresses similar sentiments to those I interviewed. He wrote:

I must admit when I first experienced this, I did not fully understand what Imam Mohammed and Chiara were preparing their Muslim and Christian communities to achieve. After 9/11, it has become more and more apparent that their vision and our relationship can be a model for others wanting to follow the same path. Having experienced Chiara’s message has helped me, a Muslim-American living in a post 9/11 world, to continue living generously, and, yes loving generously. 37

From the feedback given in the interviews, it’s also evident that the dialogues accomplished the faith leaders’ goals. Firstly, the statements from each of the interviewees indicates the importance of establishing a common faith in God, the creator of all was communicated. Secondly, the statements from each of the interviewees indicates the importance of having a sacred love for all humanity was definitely conveyed. Thirdly, statements from each of the interviewees indicates that a mutual respect of the sacred traditions of the other faiths was clearly demonstrated. Fourthly, statements from some of the interviewees indicated a high appreciation of the discipline, character, and moral standards each faith provided to its adherents. Finally, the interviewees also expressed hopefulness that faith communities could work together for common good, uniting in service for God’s pleasure by serving humanity.

In fact, the connections that were established went far beyond any formal dialogue experience. Genuine relationships between faith communities were established which fully exhibited friendships of mutual respect, concern, fellowship,

37 Ibid.
and love. Imam Mohammed’s daughter, Laila Mohammed, was so impacted by her experience with the Focolare that she named her daughter Chiara.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{38} "Edited Interview with Sister Laila Mohammed."
Future Implications

This study provides an extensive literature review from primary sources on the interfaith dialogue between the members of the Muslim American Society, representatives of the Catholic Church, and especially with Focolare. Additionally, five guided research interviews were conducted with members of the former Muslim American Society, providing original research. While two of these interview subjects, Imam Earl El-Amin and Imam Ronald Shaheed, figured quite prominently in the original dialogues. The three other interview subjects were significant participants in later dialogues spawned by these initial meetings. The current research presented insights into the impact and effectiveness of the interfaith dialogues from the indigenous Muslim American community. Very little information from this perspective had been published on this subject matter.

Further research could greatly expound on the number of research participants from the Muslim American Society. On certain trips to Rome, there were over 200 member delegations present during these various dialogues. Additionally, other key voices of the Muslim American Society, such as Imam Plemon El-Amin, Imam A.K. Hassan, and Imam Ezekiel Pasha, were not interviewed during this phase of research. Further research could include these voices and others.

Additionally, the focus of this thesis was particularly on the perspective of indigenous Muslim Americans of the former Muslim American Society. Further research could include specific interviews with members of the Vatican, National Council of Catholic Bishops, and members of the Focolare. There were hundreds if
not thousands of members that were directly involved or apart of the various occasions of these meetings. Doing guided interviews with many of these persons would provide an even more complete qualitative viewpoint on the impact and effectiveness of these interfaith meetings.

Finally, future inquiries could expand beyond the participants in these interfaith meetings to include Catholics, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others that witnessed these meetings from afar. The scope of this academic inquiry could be broadened to include lay people as well as those outside of the world of faith. A research project of that breadth could qualitatively measure what type of impact or effectiveness these dialogues had beyond the meetings themselves. Subsequent research would build significantly on the findings of this study and provide a fuller picture of the impact and effectiveness of the interfaith dialogues between the Catholic Church, Muslim American Society, and the Focolare.

Illustration 3. Nation of Islam *The Muslim Program* circa 1960s.
Illustration 8. Nation of Islam *The Early Years Photo Collage.*

Illustration 11. Imam Mohammed with President Nelson Mandela
Illustration 12. Imam Mohammed with Pope John Paul II. October 1999
Illustration 13. Imam Mohammed with Chiara Lubich.

Illustration 15. Muslim Journal Covers highlighting the Muslim American Society relationship with the Focolare Movement and the Catholic Church. Circa 2000s.

Illustration 17. Muslim Journal Covers Highlighting Interfaith Dialogue led by members of the Muslim American Society. Circa 2000s.
APPENDIX 1

MALS THESIS QUESTIONS

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW:
1. Do you consent to this interview being recorded? Do you consent to being identified by first name and location of residence? If not, would you prefer to be identified anonymously?

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS:
1. What is your name?
2. Where do you reside?
3. What year were you born/what is your age?
4. What is your gender?
5. How old are you when you became Muslim/Catholic? When you joined this community (Imam Mohammed’s community/Focolare Community/Catholic Community? When you accepted the leadership of IWDM/Chiara Lubich? How long have you considered yourself a member of the community?
6. Do you consider yourself a pioneer? Are you considered a pioneer?
7. Do you consider yourself a legacy member of the community? Does your family have a history of involvement in the community?

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS ON INTERFAITH:
1. How do you feel about interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians?
2. What is your experience with interfaith relationships between Muslims and other faiths? With Catholics in particular? Is it just within your non-Muslim/non-Catholic family?
3. Have you ever been a part of a Muslim community interfaith event or program?
4. How did you feel about this event? Was it what you expected?
5. How did it compare to other religious events you have experienced? How was it similar? How was it different?
6. Have you ever been a part of a Non-Muslim community interfaith event or program? With Catholics/Non-Catholics?
7. How did you feel about this event? Was it what you expected?
8. How did it compare to other religious events you have experienced? How was it similar? How was it different?
9. What is the value of interfaith experiences between Muslims and Christians to you?
HISTORIC EVENTS

_Imam Mohammed_ went to Rome and met with the Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in October 1996. There were a series of meetings that preceded this first trip between Imam Earl El-Amin, Imam Eric El-Amin, and Imam Earl Abdul Malik Mohammed with members of the Vatican. Imam Mohammed initially met with Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore in 1995 at a program on inter religious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Imam Mohammed met afterward with Cardinal Keeler who served as Archbishop of Baltimore at that time.

In Rome, Imam Mohammed and his delegation met with several Catholic communities. The community which Imam Mohammed developed an ongoing relationship was the Focolare. Imam Mohammed developed a deep and respectful friendship with Chiara Lubich, leader of the Focolare movement.

In 1997, Chiara Lubich of the Focolare Movement spoke with the aid of an Italian translator at the Malcolm Shabazz Masjid in Harlem, New York with Imam W. D. Mohammed. Imam Izak-El Pasha moderated.

Imam Mohammed again traveled to Rome in October 1999 and again visited with Pope John Paul II. Imam Mohammed delivered a testimony and prayer at the closing ceremony in Vatican City at the Interreligious Assembly before the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The theme was Towards A Culture of Dialogue.

Remarking on this amazing event, Dr. John Borelli writes, “In October 1999, at the interreligious assembly convened in Rome by Cardinal Arinze as a preparatory event for the celebration of the Great Jubilee Year 2000, Imam Muhammad offered prayers on the steps of St. Peter’s Basilica during the closing service. I was told that it was the first time that a Muslim offered a prayer in any formal way in the precincts of St. Peter’s. An American Muslim prays in a public service at the central spot in the Vatican. I was pinching myself again.”

PRIMARY QUESTIONS:

10. Did you travel as part of Imam Mohammed’s delegation to either of these trips to Rome? Were you part of the team hosting his delegation? Which one? If not, did you know someone who did attend? Were you in attendance at Malcolm Shabazz Masjid in Harlem New York?

11. How did you feel about your experience?
   1. is it what you expected?
   2. how does it compare with other religious places you have visited?

12. What difference has this experience made in your life?
   1. What does this experience mean to you?
2. What is the value of this experience to you?
13. What did you learn about interfaith relationships from this experience?
14. Has what you experienced impacted how you see religion? current events, politics, equality, freedom, or moral values in society?
   1. Has your viewpoint been broadened or narrowed? Please describe.
   2. Have you changed your ideas or thinking since having this experience?
15. Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammed pursued this dialogue?
16. What do you think his intentions were?
17. What do you think Imam Mohammed/Chiara Lubich/Pope John Paul II hoped would result from these dialogues?
18. What did Imam Mohammed’s meeting at the Vatican with Pope John Paul II mean to you?
19. What did Imam Mohammed’s meeting with Chiara Lubich of the Focolare movement mean to you?
20. In your opinion, were these dialogues successful? Why? Why not?
21. In your opinion, were these dialogues effective? Why? Why not?
22. Was this experience beneficial to you? To our communities?
   1. Would you describe this experience as a benefit or waste of time?
   2. How would you quantify or qualify the benefits that resulted from these dialogues?
   3. How do you feel about this experience? How do you rate this experience on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most meaningful and 1 being the least meaningful?
23. Did you learn anything else from this experience?
24. Is there anything else you would like to share or comment?
Edited Interview Transcript of Sister Amatullah Sharif

September 1, 2016

Location: Assisted Living Facility south of Chicago, IL

Author/Transcription Note: The notation “inaudible” simply means that a sound obscured what word or phrase was exactly stated in the audio recording.

T. Najee-ullah: As-Salaam ‘Alaikum

A. Sharif: ‘Alaikum As-Salaam

T. Najee-ullah: Do you consent to this interview being recorded?

A. Sharif: Yeah.

T. Najee-ullah: Do you consent to be identified by your first name and location of residence?

A. Sharif: Yeah.

T. Najee-ullah: Or do you- how do you want to be identified?

A. Sharif: Yeah I'm Amatullah Sharif.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay. So I'm going to ask you some- so I'm going to set this here. I'm going to ask you some basic demographic questions. This is just to identify you for the recording and so that when it's transcribed everything, each interview will be categorized appropriately. What is your name?

A. Sharif: Amatullah Sharif.

T. Najee-ullah: Where do you reside?

A. Sharif: Markham Illinois.

T. Najee-ullah: And you can answer this either way, you don't have to give exact- either what year are you born and what is your age?

A. Sharif: 1946, 69 years old.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay so now I'm going to ask you some community questions just trying to get into kind of- for the record. At what age did you become Muslim?
A. Sharif: In my early 20s, a young adult I became Muslim. I got out of college, went to New York and I started reading a lot of black literature, slave literature, and contemporary stuff. And the more I read, the more I was becoming conscious, conscious of African American plight. And that led me up to find out about Islam.

T. Najee-ullah: So when you joined this community, you joined with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad?

A. Sharif: Yes. I was ... I've ran into a- Okay. I had met- in my black consciousness I went to the bookstore, Books-n-Things in New York in Manhattan and I ran into- today he's the assistant to Minister Farrakhan who was kind of a spokesman for him.

T. Najee-ullah: Akbar Mohammed?

A. Sharif: Akbar Mohammed was the one who fished me. I was his fish, so to speak. They picked me up. I went down to the Books-n-Things, they picked me up from there and took me to Queen's New York and there- this was a nation of Islam. There I heard a young minister speak and I guess because I had been reading books and stuff and slavery, he mentioned how we were treated during that time and there was like an epiphany, and I said oh this is the place. But because prior to that they had told me all of the things that the Muslims were doing, because I was kind of frustrated with America and I was about try to find a way to go to Africa because I couldn't take that we weren't doing anything per se.

But when I spoke to them they told me about the schools, the stores, restaurants, everything they had I really didn't know. And so I was excited about that. So I immediately signed up to get my x, so I did all of the preparations in New York I was staying in Bronx at the time with friends. And so but then I thought I'd rather complete it in my hometown DC, so I came back to Washington and kept having to write the letters until one of them worked and April the 11th, 1970, I got my X. And I did it from Washington DC from Dr. Lonnie Shabazz at that time.

The minute I got my X there, I hit the ground running because I was so excited about Islam. I wanted to work and help and do whatever I could. And I did. And you want more?

T. Najee-ullah: Could you describe when you accepted the leadership of Imam Mohammed.

A. Sharif: Huh?

T. Najee-ullah: Could you describe when you accepted the leadership of Imam Mohammed?
A. Sharif: Oh well all of that was natural progressions. Because what happened was after working in DC in the community doing a number of things and served as an MGT secretary. Then I also served as assistant secretary for University of Islam and eventually I got invited to come to Chicago to work for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad as a secretary. I went there that Friday and he asked if I could come back that Monday to work. So I had to come back to DC and clear up everything to get back to Illinois. So I stayed working under the leadership of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad until when he passed. When he passed I was asked to be a secretary for Imam W.D. Mohammed. So it was a segue, so to speak. And so I worked as secretary there for him until I came back to DC, my father was ill, so I came back to DC and that was like in 1970, 1977. And got married, had kids and all like that.

Then Imam needed- Imam it was a [inaudible 00:07:54] we had a [inaudible 00:07:57] Mohammed. And Imam was doing the Eid al-Adha in Philadelphia, so me and some sisters we drove to Philly. When we got there, then I had a meeting with Imam and during the conversation and meeting and all he was saying he needed somebody in Illinois secretary and somebody. Things weren't going the way he wanted and invited me to come back there and so I said okay, went back to DC, but I waited until my kids finished that school session and then he relocated me from DC to- oh, that's so- he relocated me from DC to Illinois but that was a ladder.

The work that I did for Imam Mohammed, most all of it I did from Washington DC. So I was excited to be able to get Imam- I did public relations for him basically. So I would, different things would occur and I'd ask if he would like that or whatever, radio, television, different things. And he agreed and I even wrote a book, I did a book for him. So it was just- when you knew you had a leader like him in Islam, you- I just had the desire to make sure he got exposed, as well as Dawah getting Islam all around in the DC area. Because he always liked to come to DC. He wasn't always invited but I would find venues, different venues to have him there. So it all really started back in the 80s, the different things I did, developed pamphlets for him and I think we probably distributed about two million or more around- mm-hmm (affirmative).

I think I developed about 45 pamphlets, and that started the pamphlets. Is it- I don't know what you want, but this is a long history of stuff. You can take whatever you want but.

T. Najee-ullah: I just want to get to-right now I'm just getting background- 

A. Sharif: Yeah that's what I thought.

T. Najee-ullah: Let me check the recording just for a second to make sure it's set up. Okay it's working fine. So.
A. Sharif: I should be recording this for me.

T. Najee-ullah: Oh I can give you a copy.

A. Sharif: Huh?

T. Najee-ullah: I can give you a copy.

A. Sharif: Oh, okay, all right. It's just that- yeah because I can't transcribe I appreciate it.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes ma'am. These are not necessarily long questions [inaudible 00:11:49]. Do you consider yourself a community pioneer? Or are you considered a pioneer?

A. Sharif: Well they here consider me a pioneer, yeah. I would say yes. And that was another thing about people born in the community and been around for a lot. I'd consider some of those- and especially if they are community activists. Yeah. But yeah I would consider it to- because believe me, we pioneered stuff that had never- we'd been the first to so many things that had never been done before. And it's only because the grace of Allah would give you these ideas and the guidance of Allah. We've pioneered, you know there's no book or manual for the things we've done. But has lasted for a while. We pioneered a lot of them. So I would call it that.

T. Najee-ullah: This is the last of the background questions and I'm going to start to my topic and then I'm going to get specific about the topic. The last background question is- so do you consider yourself a legacy member of the community or does your family have a history of involvement in the community? Were you the first in your family to embrace Islam?

A. Sharif: Do they have a legacy because it-

T. Najee-ullah: So this question is asking- were you the first in your family to embrace Islam or did you have other members of your family that embraced it as well?

A. Sharif: I'm the first and only member of my immediate family. No one else ever took it. My children are Muslims. They- myself and my children, I had three kids. We are Muslims in the family. If I had somebody I don't know who they are. But I had kind of a big family. But everyone else are Christians.

T. Najee-ullah: So then this is the next question I'm going to ask you about interfaith. So you can look at this either as your experience as a Muslim in your family and your other [inaudible 00:15:12]. How do you feel about interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians?

A. Sharif: I think it's great. It's a wonderful thing. I have in my family Christians, Baptist Christians. I have Jehovah Witness, I have probably Catholics. I have
members from every- I had some Apostolic- every, you know, not every but quite a few different backgrounds of Christianity. And we come together, banquets, programs, birthdays, whatever, and we socialize fellowship. We do not discuss religion per se because they're not that keen on me being Muslim, because then the only reason I think is because their concept of what we think about Jesus- we don't actually see Jesus as God. Some of them do. So we don't go near that per se. What I find disappointing is that because you have a Muslim in the midst, why not ask them questions that you want to know. But they don't. So- you stop that.

T. Najee-ullah: So we were talking about asking some background questions on interfaith?

A. Sharif: Oh yeah. I was saying that interfaith is good but my people, they're not into interfaith like we are. Yeah.

T. Najee-ullah: So I asked some background questions on interfaith. I'm gonna ask a few of these and let you answer…then I'm going to get to the part about Imam Mohammed and go back and forth a lot. I'm just trying to ask these questions to everybody.

A. Sharif: Well to summarize basically interfaith, I has an interfaith family per se. And it's mostly good in terms of being together and we have a family message on here. We have a family message on the line so when birthdays come or something comes up, you know, breaking news, and then everybody would chime in with- so that's a good thing. But they visited, I've had them to visit with me- my mom, my mom visited me up here. Different programs we've had that family has visited with me have come and attended. So that's about the extent of interfaith.

T. Najee-ullah: So if we look out at interfaith relationships between Muslims and other faiths that's not your immediate family or a non-Muslim family. Have you ever been a part of a [inaudible 00:24:59] community interfaith and leader program?

A. Sharif: Extremely.

T. Najee-ullah: Yeah. How do you feel about being a part of those events?

A. Sharif: I feel honored to be a part of the events. I have been at the Washington Cathedral- it's a Islamic- where they have Muslim, Christian, Jews, different faiths give excerpts from the Quran, the Bible, whatever. We've had where dignitaries from the White House and all like that were there. It was for a reason, I can't remember that one. And my daughter has been very big in interfaith. As a teenager she- there's one group in DC that had her represent Islam. The Children's Defense Fund has us- we were when they had a huge program on the Washington Monument, my family we were on the stage representing Islam. There's been so many opportunities. We've been into
Jewish synagogue, we've been with Imam Mohammed when he's been interfaith programs and it all serves. And then of course the Focolare, we love them. We went to Italy. Myself-

T. Najee-ullah: I'm going to ask about Italy in a second, just talking about Italy. This is just in general. Were these interfaith events what you expected and how did they compare to other religious events you have experienced? Was it similar or different?

A. Sharif: I would say they were- the interfaith were different. We all came from there knowing more about one another, respecting each other. It's been so many that we've had and they're all basically the same. The one I would say the most-respected one would be the Focolare. Because they always have follow up. A lot of the others they didn't really have a lot of follow up. Focolare had follow up. And they continue to this day, they follow up. They visited me and I get their literature and they're always inviting us to their programs.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay.

A. Sharif: And they come to ours, with our conventions, they speak at our conventions.

T. Najee-ullah: Thank you. You've kind of answered the other questions. It's just, you know a lot of these you try to find out what someone thinks you ask similar questions just to see how the person responds. Oh it wasn't that, I wasn't asking what is the value of interfaith experience between Muslim and Christians you answered that. So for the focus of my studies, I'm dealing with the following historic events. So Imam Mohammed went to Rome and met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in October of 1996. This was after a series of meetings that happened between Imam [inaudible 00:29:14] Imam [inaudible 00:29:14] and Imam [inaudible 00:29:17], members of the Vatican and the United States.

A. Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

T. Najee-ullah: Imam Mohammed initially met with Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore in 1995 at a program on interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Imam Mohammed afterward met with Cardinal Keeler who served as the archbishop of Baltimore at that time. In Rome, Imam Mohammed and his delegation met with several Catholic communities. The community which Imam Mohammed developed an ongoing relationship was the Focolare. Imam Mohammed built a deep and respectful friendship with Chiara Lubich the leader of the Focolare whom, in 1997, Chiara Lubich of the Focolare spoke with the aid of an Italian translator at [inaudible 00:29:57] in New York with Imam W.D. Mohammed and that Ezekiel Pasha moderated. Imam Mohammed again traveled to Rome in October 1999 and again visited with Pope John Paul II, the Imam Mohammed delivered testimony and prayer at the closing ceremony back in
the city at the interreligious assembly before the Central Committee for the Black Jubilee of the year 2000, particular council for interreligious dialogue.

A. Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

T. Najee-ullah: The theme was Towards a Culture of Dialogue, remarking on this amazing event Dr. John Borelli, my advisor, writes, "in October 1999 at the interreligious assembly convened in Rome by Cardinal Arinze as a proprietary event for the celebration of the great jubilee of the year 2000, Imam Mohammed offered prayers on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica during the closing service. I was told it was the first time that a Muslim offered a prayer in any formal way in the precincts of St. Peters. An American Muslim prays in public service at the central spot in the Vatican. I was pinching myself again."

A. Sharif: I wouldn't say on the steps. It was- where I'd say steps, steps means steps. But he was in the back on the interior of it where the Pope was. Pope was not on the steps. So I would not say on the steps. Because people might really perceive him there on the steps. And there were a lot of steps. He gave the invocation in the Vatican, I would say, in the Vatican, to over a hundred thousand people I think it was. And that's good, that's accurate.

T. Najee-ullah: So these are questions about these events and so did you travel as part of Imam Mohammed's delegation to these trips in Rome?

A. Sharif: That one. I basically- yeah we had to take care of the kids, well I had to take care of the kids. I didn't get to that one but I got to one later, a delegation we went to Italy. And Imam was supposed to go on that one but he wasn't able to go and he drafted a letter for Chiara Lubich and gave it to me to give to her...and then then they translated it in Italian.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay. Were you in attendance at the Malcolm Shabazz?

A. Sharif: No I didn't get there either.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay. But you were very much aware of the experience.

A. Sharif: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I was very much aware. It was- the Imam was elated. His association with Chiara Lubich was admirable and well accepted and they had a meeting of the mind, a kindred of spirit and he respected her so much as did she of him. And she drafted a letter and sent it back and her letter was- it was incredible, because the way she formed it, she formed it their friendship and allegiance and she used...I was like wow, you know. I was glad to see that and knowing that when she passed, she seemed to have had an understanding of Islam. Glad to see that. But it was a good thing, the major thing that I think Imam Mohammed wanted for us to get from the allegiance with the Focolare
Chiara Lubich, that movement, was that we should love one another, almost unconditionally.

Because what I learned from them, how their love for Jesus and his teachings was so strong and it was about love and so no matter what, no matter how you loved one another, each other, and I could see it when I was there. I could see exactly what that meant. And I started putting it in practice because in our community or anywhere we had personality issues. This person don't like you and this one this and that and like that kind of thing. Or somebody does something to you and you're like I'm not speaking to them and all that kind of stuff.

And I remember when we got on the plane coming back, there was a sister who I wasn't speaking to too much because she wasn't speaking to me. But coming back on that plane, she sat across from me and I initiated a conversation with her and then I asked her to accept my apology if I had treated her any kind [inaudible 00:36:51]. And she said know I was just about to say that to you. That's how strong their actions weighed on us. And then we became friends again so much for that because what I had learned from the Focolare I put it into practice right then and there. And it was so good, it was such a relief felt. But we who went are the people who should try to instill that in our community and it worked but then you know after a while it goes off.

But I could see what Imam wanted, he was saying that you know all we need in our community is love and love for one another. And that's what the Focolare had in their community. And it does make a difference. And that song that says "what the world needs now," it is a truism, a truism. And if we can look at one another and look at them as a human being as a person, not this label, that label,…And that we all are children from Adam and Eve and all that. I guess it will take a minute, but that's what I learned from Focolore. Long lasting. And I tend to carry that even now, you know I have a love for people. That's their children, they don't have to be mine.

T. Najee-ullah: So I think you also covered some of the answers to this, I'm gonna ask the questions. If you think that you've already touched on the answer you don't have to answer them go to the next one okay? So well this question is- you answered how you felt about your experience. Was it what you expected?

A. Sharif: In Italy?

T. Najee-ullah: Yes ma'am.

A. Sharif: Oh. It was beyond, it was really awesome. I don't like to use that word but it was really great. The country itself was beautiful and the people were friendly and I really kind of fell in love with it. It really is a romantic kind of country
because you can feel the romance and I was able to get dialysis there for three days and they went with me, served as my interpreter. The program, they had programs with people, when they had programs with people, this particular one was for Muslims all over the world, so we met Muslims from Turkey, from every- Japan, China, oh it was blazing.

Because they also had an area where they did for themselves, they had a furniture factory where they built and made furniture, you know, bedroom furniture, children furniture, everything. Everybody, all of the Focolare or Focolarinis, the Foelorinis. They're from numerous countries but they all speak Italian. It's like we're supposed to speak Arabic. So they can be Japanese but they speak Italian. They had so much unity and of their artists they had their things on display. It was much more than I expected. And then they had programs with the Japanese dancing in their beautiful colors. The other thing is when we have our programs here with the Focolare, we're invited, we have to participate.

And everybody know, well what should we do? I thought. Let's do Clara Mohammed's song, so we did- everybody didn't know it but I had- the book I had done, the Champion, the book I had done for Imam I had put Clara Mohammed's song in the front and I had a copy with me so we Xeroxed it and everybody got a copy of it. And so that was our song, was the Clara Mohammed. It turned out really nice, we had a little choir, it turned out really nice.

T. Najee-ullah: How would you compare the trip to Rome, to Italy, as a religious trip, how does it compare with other religious places you've visited?

A. Sharif: Other religious places?

T. Najee-ullah: Or other places in general, I mean I don't want to limit you to religious places.

A. Sharif: I would say Italy was probably a nine as compared- my only disappointment was the day that I had dialysis was the day they went to the Sistine Chapel.

T. Najee-ullah: Oh wow.

A. Sharif: And I didn't get to go there. But we went to Trent, Italy, where the movement was born from Chiara Lubich. So we had that history, how it came about. I went there and I had a dialysis there and then we went to Rome and there was another place we went which is where they had the furniture and the different things. But it was beautiful too, scenic, because you could see the grapes and the olive trees and the grapes vines where they had the ... Oh what was really interesting and impressive was where we stayed. We stayed at Gandolfo, I can't say it but I know it in my mind. Castel Gandolfo
T. Najee-ullah: Yes I saw it.

A. Sharif: Yeah.

T. Najee-ullah: I have that-

A. Sharif: That was the summer home of the Pope and he gave it to them and they renovated it, they fixed it so it would be like dorms and there was no basement, they made a basement, and that's where the cafeteria, where the dining room was. And it was interesting there, they had a routine. Each community, we were responsible for cleaning and setting up, it was real nice. The food was good. So then of course they had the market where you can go buy olive oil or other food to bring back. But it was very impressive, very impressive.

T. Najee-ullah: So these other two questions I think you've already shared- I'm going to read them but then I'm going to go to the other ones. What difference has this experience made in your life and what did you- what did you learn, I think you talked about that.

A. Sharif: I did.

T. Najee-ullah: So the next question, has what you experienced impacted how you see religion and then the second part of that question is, has it-

A. Sharif: My sociology class and one of the assignments we had was to write about well whatever we wanted to. And so my papers were always about Islam and I wrote about the difference. It was about the difference between Oral Roberts, you know his community and our community. And some of it was similar because they had a ministry for prisoners, you know a ministry for different things it was similar. But I remember writing a paper about Al Islam and the leadership and different things. When he returned my paper it was an A and he wrote on it, "you should be a public relations person for Islam."

There was so much information that they didn't never know and that I should do public relations. But the funny part was I was doing- you know, I was already doing public relations for the community. So and then there was one paper I did, independent study, I had to do a paper on anything. Of course it was on Islam again. My teacher, I didn't know that she was Atheist, she said she was Atheist, but she gave me an A on that paper and she kept it. She said "I want to keep this." I said "you can't keep my paper," but she kept it and maybe she wanted for other people to know about it. It was interesting. But every chance I ever got when I was in school to do anything it would be to spread Dawah, the Dawah of Islam.

T. Najee-ullah: The question was has what you experienced impacted how you see religion?
A. Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

T. Najee-ullah: And the second part of that was, religion, current events, politics, equality, freedom, or moral guidance in society.

A. Sharif: The first part is what I learned I guess from interfaith and of course from Imam is that all religions should be respected, the major ones, they should be respected, all of them. And that the order in which they go, you know, Christianity came first and how our religion confirms a lot of stuff that's come through. I already know from Qur'an where we stand on a scale from one to ten we're a ten. I already know that. I don't throw it around because it's not a good idea to do that, but there's so many things that have occurred that makes me know how real and how great Islam is. It came with the creations of the heavens and the earth and Islam is submission to the word of Allah. Everything in creation submits to Allah's will, everything.

And nature submits to his will. Therefore him creating human beings, we should do the same. I think my experience has let me to know how real Islam is, Allah is, although I still got a long ways to go. But it's impacted my life extremely, that I wish more people could see the beauty of it, the greatness of it. I think they do, especially when it comes for- but we have to have things to hold them, you know, we have to have developed things. But the only solace I get from that, because of this unity that we have, is that I know that Allah can bring us all together in the twinkling of an eye. No matter where we are, what we're doing, what we're working on with this organization or that. If Allah so wills and it was necessary, he could bring all of the Muslims together in unity in the twinkling of an eye. That's my solace. Because the frustration of division you know then again Allah knows everything, nothing happens without his will.

T. Najee-ullah: Absolutely. Would you say that your viewpoint has been broadened or narrowed, and have you changed your ideas and thinking since having these experiences of interfaith.

A. Sharif: Extremely broadened, because a lot of that for me, Imam Mohammed, a lot of times when he would talk people would get the idea that he's talking just about our community. But he was always talking about the whole, you know, and never just a few people here, a few people there. Never. It was always everybody.

T. Najee-ullah: I think you've answered this one, but just I want to say it in case you want to add anything to it. Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammed pursued this dialogue?

A. Sharif: What dialogue?
T. Najee-ullah: With Pope John Paul II and with the Focolare.

A. Sharif: Mmm. John Paul II was totally historic, he was like the son of the honorable Elijah Mohammed had the opportunity to meet with the Pope of the Catholic community. It was historic to show the levels that we've come from and how Imam Mohammed his, this is my opinion, but how his understanding of the religion and the [inaudible 00:55:14] and his performances and him as a leader went from there all the way up to here. Went from his, Martin Luther said, a mountain top and it was such an honor that he was most humble and to be there and so for that and it dignified our community, it dignified us. And from that part, you know the other part was what now?

T. Najee-ullah: So I guess what do you think his intentions were or what do you think he hoped would result from those dialogues? The meetings in Rome, the Pope and the Focolare.

A. Sharif: Well again to align ourselves with like-minded people. He had a respect for the Pope. That Pope and this Pope, they're a little different than the others. They were reaching out to the Muslims, they reached out to us to try to better understand about us and not just to tolerate us, you know. And but to better understand and see the similarities, with us and the Christianity part, and this Pope was very progressive. I mean he went everywhere, he was very progressive. I can't really say what Imam's intentions were. I don't know but I know it was all good, for the better, for us and again it dignified our community. And it showed our interfaith responsibility and just like the [inaudible 00:57:49] says if Allah wanted all of us to be one thing but he made it so we wouldn't hate one another but that so that we would learn about one another.

T. Najee-ullah: That's right.

A. Sharif: And even when a lot of the negative things came out about the Catholics and the priests [inaudible 00:58:11], you know said these people knew about all this stuff a long time ago. It's like they wanted to wait for a certain time to come out and try to embarrass them. I mean he didn't condone anything but he didn't really want us to clamp down on them. Because it was just a few apples.

T. Najee-ullah: Well these are the final questions, because I think you've answered what, because we didn't- at the Vatican what Pope John Paul meant to you. What the meeting with Chiara Lubich meant to you.

A. Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

T. Najee-ullah: So the last ones are, giving your opinions, do you think these dialogues were successful, why or why not, and do you think they were effective, why or why not.
A. Sharif: I do. Because today the dialogues continue. The association with the Focolore continues. It may not be all over the place, but there are groups of people in the community who continue to uphold the legacy that we have with them. And these people are sincere. It was so interesting. We never felt like we were being proselytized and we never proselytized them. But when you get their literature you'll see they always have something in there about Islam or Imam Mohammed and you can feel from the heart that they were sincere. So and here again, as he's told us before, it doesn't take like a whole crew of people, you just have those sincere folks that keep the hope alive so to speak. And I think eventually, while I may not see it in my time, but I think that young adults and young people coming up, I think they want to continue the legacies and it's there, the seeds are there, always there. Yeah. It's a good thing, it was a good thing.

T. Najee-ullah: So I think this last question on that vein, I think you've answered it, so you can choose to answer it or not. Was this- I'm trying to capture, the essence of something, so I'm asking some similar questions that get us the same thing depending on how people answer. Was this experience beneficial to you and to our community like how you said that.

A. Sharif: Yeah.

T. Najee-ullah: And if you could rate it as a scale of one to ten with ten being the most meaningful and one being the least, how would you rate this experience. And I think you've already-

A. Sharif: Like the Focolare, Pope-

T. Najee-ullah: Well yes ma'am they're two different experiences.

A. Sharif: On a scale of ten I'd rate it a 15. It's historical. We've done so many firsts. You know Imam giving invocation for the senate was a first. The Vatican was the first, you know it's just so many things. We'd signed charter when we was there, that was a first. There were so many things pioneering.

T. Najee-ullah: So these last questions are open for you- did you learn anything else from this experience and is there anything else you wanted to share or comment?

A. Sharif: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I just only hope that from what Imam has taught us, what he's- was blessed to be an example that we could really keep it going, carry it on. Not superficial, not our own brand of stuff, accuracy, the thing that I like most is accuracy. Writing for Muslim journal and anything that covered the White House, the State Department, these are places that I covered with Imam Mohammed. A lot of places it's accuracy, yeah, and put your thing, this thing and that, put the truth. And that's what I would hope our history,
documentary, whatever is pure accuracy. Nothing embellished, nothing taken out. Because truth is powerful and truth is extremely powerful. It is what's necessary to help grow people, to have balance - is the truth. Accuracy. That's it.

T. Najee-ullah: Thank you for your time, thank you for allowing me to intrude on your dinner.

A. Sharif: Oh, no.

T. Najee-ullah: Just share your company.

A. Sharif: I was hoping you'd eat with me.

T. Najee-ullah: So but it was good, it was really good. But I appreciate you, I really do appreciate you allowing me to come here.

A. Sharif: Mmm.

T. Najee-ullah: I truly appreciate you and your service to the community
Edited Interview with Dr. Mikal Ramadan

September 2, 2016

Location: Mosque Cares Annual Muslim Convention at Tinley Park, IL

Author/Transcription Note: The notation “inaudible” simply means that a sound obscured what word or phrase was exactly stated in the audio recording.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I have to ask a couple of questions, recording for research purposes … internal review board.

Do you consent to this interview being audio recorded?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Yes I do

Tariq Najee-ullah: How would you like to be identified?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Imam Dr. Mikal Ramadan

Tariq Najee-ullah: What is your location of residence?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Chicago.

Tariq Najee-ullah: What year were you born and what is your age, however you can answer the question.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: I'm 68 years old and I was born in Mount Clemens, Michigan. Not far from where Imam Mohammed was born. Just a couple days from when he was born, so we mentioned that before to him.

Tariq Najee-ullah: How old were you when you joined the community?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: I joined in 1962, I was about 10 or 11 years old. Quickly, my family was all Methodist and we attended a church not far from my home and we were very active. My mother was active in the church activities and my father was active. It was an elderly couple that lived between our church and our house - they were Muslim. They invited us to the temple. This was probably back in 1960 and we began attending. My father liked it and we did too. Eventually we wrote our letters and we joined the nation. Just to make a long story short we were very active in selling Muhammad Speaks newspapers. I grew up in the community and I went to college in the community, I was active in that time.
Tariq Najee-ullah: That's the basic set up as far as who you are. The next questions I have are kind of centered on background with interfaith and then we'll talk specifically about the events.

How do you feel about interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians?

[00:03:10 audio stops and begins again] - generations.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: What was I talking about?

Tariq Najee-ullah: These questions - again, they're just really to set up a background and then with interfaith, experience with interfaith, and then we're talking specifically about these events regarding the history of Imam.

How do you feel about - in general - about interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: I feel it's essential. We're believers, they're believers. I owe this understanding to Imam Mohammed, who changed my view from the Nation of Islam. He pulled and tugged us along and expanded our understanding. I appreciate the strong faith that they have and I am so grateful to be now establishing the contact with the Focolare that we have. I think if you said that there are times and different ways that the example that they are to us, of practicing real loves amongst themselves. And loving being a servant to others, which you can feel with the Focolare.

In our first contact we were, perhaps suspicious, we had never seen ... we'd been raised with Catholics all our lives, we were raised with white folks all our lives. And here we have these people acting different and expressing a different feeling. Expressing a love and respect for our faith. They weren't trying to proselytize, they weren't trying to, you know - "this is why mine's better than yours". But actually, through the relationship, they were enhancing my understanding and their relationship with us enhanced theirs, they would say it so many times.

So I am grateful to Allah and thankful to Imam Mohammad for establishing this. They raised the bar. They raised the bar in loving one another. Sometimes you haven't felt that feeling and they established that love is working, love is opening, love is serving. You know, loving is being a first, as they say, to establish the contact and the follow through. There are principles that I find personally ... some principles I get from the Focolare - just like principles I got from the F.O.I. General orders and things like that, that stand as foundational in
my character. Everything from my faith, but these things stand as [inaudible 00:07:04]. I like that.

Tariq Najee-ullah: That's wonderful. I think I'm going to read something about the event and then talking detail about those.

Imam Mohammed went to Rome and met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in October of 1996. There were a series of meetings that preceded this first trip between Imam El-Amin, Imam Eric El-Amin and eventually Imam Earl Abdul Malik Mohammed at the Vatican. Imam Mohammed initially met with Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore in 1995 at a program on interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Then Mohammed met afterward with Cardinal Keeler who served as Archbishop of Baltimore at that time. In Rome, Imam Mohammed and his delegation met with several catholic communities. The community in which Imam Mohammed developed an ongoing relationship was the Focolare. Imam Mohammed developed a deep and respectful relationship with Chiara Lubich, leader of the Focolare movement. In 1997, Chiara Lubich of the Focolare movement spoke with the aid of her Italian translator at the Malcolm Shabazz Masjid in Harlem, New York with Imam W. Deen Mohammed. Imam Ezekiel Pasha moderated.

Imam Mohammed again, traveled to Rome in October 1998, and again visited with Pope John Paul II. Imam Mohammed delivered a testimony and prayer at the closing ceremony in Vatican City, at the interreligious assembly before the central committee for the great jubilee of the year 2000. Pontifical council for interreligious dialogue. The theme was toward a culture of dialogue. Remarkling on this amazing event, Dr. John Borelli wrote, "In October 1999 at the Interreligious assembly convened in Rome by Cardinal Arinze, as a preparatory event for the celebration of a great jubilee, year 2000, Imam Mohammed offered prayers on the steps of Saint Peters Basilica during the closing service. I was told that it was the first time that a Muslim offered a prayer in any formal way in the precincts of Saint Peters. In American Muslim praise and a public service as essential spot in the Vatican. I was pinching myself again."

Questions - did you travel as part of Imam Mohammed's delegation on either of these trips to Rome?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: No I didn't.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Were you in attendance at Malcolm Shabazz Masjid in Harlem?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: No I wasn't.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Do you know those who were in attendance?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Practically all of them. All of the ones that you mentioned. I really became active with the Focolare after that and I probably was one of those that were slower to come around. I was aware of when those trips were occurring, I wasn't really invited at the time. I experienced and spoke with all of the ones who came back and all. I heard the stories and the experiences and later saw them on tape. Even when Chiara Lubich was in Washington, I did attend then. I was of the mind, slowly coming around, [inaudible 00:10:33], how do they fit in? I didn't understand what was the point, what was the excitement about them.

So only after that did I begin to personally discover the Focolare. So I didn't personally attend any of the meetings with Imam. In fact in Chicago, [inaudible 00:11:09], 15 years. After Imam, he wasn't going to the Focolare house and setting up the programs and all. I became very active after that. Annually, my wife and I were in Rome, setting up the programs and the encounters and what not. So I was kind of slow to come around. I can witness that in others too. Some came around quickly, some came around slowly. Some still don't know why, they're back there where I was. You know, Focolare? Why Focolare?

Tariq Najee-ullah: This experience, I noticed that in interviewing people from our community, why do you think that is? At that time, what did the experience mean to you? What would that experience mean now to you, having had the relationship with Focolare? If you could - I don't know if you remember how you felt then, at that time when Imam was having those trips, what did that experience mean?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: When you're in Chicago, Imam took a lot of trips to a lot of different places. He was going to speaking engagements all over the country, all over the world. Initially in our [inaudible 00:12:37] we used to go travel to the speaking engagements he would have around nearby, take a bus. So it wasn't ... he'd travel to different places, that's fine. The stories that came out of this trip - he took a delegation with him - and the stories that came out were different. We would hear about these people that were different. They hadn't seen any white people like this. They were really loving. And I could remember a sister that was on the trip, "Yeah, and Imam was really listening and taking to them, what they were saying". So I would year that, and "okay".

I would give more and more ear to it. But it still ... and they began having encounters in different places. We were in Chicago - very slow coming around. They had encounters down in Texas, in Houston. They would have encounters in Indianapolis, in different places, and
still we had nothing in Chicago. Even though this was the place, Imam was here and where he really visited the Focolare here and started establishing the relationship with them. There's a whole history and story on that. But we really came around slowly, okay.

So, now you say how is that different from the way it is now?

Tariq Najee-ullah: Yes sir.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Oh my goodness. I thank Allah. I respect people who come around slowly or are struggling with it, or that don't see it. But it's a great value; it's a great value. What we see from attending - I've gone to Rome four times and attended the interreligious dialogue. Some of the ground rules that were established, to me, set the standard for interreligious dialogue. That we would not proselytize each other, we both recognize that there were those in each of our faiths that didn't believe in what we were doing. We recognized that, but we recognize the common ground that we have of love and mutual respect and things that we can learn from one another. Those were the common ground rules, we would respect one another's point of view on various topics. We look at prayer, how do they look at prayer. How do we look at loving your neighbor, how do we look at various things, and they would have a point of view, we would have a point of view, and there was a mutual respect.

But you would love that they love God. That's the bottom line. They love God and you love them, because they love God. They love the neighbor and they really are able to demonstrate it such that others can feel it, okay. They can demonstrate it such that others can feel it. Of different faiths.

In the early dialogues - now we've gotten off the point. The early dialogues it would be just the Focolare and Muslim friends of the Focolare. So it'd be Muslims from all over the world and the Focolare. We kept saying, well, why don't we have everybody here. We raised the issue - why don't we have everybody here? So the last time it was open, we had different faiths, we had Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindu, you know. We didn't know how it was going to turn out, we didn't know how that would be but Allah blessed it and it was a very beautiful event. They sincerely loved Imam Mohammed. They sincerely ... when he passed, we were over there ... let me back to your -

Tariq Najee-ullah: This is good, because I'm asking qualitative questions, so it's basically how you feel and what your observations are. There's no right or wrong answers.
So you said you visited Rome a number of times. How did you feel about your experience? Is it what you expected? How was it similar or different to other visits to other places?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: In many ways it was more than I expected. They are experienced in being hosts, they have a whole city of their own. This is the Catholic religion and the resources, you know we stayed in the Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence. They have tours of Rome and they have Catholic Universities there, you know, so we interacted with intellectuals. You see some of their best resources, the libraries are open to us. Their priests are open to us, tour guides are open to us, the organization is tight. They record everything and they thought through everything. They are courteous and very respectful, even in their building they have a Wudu station, okay? In the Pope's summer residence, in the Castel Gandolfo, the built over there for their Muslim guests a Wudu station. We had a place for prayer, prayer times in the agenda. Then we would have time for picture taking and time for touring and time for being alone.

So it was ... every time they would always have, in preparation for the trip, they would have the best fares. How it could be convenient for us to travel, if there was anything else we would need. They were very experienced in being hosts. Then you see the films of Chiara Lubich when she went visited with the Hindus or the Buddhists and with her spirituality ... faith is one thing but then spirituality of loving your neighbor, loving God and loving your neighbor and doing onto others as you would have done to yourself, resonates. You can see it resonating. So that's the beauty of her. I can remember when Imam Mohammed first kind of noticed that, you know, they have Muslims. Focolare! They mentioned that. We take that for granted now but they had Muslims who were Focolare, you know. So without changing your faith, [inaudible 00:21:43] you up and your capacity to love. This was significant for us, okay.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I didn't know they had Muslims in the Focolare.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: In Algeria right now, coming up probably next month, a whole Focolare in Algeria. I was invited to that but my schedule wouldn't permit. Mikall Saheer is going and his wife. All muslims, the whole, in Algeria, all of them are Muslims and it's a Focolare compound. They're in Algeria and they're celebrating, I don't know how many years that they've been there. So, yeah. That would be an experience. You should really have some information about that.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Some of these questions you've answered but I wanted to repeat them ... still ask them to give you a chance to expound upon them or choose not to.

What difference has this made in your life? What does it mean to you or what is the value of it?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: It's very meaningful. It's very meaningful. When we respond to people, we respond out of our own cultural context. You know as a muslim, as an African American, with the history and legacy of us in America and to those we've grown up around and interacted with all along, we have a ways of doing it. Depending on what we accept and our background experience, you know. In the workplace and what not. Focolare sort of turned it upside down, that's what it did. It turned it upside down. They base their interaction first on love, putting yourself in the other person's shoes, okay. Now for my African American context, I could come a certain way. Or my Islamic context I could come and know that they are son's of Adam. They have a right to this religion, this faith, they're the same, okay. That does not take it into ... they have active loving. They put love on steroids, all right, yeah. That's difference from being open and I want to share my faith with you or I can influence you or my example to you, or now the Focolare - boom. I want to get to know you, I want to feel where you're coming from, I want to interact with you. It's a fine difference.

Tariq Najee-ullah: From a place of love and humanity.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Active. There's a passive understanding of the love and humanity or there's an active love and humanity that I want to actively extend to you. That's what I get from them. That's what I think Imam Mohammed saw. He felt, "my community needs some of this".

Tariq Najee-ullah: Actively loving one another.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: That's right. He said that.

Tariq Najee-ullah: You've kind of answered this but ...

We talked about this, what you learned about interreligious relationships from this experience, so I'll go to the next question which is: Has what you experienced impacted how you see religion?

Has you view been broadened or narrowed, or changed any ideas since?
Dr. Mikal Ramadan: I thank Allah for Imam Mohammed. This is what the experience did, okay.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Yes.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: This is what the experience did. Imam brought us into the faith of our Islam. A new appreciation of it, the understanding of it, to seeing what cultural locked in the religion and what's not. What Allah wanted us to rise above and understand and then what's not. That's where I am, that's from whence I come, thank Allah.

What the Focolare did and this also - because I wouldn't have known the Focolare except it came through Imam Mohammed, he saw. And what they did was put a whole new level on interfaith relation, dialogue, and working. We call it the Interfaith Dialogue of Action, of living. Dialogue before would have been, let's just talk. That's my point with your points. This is how we see it versus how you see it. You know that goes on all of the time and it gets nowhere - not that it gets no where, it enhances understanding, but it goes on in closed chambers all along. We were always pushing the envelope in our encounters, we wanted to be in a dialogue of action, a dialogue of living, to where we would know one another -

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: So it was this dialogue of life and dialogue of action, we would take it to the next level, not just talk. We would actually do and learn and love one another across the faith boundaries. We recognize the common ground, love the common ground, then love the people that came to the common ground. That's another level, okay, that's another level. First level is just recognizing the common ground and talk about the common ground, next is to love the people and begin to do things and begin to do good works. Do good works that God respects through that common ground, that's where we're going, that's where we're taking it with the Focolare and with our efforts.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: So that's it and in planning encounters every year, that's where we want to be taking it. So we will be feeding the poor and out in the community, they participated in our parades with Imam - oh that's one thing. We would go to the Bud Billiken parade and ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: Chicago, downtown Chicago?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Yeah and we would have a big poster of Pope John Paul II on the back of the Muslim ... you know this has always been hailed as a black parade. The biggest African American parade in the country and when Imam met with John Paul II, we would have a big poster of him on the back of the float. That would raise - what is this all about? Why is here
there? And it's heralding this relationship that we have with the Focolare, with the Catholics, the muslim catholic relation. That was significant.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammed pursued this dialogue and what do you think his intentions were? Did he say anything to you that suggested what he was trying to achieve by pursuing this?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: He wanted ... you know how that commercial says, let me have what they're having? That would be it. My community could benefit from what they have. It was important because we are victims of prejudice for so long and we were coming out of the first, "white people are devils", it's a big total circle, 360 degrees. So many of us may harbor things about white people, which would not be surprising. You see evidence of, you know ... and we still harbor stuff about ourselves, too. We can't freely love one another and take it to the next level. The structure will foible. He wanted to see - he wanted us to have a taste of that and that was good. He wanted that to grow amongst us, he wanted us to grow, extend it to us and extend it to ourselves. He said he wanted his kids to have it and his grand kids to have it and go on.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Active love.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: That's right, active love. It's a love of the neighbor through the love of God, that's spirituality. That's it. It's opening us up.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So with that being said would you say that other than us learning how to love like they love, was there anything else that you could reason or think that Imam Mohammed also wanted to happen as a result of this relationship, whether ... not just the active love but maybe something we were supposed to gain or something they were supposed to get from us, or something just ... the world would improve ...

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: You know, they learned a lot from us. They learned the intensity of our commitment, our sacrifice, you know. Things that we would just stop and do, it was that time for prayer. They learned from us, they learned a clarity of our religion. The clear, simplicity. They would explain things, the suffering, this, that, they had a lot of ways that they described it. But they would see that ours was straightforward and requires effort and commitment. Fasting. So they loved that about us and a unique thing - they found us more receptive than they found the black Catholics. They would have black Catholics that they would take the Focolare perspective to, they were less responsive than we were. That's due to Imam Mohammed.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Yes sir.

So we're wrapping up here, the closing questions, and again you've addressed this at various other points but I guess these are kind of wrap up questions to offer you an opportunity again. Then I have a couple of follow ups to those and then we'll be finished.

What did Imam Mohammed's meeting at the Vatican with Pope John Paul II mean to you?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: It meant a lot. Before the Vatican meant nothing to me, it's like you know nothing special to me, I should say. Nothing special to me at all. Learning that there was another city that was a holy city to another religion, okay that's nice knowledge. The Vatican, I'm aware of it and it's function to Catholics but that was just knowledge. The fact that Imam Mohammed a man from our community, African American, was accepted and representative of Muslims in America, that's big. The fact that he had an open meeting out in front of all the Vatican and a speech there at the Vatican, that was significant. That raised him, that raised us, that raised Muslims, that just raised everything up. That was the start of my interest in the Vatican. I went back four times, I've been to the Vatican. We had audiences, we were up on the stage, the Pope was sitting there. But if Imam Mohammed had not done that, that would have meant a lot less to me. The fact that he did and the fact that we ongoing was continuing his legacy and valuing the relationship, was significant, it meant a lot to me.

Tariq Najee-ullah: What did Imam Mohammed's meeting with Chiara Lubich of the Focolare movement mean to you?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: That was the will of God. It was a Godsend. It was directed by almighty God and all of us who see the videos and see the relationship that those two had, the spiritual relationship and respect and mutual love that those two had. When I watched those videos and films with Focolare, it was like watching your parents. It was like watching your parents. You have a love for both parents, it was so significant, both of them had meant so much to the world. What Chiara Lubich was doing and the interfaith dialogue, everywhere that they went, where the Focolare are all over, 86 countries or something now ... how she has broken down barriers and what not and now Imam Mohammed has broken down barriers within our Islam and established this relationship. This is so significant! This is right. I think future generations, vehicles like this, will even appreciate this more perhaps than we do now.
Tariq Najee-ullah: I think so. So the last couple of questions. It's difficult to measure when events like this happen, but to give a context and to try to understand part of my research is to document but also to try to analyze the effectiveness so I have a couple questions related to that.

In your opinion, were these dialogues successful? Why or why not? Can you quantify maybe an unsuccessful effect?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: They were successful and they're effective. It operates on a level that doesn't receive the publicity. People judge success by how much publicity, how much is in the news, like that, another level. But on another level it's very significant. It broke down barriers and walls. Now what we do when those barriers and walls are broken down is up to us. If we share that, because there are ideas that are wall builders. The wall builder ideas are rampant out there and you can easily fall back into your prejudice, fall back into your camp, fall back into your old understanding, fall back into your own faith and it's viewpoint. You can fall back into that and it's easy and comfortable.

They were trail blazers, they said not a trail has been opened, if you let weeds grow over the trail so nobody else knows the trail was here, that's our fault. That's our fault. That's why it's important to have these encounters in the spirit of universal brotherhood, that's a theme that came from Chiara Lubich and the contract that she had with Imam Mohammed. They would establish these regularly so that we would acknowledge that these relationships exist and why they do and the progress that we made.

The one thing that they do that is very helpful and breaks it down to a personal relationship is they have ... almost like testimonies where people would get up and say, "based on the spirituality" they don't like that like that, but, "based on the standard that you have, what experience have you had in your life recently, that you have contact?" That you did this, did you go out of your way, did you ... this breaks it down from a high level to a personal level. That's spirit. You can ask Muslims, "what did you do on times of [inaudible 00:44:22] this week? How did you share your faith with someone else? How did you share your humanity with somebody else?" And they have to explain it, or not have to explain, but willing to share that. To put that on our minds.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I didn't know they had a contract with each other ... 

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Huh?

Tariq Najee-ullah: I said I didn't know they had a contract with each other.
Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Yes, they had a contract. Yes! They had a contract, a mutual contract, not a written, enforceable, legal contract. But a mutual contract of love that they had between those two and their two organizations, okay. Yeah you should have that in your writing.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I do.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: That's important.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Yes I'll have to look that up. Right now most of the reading and research that I've done is mostly been the Vatican's archives.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: You have to see the movies, you have to see the videos. The mutual contract is a big thing, it's the key. That's the key. They knew that the thing would be just between them two, but they made a contract and out of the contract became these encounters in the spirit of mutual brotherhood.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Where do you have ... the Focolare have those videos?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Yeah, call the Focolare house. Here, let me give you the number. You can tell them you spoke with me and ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: This is here in Chicago?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Yeah.

Tariq Najee-ullah: If I were to contact them ... they have regular hours?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: You can call them anytime! They just recently changed, they rotate every so many years, the people from area to area. Here's the two numbers that I have.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Do you have an address for them?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Yeah, Focolare House. Something on Greenwood, used to be the ... let me see.

All of my things are referring back to the same thing.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Closing questions are ... was the experience beneficial to you or to our community, you addressed that. So the last part is ... you addressed this too. How would you quantify the success or you just talked about that, so the last question before my actual last question is, if you could rate this experience on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the most
meaningful and one being the least meaningful, how would you rate it?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: To me ... it would have to be a 9.5 because I would have to leave room for things that I don't know how to compare against. I do know that if I had made this journey's with Imam, I made them after Imam, and all of the things I came into were after. I wasn't with the party that went initially. That would have enhanced it more. I think these are the most significant, very significant.

It completed the journey from the Nation of Islam - I mentioned that before. It completed the journey. Black man is God, white man is the Devil. Okay, teaching in the Nation. Were in the Nation?

Tariq Najee-ullah: No sir.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: Well that, basically we can do whatever we want to do because we were the chosen ... we went through the Nation with that. That had an effect on us, that pushed us forward and also did a little brain damaging. Imam Mohammed corrected that. He said, you are a part of the human family. The family of Adam. Your faith is Al Islam. He just taught us the religion of Al Islam. This, the Focolare, brought it all the way back around. You had to put down all of that, "Black man is God", which you put down already but it swept out what might have been retained in the heart. It swept it out, swept it out. Brought it around full circle. So, that's what I would say.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So is there anything else that you have learned, and our questions haven't covered it, that you've learned from this experience or anything else you'd like to share or comment?

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: It's all been a great blessing for Allah. I thank Allah because I feel like I lived a dream. I don't know in terms of anything else professional I would want to do, this is it. Practicing medicine. In terms of the time period and living a time frame in human history, having lived right at the time that I lived, coming from Christianity to the Nation of Islam to Imam Mohammed to the relationship with the Focolare, seeing all of that and having been - thank Allah - expanded. Each time Christianity, I was expanded, Nation of Islam expanded me, Imam just took it to another level. And Imam saw how this would expand us, too. To come through all of this and to come back with a different view of Christianity in awe, after every coming out of it. The feeling of it that we had from the Nation of Islam, having come through this, this just put the cherry on top. Okay, that's it.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Well thank you for your time, we went a little bit past the thirty minutes but I really do appreciate your generosity of time and making time for me to do this. For documenting this history but also, something that I think is important to you and important to our community, trying to get the information best I can so I can do it justice.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: I'll tell you, I thank Allah for the blessing of you doing this now. It's brought things out in my that I was feeling but I hadn't brought fully to mind. This has been ... hope you can make sense out of what I said.

Tariq Najee-ullah: It was excellent.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: So this is beautiful and I just make dua that Allah bless you with this effort and that this is an important book that covers its time. We needed this. There's so much history that can not remain in the Catholic libraries, okay.

Tariq Najee-ullah: They document everything.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: That's right! They document everything and it's to their credit.

Tariq Najee-ullah: If I had my computer I'd show you, I just keep getting emails from my advisor and I'm looking at it seeing his notes and document of every meeting that Imam Earl and Imam Eric and Imam Abdul Malik had with the Vatican. I have a summary of those meetings. A summary of the meetings Imam had with the Pope and it's just ... they document all of it.

Dr. Mikal Ramadan: We need to be calling people like that. Because the writers of history are the ones transfer it to other generations. We do word of mouth and that passes away. So please do this and be sure to look, call them and get the videos.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Yes sir.
Edited Interview Transcript of Sister Laila Mohammed

September 2, 2016

Location: Mosque Cares Annual Muslim Convention at Tinley Park, IL

Author/Transcription Note: The notation “inaudible” simply means that a sound obscured what word or phrase was exactly stated in the audio recording.


L. Mohammed: ‘Alaikum As-Salaam.

T. Najee-ullah: Do you consent to this interview being recorded?

L. Mohammed: Yes, I do.

T. Najee-ullah: How would you like to be identified?

L. Mohammed: Laila Mohammed.

T. Najee-ullah: Your location of residence?

L. Mohammed: Roselle, New Jersey.

T. Najee-ullah: You don't have to answer this exactly. What year were you born and how old are you?

L. Mohammed: I don't mind. I was born in 1959. I am 56 years old.

T. Najee-ullah: You have a very important place in this community. You are a part of the first family. Your legacy precedes you. So thank you tremendously for the honor in allowing me to ask you these questions.

L. Mohammed: Thank you.

T. Najee-ullah: Some of these questions I don't even have to ask you because Allah has blessed your family to be the family that brought us Islam and model for us what it means to be Muslim. So we appreciate that.
L. Mohammed: I appreciate you. But ask me the questions anyway. You know them already, the-

T. Najee-ullah: These questions are, because I asked you when did you come into the community?

L. Mohammed: ... oh, okay.

T. Najee-ullah: When did you become Muslim? When did you ... Do I have anything?

L. Mohammed: No, you're okay.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay. Those type of things. Are you a pioneer in the community? Or a legacy member of the community?

L. Mohammed: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

T. Najee-ullah: I can ask you those, but I think-

L. Mohammed: You know the answer already.

T. Najee-ullah: ... yes, ma'am. So I'm going to focus this interview, for time. We're going to focus on some events. I'm going to read about the events that my research focuses on, then I'm going to ask you some questions about those.

L. Mohammed: Okay.

T. Najee-ullah: Imam Warith Deen Mohammed went to Rome and met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in October of 1996. There were a series of meetings that preceded this first trip between Imam Earl El-Amin, Imam Eric El-Amin, and, additionally, Imam Earl Abdulmalik Mohammed with members of the Vatican. Imam Mohammed initially met with Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore in 1995, at a program on interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Imam Mohammed met afterward with Cardinal Keeler in Baltimore, at his home. Cardinal Keeler then served as the archbishop of Baltimore at that time.

Later in Rome, in October, Imam Mohammed and his delegation met with several Catholic communities. The community in which Imam Mohammed developed an ongoing relationship was the Focolare. He developed a deep and respectful friendship with Chiara Lubich, the leader of the Focolare Movement. Later in 1997, Chiara Lubich spoke, with the aid of an Italian translator at Malcolm Shabazz's masjid in
Harlem, New York, with Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, and Imam Ezekiel Pasha introduced him and moderated.

Imam Mohammed again traveled to Rome in October of 1999 and visited with Pope John Paul II. Imam Mohammed delivered a testimony and prayer at the closing ceremony in Vatican City, at the interreligious assembly before The Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, before the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The theme was Towards a Culture of Dialogue.

Regarding this event, Dr. John Borelli, who serves as my mentor, wrote, "In October of 1999, at the interreligious assembly convened in Rome by Cardinal Arinze, as a preparatory event for the celebration of the Great Jubilee Year 2000, Imam Mohammed offered prayers on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica during the closing service. I was told that it was the first time that a Muslim offered a prayer in any formal way in the precincts of St. Peter's. An American Muslim prays in a public service at a central spot in the Vatican. I was pinching myself."

Regarding these events, I have some questions for you and these questions will help me in terms of my research. I have captured from the Catholic Church their documents. I have their documentation of what happened and the events surrounding what happened. From the Focolare I have their published documents, and I'll be following up with them trying to get whatever video they'd have and get their statements on record.

What is missing, from our community, I just have Muslim journal articles. I have excerpts of the Imam's speeches where he made comments or remarks, sometimes at the convention when he spoke of them at the public address. But I don't have anything from those members that traveled with him or those members in our community that have continued the relationship with the Focolare. I don't have any feedback or anything in writing, and so part of my research is trying to capture that so our perspective can be written down and documented in an academic form, just like the others. And that [Arabic 00:04:54] this will be a foundation for more work. Maybe we'll have a documentary and a book to come out. But, right now, this is just thesis research for my master's thesis.

L. Mohammed: Okay.

T. Najee-ullah: My questions, first, did you travel as part of Imam Mohammed's delegation to either of these trips to Rome?
L. Mohammed: No, I never went to Rome with Imam Mohammed, my father. But it's very, it's interesting. But Allah plans, you know? After my father passed, he passed in September as you know-

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: ... and there was a planned trip, a visit to Rome, in October. He was supposed to go. The Focolare asked me to go and that was my first time going to Rome. Since then I've been three times.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay.

L. Mohammed: The last time I met Pope Francis.

T. Najee-ullah: Oh, wow. [inaudible 00:05:48]

L. Mohammed: Yes.

T. Najee-ullah: How did you feel about this experience? Was it what you expected, or?

L. Mohammed: Going to Rome?

T. Najee-ullah: Going to Rome. Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: Prior to going to Rome I knew the Focolare. The first time I heard of the Focolare was when my father told me about them. He said that he had met many of them and he specifically talked about Lady Chiara. He'd said that their spirits connected and that he wanted our community to meet her community, and she wanted the same thing. Because they had connected in the way they did, they wanted us to then connect.

I knew about them, I had met them, and had gone to events with them. I met Lady Chiara when she came to the Harlem masjid. Then one of the really early memories is when we were in DC and she spoke. Were you there?

T. Najee-ullah: No, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: It was so beautiful. It was thousands of people and I remember, first of all, I'mma tell you this. My father, I should preference it with this, he raised me to be a thinker and to respectfully question and so I said, "Why you want us to do this with these Catholics and these white folks?" So that's what I asked him and he was like, "I just think that we would have a good experience," and he said, "Because of the love."
Then he said publicly, and privately, because of the relationship of African Americans and Caucasians that we can perhaps heal or do something to positively effect the process of moving past slavery. It has done that. I can say for sure for me. There's this young activist and she says that Black folks aren't prejudiced. Because I always say, "Well yeah I'm prejudiced." But she says that you have to have a certain setup to be prejudiced. We're just responding to a condition.

In my response to the condition I would tend to be very shy or very standoffish with Caucasian people. Questioning. My relationship with the Focolare, especially the Focolare here in Hyde Park in Chicago, where I lived up until a month ago, I don't feel that way. They have helped me to stop seeing a color before I see the character. We have become so close, the women at the Focolare House in Hyde Park, until I have told my children, "If my family or if we're not around and you need something, go to the Focolare House. That's our family, too."

The Focolare, a couple of the ladies there, they have had problems in their family and we've prayed together. I've prayed for one of them's mother. They've prayed for my family. We're connected. I can say I love them. Not that I've never had a working relationship and even a friendly relationship with a Caucasian, I have. But this did something different because it was God in it. Because you just got to see the human being and they saw us. Over the years, we've done simple things: eat together, go to events together, pray together, sing together. Now we're together, you know?

When I went to Rome, it wasn't new in the aspect of the Focolare. But it was very timely because Lady Chiara had passed. Her movement was in the process of healing and in the process of continuing. I was there along with [Ndidi Okakpu 00:09:49] and some other Imams and we spent hours, way into the morning, talking about how our community was going to move forward now that Imam Mohammed had passed from this life. Now Allah can give him the [inaudible 00:10:03].


L. Mohammed: It was helpful. It was almost like we could see our big sisters and brothers and how they were doing and that we could do it, too. And so [Arabic 00:10:16] it was good. It's been good. I've continued to work with them. Now that I'm in Jersey, I've contacted the Focolare there so continue to work. I actually, a few years ago in Rome, I made a public statement that my father said he had a pact with Lady Chiara and that he hoped that his children would, and I said, "I definitely do." I give that same promise that as long as Allah allow me that I will have a
relationship with my brothers and sisters of the Focolare [Arabic 00:10:58].

T. Najee-ullah: This is the second time I've heard about that pact. That was a verbal commitment? A promise? What-

L. Mohammed: Yeah-

T. Najee-ullah: ... what were the details of it? I have not found it?

L. Mohammed: ... it's like a verbal commitment. It was a verbal commitment between the two of them, but between the communities because it was said publicly many times. The pact was talked about many times.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay.

L. Mohammed: You know my sister [Vichara 00:11:26]?

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: You know her daughter's named after Lady Chiara.

T. Najee-ullah: I didn't know that.

L. Mohammed: Yeah, her daughter [Haja 00:11:29]. Do you know Haja? Haja is a teenager now. [Kira 00:11:40] just has two daughters. Haja is the youngest daughter and her middle name is Chiara.

T. Najee-ullah: Oh wow.

L. Mohammed: Her name is Haja Chiara.

T. Najee-ullah: I did not know that. That's powerful. Your trip to Rome, you've said a few things. Instead of just going in order of the questions, I'm trying to go to the question that makes sense.

L. Mohammed: Okay.

T. Najee-ullah: So, this experience and relationship with the Focolare is different than perhaps with the other interfaith groups?

L. Mohammed: Yes! Very.

T. Najee-ullah: What is that difference? Can you compare it? How would you describe that?
L. Mohammed: The other groups, because I do a lot of interfaith work, and they get frustrated with me because I get frustrated with them. Because they make it too hard. With the Focolare, we just simply do regular stuff. How I figured it out it's like, who are you closest to? Your family, right? What do you do with your family? Nothing but eating and live life. So when we get together with the Focolare we don't talk about an agenda or what cause we're going to support together, we just live and spend the day together. That's what makes it so simple but so unique and wise. It's beautiful, but it's easy. Just like Allah said, he makes this religion easy for us, and we make things difficult. I'm telling you all we do is eat together, talk-

T. Najee-ullah: It's a very human relationship, it's not-

L. Mohammed: ... yes, it's a very human relationship.

T. Najee-ullah: ... there's no tension, there's no type of I guess sometimes these other events may be orchestrated.

L. Mohammed: Yes, yes.

T. Najee-ullah: So like a lecture or something?

L. Mohammed: Yes. Other events and other groups I've been in it'll start off just a meeting over coffee or tea or something, but then everybody wants it to have an agenda. What cause are we going to work on together? Then it becomes a debate over what cause is the best cause. That brings up the friction. Or even, well this is what we believe and that's why we believe it.

With the Focolare, we don't do that. We'll talk about spirituality and talk about God, but it's not like I'm going to tell you and you tell me. It was, this is very ... This is not true, this is like, just a story. So we're in this space and it's raining today. I might start talking about the rain and say something about Allah and they might say something like that. That's how you learn about each other. But it's not that I'm going to teach you. Not saying that we've never had those kind of moments -- those teaching moments or those purposeful moments -- but in the beginning there was not that. At least I didn't participate, I've never experienced, in the beginning anything orchestrated and anything other than a natural situation to enjoy and get to know each other.

T. Najee-ullah: How would you compare your visit to Rome and the meetings that you've had with the Focolare to other trips that you've had, other places you've visited, whether they're religious or special places? How would you describe that experience? How did that make you feel?
L. Mohammed: I can say that, because I've been there three times now, as a whole I've had all types of experiences. The first time I went, I was thinking that it was going to be very educational, like a museum trip. I was surprised. I will tell you what happened. We were at the Vatican. We went there for a tour. I'm in the larger area. When you go in there's this big area, there are all these different people there, and I'm thinking, I'm going to go here, I'm going to take my notes, like you go to the museum. But I felt something. I'm telling you, I felt the presence of Allah. I felt it. I looked around and wasn't nothing but a bunch of people that did not look like me. I felt it. It was just beautiful.

My mother, she converted to Islam, and she was raised Catholic. All of my aunties and my uncles, especially my aunties that I love dearly, they're Catholic. One of the things that happened to me as a child, people always say, "Oh you were born Muslim so you didn't have to take your shahada," and you know, "You're a Muslim." But I think, and other people have whatever experience, but my experience is that yes I was born Muslim and I never wanted to do something else. But there was a moment when I claimed it for myself.

It was one year during Ramadan, because you're really reading the Quran intense and trying to be the best you can be. I remember reading where Allah says that Muslims, Christians, Sabians, and Jews will be in paradise. I'm paraphrasing. I thought, "Wow." Because I thought about my aunts and I said, "This is for me. This makes sense." I can remember at that same stage of life feeling why do Jehovah Witnesses say what they say? Why do some of the Christians say what they say? That we're not going to heaven. All that was in my mind as a young teen, I was maybe 12 or 13 something. That's when I felt like, "Yes." It was about that situation of being around Christians in your family and Muslims, this interfaith.

When I got to the Vatican, I felt that experience and I remember I wrote my daughter, I said, "I haven't made Hajj or Umrah but I think this is how it feels to do that." That's the feeling I got in the Vatican. That began to take me to where I am now because I really believe that interfaith work is my main priority. I do empowering and domestic violence and life coaching, but what I really, really love is interfaith. I love diversity.

That was the spiritual event the first time I went. Then, like I told you, we spent so much time looking at what they were doing to move on in their community and then thinking about us. So the organizer in me, I experienced that, almost like going to an organizing workshop or something or a retreat. So I had that experience. I really can't hardly remember the second time too much, but I remember the third time very well.
That's when I met Pope Francis. This meeting was a little different because most of the meetings were about the Muslims and the Focolare. But this last one was about several religions and the Focolare. At this last one, there were monks, there were Jews, of course there were Catholics and Christians, there were Muslims, and they were also Muslims from around that world. Because the other one was about mainly our community, too. So, they were Muslims from around the world. At this time, Imam Mohammed had passed and we were presenting on our relationship with the Focolare. It was a different experience in that I could see how much Lady Chiara and Imam Mohammed had an effect in the world. That was very empowering, at the same time, made you feel a very big debt and the responsibility of continuing. You see? I'm very grateful to you because you asked me, I'm 56, and I could be your mother. And it makes me feel wonderful, makes me feel peaceful and grateful, that it's important to you to do this work.

T. Najee-ullah: [Arabic 00:20:29].

L. Mohammed: So, that's that. But then, lastly, I had a wonderful time in Rome, too, on many occasions. We went to Tuscany, so beautiful. The Focolare have a university called the Sophia University. It's in Tuscany. We were having lunch one day, I looked out the window I said, "I must be in the paradise." It was so beautiful. My times with the Focolare in Rome have been a total fulfillment. Very nice. Italian food. Good food.

T. Najee-ullah: [Arabic 00:21:08]. You've mentioned this and so of these questions they're written in a way to, because I don't know how people are going to answer the questions-

L. Mohammed: Okay.

T. Najee-ullah: ... I have to try to, so if you feel that you've already answered it, you don't have to answer it again. What did you learn about interfaith relationships from this experience?

L. Mohammed: Basically I learned the importance of taking the human right, letting it be organic. That's the main thing that I've learned. I've learned that it can be successful and that it can be lasting. It can be not just something that you're doing because of a project or because of the space that you're in, but something that you'll long for, you want to do.

T. Najee-ullah: Has what you experienced impacted how you see religion? For example, has it broadened or narrowed your viewpoint or changed any previous ideas or thinking?
L. Mohammed: I guess it's probably broadened it because of, and not just this, I also have a relationship with a Jewish organization that's on the East coast. I went to concentration camps with them. It was very impacting, also. The experiences that I've had in the interfaith community has really kind of erased the word religion from me. I think of it as believers or spirituality, I don't really like that word, but I like believers. We worship the Creator. I think the religious stuff gets in the way.

T. Najee-ullah: Some of these you've kind of expressed, but this will give you a place if you want to add some more things. Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammed, why your father, pursued this dialogue? What do you think his intentions were? What do you think he hoped that would result from them?

L. Mohammed: I think that he hoped that we would have a positive outcome. That individuals and the community would be positively affected in both communities, our community and their community. Imam Mohammed, as you know, because you're a student of Imam Mohammed-

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: ... he didn't have the letters but he was a psychologist.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: He was doing a psychological experiment or a project on us trying to heal us from that ghost he said we'd carried on us from slavery. I think that was, of course, a big part of it. I know my father and he was a very sensitive and loving person. I think he just fell in love with Lady Chiara, and when you fall in love with something or someone, you want to share it with the people you love. That's what I think he did.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am. We're kind of winding down here, but this is a umbrella question that'll kind of give you a chance to add some other things. What did Imam Mohammed's, your father's, meeting with Pope John Paul II of the Vatican mean to you?

L. Mohammed: Wow, to me as Laila? As-

T. Najee-ullah: However-

L. Mohammed: ... as that's my daddy. It was unbelievable. I was born in Philly, but I don't remember anything. We left when I was like two. I was raised on the south side of Chicago. I wasn't raised in a space where I was the person that I am now. Because my family wasn't known then because
my father was put out of The Nation. We were just regular folks. We lived in an apartment. I went to public school. Now, I went to Muslim school when I was little. My degree is in early childhood, and you really are formed at a very young age. I was under 10. Under 10, I was just Laila, Wallace and Shirley's daughter, going to Enrico Fermi. My father's with the Pope? It's mind blowing. It's surreal. Even now, my father is in a monument with Dr. King? Even though you know it, but it's still like, "Wow!"

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: But then me as the woman and the person who, I humbly say, I think that Allah gave me a purpose to continue the work of my family, which is now six generations of Muslims. My grandfather Elijah and Clara, my grandfather's parents converted and they were always, all of them, very serious about helping their people. By helping their people, you'd help the world. Imam Mohammed even took it further, that we help the world. We want to help our people. This is the Quran.

That's what I feel when I think about Imam Mohammed being at the Vatican. I think what a wonderful leader. What progress he made, the son of Elijah and Clara, and I got a whole lot of work to do. Let me find my little piece of the puzzle and let me work that piece. [Arabic 00:27:18], you know? Because that's something that I have to do, take my father and put him in pieces because he's my father, he's my Imam, he was my employer, he was my mentor, and then I can say [Arabic 00:27:32] when I got to be older and had grandchildren, he was my friend. We were friends. I have to see all those spots. When I see something big, like him with the Pope, I see all those different things. I try to balance that [Arabic 00:27:55].

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: Just keep moving. That's my new thing. Just keep moving, that's from Takin' It To The Streets. I'm on Imam's board. We did that Marquette Park and the stuff with Dr. King.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: My thing is that I've been saying Dr. King in the Civil Rights Movement, it was a movement. What happened to us? Why are we here now at this Black Lives Matters and all this stuff we're going through? Because we stopped moving. My thing is just keep it moving, even if it's a little step, we just got to keep moving. It was a movement and we can't, Imam Mohammed said, "We can't stop now." Okay? So we just got to keep it moving. That's my thing.
T. Najee-ullah: You know and to see that they prayed for this, so we don't have a choice but to keep moving, like you said.

L. Mohammed: You can keep moving because this is the thing, you survived. You got the best in you. You came from the stock that made it. Okay? So you can keep moving. It's beautiful. I feel like the stories that we're told about slavery were spun in such a way to keep us down. But if we look at our lives, we are powerful. We are the best of the best. We made it. Yes!

T. Najee-ullah: That is [inaudible 00:30:21]. I see the work of your father. I see it's just a legacy. Allah is in control. Allah has raised us up and is giving us what we need to move forward and to elevate, really to take leadership of the world.

L. Mohammed: Yes.

T. Najee-ullah: We just can't be afraid of it.

L. Mohammed: No, we can't be afraid and we can't fight over it. We can't think it has to be one person because it's not supposed to be one person. Imam Mohammed was not a stupid man and he did not carelessly do stuff. There's no way he would have passed and not left a successor if that was supposed to happen. And if it was supposed to happen, Allah would have saw that it happened. But, we're at a time where it's collective leadership and everybody has their spot and their place. When you figure it out, then just like Allah say, "Go as if in a race," and just move it, just keep it moving in your space. We're going to be fine. We are fine. I think we're doing wonderful.

T. Najee-ullah: Continue to pray for [inaudible 00:31:18] because I want it to keep going generations.

L. Mohammed: I think that it will though. We have little children, I have nine grandchildren and some of them amaze me. Well, they all amaze me, but some of them they're interested in this kind of stuff. I can remember being a little girl, I can remember when I was seven maybe eight, and I was sitting at the kitchen table with my father and he was talking to me about his plans and what he wanted to do. I was interested. I remember he used to always tell me, "Life is serious business." That's what it is. Our children are going to know. Your children are going to know.

T. Najee-ullah: [Arabic 00:31:59] We're winding down here. I'm going to be asking you questions, one more question about the meeting and what it meant to you and then I'm going to be asking you to analyze what you think
the benefit was. But right now, what did your father meeting with Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement mean to you at the time that it happened? Or what does it mean to you now?

L. Mohammed: What it means to me now. They said that Lady Chiara, when she was 15 and she started the movement and they still say it now, that they lived the Bible, that they want to actually take the Bible and bring it into life. And that's what I feel. I feel that my relationship and my experience with the Focolare has brought me to this place because now I have an organization called A Shared Memory. It's basically to share the story of African American Muslims but also to share and provide spaces for diverse conversations, experiences, etc. What I say is that I want to live what Allah says, that he made us different not to despise each other but so that we would get to know each other. I got that language from Lady Chiara, that I want to live that. Because that's what the experience of the Focolare has meant to me, that we live something that we have read about. You see? Yeah. We're not just reading something that's in the Bible or the Quran. When we have these spaces with people, with believers, we're living what Allah has in those scriptures.

T. Najee-ullah: Looking at the dialogues and the relationships that have come out of your father's meeting with the Pope and with the Focolare Movement, in your opinion were these dialogues successful? Why or why not?

L. Mohammed: Yeah, I definitely think they were successful. One, because they have continued. They've been consistent, and they have longevity. But not just consistent and longevity, but positive, consistent, and longevity. When you talk to people, you won't hear anybody saying, "I dread going to those events." They're looking forward to it. It's a positive consistency and longevity. I think they've been successful.

T. Najee-ullah: Do you think they've been effective?

L. Mohammed: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think they've been effective. For me, personally, I know it's helped me to move in my journey of getting rid of that "ghost of slavery" that's on my back. Even, it has prepared me to deal with these times when I hear Donald Trump and I'm just like, "Yeah, okay, that's just you. Yeah, you've got some people that's like you, but I know some people that not like you."

T. Najee-ullah: Right.

L. Mohammed: So whatever.
T. Najee-ullah: Exactly. Yeah. Yes, ma'am. Evidently, I can see that this was beneficial for you. You've described ways that it's been beneficial to our community as well. How would you qualify or quantify, describe these benefits that resulted from this in terms of the community? You've talked about how it's impacted you-

L. Mohammed: How do I think the benefits help the community?

T. Najee-ullah: ... yes. I've talked to Dr. Ramadan before also to A. Sharif and they talked about how the community was slow to embrace the-

L. Mohammed: Well certain people still are now in the community, definitely a part of our community, definitely students and supporters of Imam Mohammed. They don't want to be bothered with that. Everything's not for everybody. It's just that simple. Just because I wear a cotton scarf and not a wool scarf but it [inaudible 00:36:29] hair. Yeah, it's not for everybody. What I think it has done for all of us as a whole, it's done something that Imam Mohammed's father and my grandfather and our first leader, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, he used to always say that we will have friendships in all ... He said a lot of stuff, good homes, something, but friendships-

T. Najee-ullah: "Money, good homes, friendships, in all walks of life."

L. Mohammed: ... "money, good homes, friendships in all walks of life." When you are on a "world stage," like Imam Mohammed was when he met the Pope and when you cross the waters, when you go out of your town and out of your country and across the world and connect, it puts you in a different space. Just like I always tell people, you have to have your children experience global traveling. They have to go past the United States to become a full person. It's such an enrichment. It did that for us. It put us on a global stage and in a global understanding and in global comfort. Even though you might not have been a part of Focolare and Imam Mohammed's community dialogue, but if you are a member of the Focolare and you are an associate of Imam Mohammed's language, when you get into a global space you can pull on that. You can go to that resource. It broadened us in that way and that's a good thing. I'm sure it did other things also. But that's what stands out in my mind.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am. I just have three more questions. We did really good on time. How do you feel about the experience? If you could rate the experience on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most meaningful, impactful and 1 being the least meaningful, impactful, how would you describe us?
L. Mohammed: I would say it's a 10 and just way past. But I think I'm prejudice because I like this kind of work. I've always been an engaging conversation type person. I've always loved culture. As a kid I used to say, "Bring me back the stamps, daddy, when you go overseas." I just like diversity and stuff, learning new things about people and how they eat, how they dress, what music they listen to. I'm kind of prejudice in that way. I would say a 10; it's great. But I know some people that say it's boring when they go around the Focolare because some folks want drama and there's no drama. It just depends on the person. I would rate it a 10.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay, the last two questions. Did you learn anything else from this experience you want to share?

L. Mohammed: I think I did learn something. I've been saying "believers" and being "believers," but I'm going to share with you an experience I had. They may still have this, they used to have once a month on Sunday, they would invite people to their home, kind of like a fellowship type thing. They were telling me how they have some people that come that are atheists and that was very interesting to me. It helped me in that way, but I think a lot of stuff has helped me to get to where I am in the last eight years, when my father passed. Him being my leader but him being my father, it's something when your parent passes. You don't know until you experience it, but it's something. You grow. What I have learned is patience. I was just talking earlier to the brother, and this does connect, and we were talking about forgiveness. You know Catholics, that's really big, forgiveness.

T. Najee-ullah: That's right.

L. Mohammed: So we were talking about forgiveness and I was saying that I can forgive but I always told myself don't forget, because then you'll make the mistake again. But I have been impatient sometimes with the other party not coming with me because I tend to forgive a little quicker than other folks. I have learned that if you really love someone and you really forgave them, you'll wait as long as you have to wait. You not going to be mad at them or pressure them because they haven't forgiven you. That's kind of that idea with the atheists. Because I was thinking, "Why y'all have atheists here? We're supposed to be all believers." But you just be patient. You meet the person where they are. You don't criticize the person or treat the person bad. I learned that from them.

T. Najee-ullah: That's wonderful. I think the first time I heard about that, atheists, was when President Obama, at his inauguration, he kept saying believers and non-believers, and I was like-
L. Mohammed: Like who are the non-believers?

T. Najee-ullah: ... I was in D.C. at that time doing that kind of work and that was the thing people kept saying that. I was like, "Oh he's talking about atheists. Okay." [inaudible 00:42:16] we had pagans, self-proclaimed pagans, they came to the interfaith, interesting, but I had to meet people where they are.

L. Mohammed: Yeah you have to meet people where they are. You have to not judge people. That's not my business. My business is to treat you right so that'll go on my record, that I treated you right because you're a human being.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am. Is there anything else you would like to share or comment? Again, this is not everything. This is an attempt to get these things on record and I pray that this goes well.

L. Mohammed: Yes! I want to share this. I went the first time and then I think it was the second time that we went back, the lodging that we stayed in. Do you know what they had done, in Rome? They had put in a wudu station for us. I mean brand new, beautiful! I'm like this is unbelievable. These some good people.

T. Najee-ullah: Because they don't have to make wudu.

L. Mohammed: No. And they didn't have to do that, I mean we can make wudu in the sink or in the tub. But they put a beautiful wudu station for us, yes they did. I mean it, not a portable thing. They changed the construction of their place. It was beautiful.

T. Najee-ullah: That is wonderful. I wanted to say this, thank you so much for your time.

L. Mohammed: Thank you.

T. Najee-ullah: The honor of your time and the honor of your company to ask these questions, I really do appreciate it. I feel like Allah is using me as a vessel to do this. I was doing interfaith work and Allah has kind of thrust this in my lap. I was at Georgetown sitting in class and my professor comes in, we have a guest speaker and he comes in and talks about Imam Mohammed for an hour. He talks about his role in that process. So I'm amazed. I'm the only one in the room that knows anything about it, other than my professor. Talking to him, he agreed to be my advisor, and he said, "I'll give you everything that I have. I need you to do something. I need you to find out what Imam Mohammed thought, what Imam Mohammed's community thought,
and I need you to document that." I said, "That's all I'm here for. That's what I want to do anyway." He agreed with me and he gave me all the resources.

L. Mohammed: [Arabic 00:44:33], that's beautiful.

T. Najee-ullah: It's my job.

L. Mohammed: I'm just so happy to be a part of it and happy to know it. Because I think that interfaith is high at the top of what Imam did, Imam Mohammed's success is for, and of what his legacy should be.

I remember I was talking to him because I was starting to do this book and we were going to have interview sessions, but then he passed shortly after that. But one of the sessions that we did have ... Because I'm doing this book called, Imam Mohammed: Through A Daughter's Eyes, and so I asked him, "What do you want to be remembered as? How do you want to be remembered?" And he said, well actually, first he ain't say a thing. He was just sitting there looking like trying to think and actually acting like maybe he didn't know. But he eventually said, "A man of moral courage."

People would automatically probably say, "Imam Mohammed was a religious leader," or, "He taught the Quran," or, "He was a Muslim leader," or, "He was the Imam. That's who he was." Well, I think based upon him saying "moral courage" any believer can have moral courage. He didn't say a man of Muslim morality. He just simply said a man of moral courage. You know Imam Mohammed, he thinks about what he says. He's very distinct about his language, about what he's going to say. When I look back, I think that was it. The whole interfaith thing, the whole connecting of human beings and leaving behind that nobody can say that Imam Mohammed didn't want to help everybody, didn't want to serve Allah by serving all of humanity.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, ma'am.

L. Mohammed: So, I think that's his legacy. This work is his legacy. I really believe and I don't see a lot of people doing it, so I'm so happy you're in this. That is wonderful.

T. Najee-ullah: Allah's put me in it. I wasn't-

L. Mohammed: Yeah, well that's how stuff happens.

T. Najee-ullah: Yeah. I was assistant Imam in D.C., and a sister came and said, "We're doing this program at Wesley Theological Seminary, I need somebody
to come do it," And Imam Yusuf said, "I can't do it." He asked the other brother, "You want to do it?" "No, I can't do it." "Tariq, what are you doing? Can you go do this?" And that's how I started doing interfaith. I wasn't doing it before that. That's when I first started.

L. Mohammed: That's good. That's beautiful. You know what? Talk to Sister Baseema. You talked to her?

T. Najee-ullah: I haven't talked to her. She went too?

L. Mohammed: She didn't do anything with the Focolare, but she was there and she used to have the paper because I remember when Imam Mohammed went to this synagogue. It was very early in his time as leader. She talks about that. She has worked in interfaith for years. Decades.

T. Najee-ullah: I didn't know that. Sister Baseema or Bahijah?

L. Mohammed: No, Baheja. Did I say Baseema? Who's Baseema? I don't even know who that is.

T. Najee-ullah: She's a pioneer in D.C. as well.

L. Mohammed: No, I didn't mean Baseema. Bahejah. Yeah, yeah. Bahejah Abdul. I can't think of it but you know who I'm talking about.

T. Najee-ullah: I know exactly. Yes, ma'am. I'll be down there. I'll be going to talk to her. I'll be down there for Eid. Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

L. Mohammed: You're welcome. So how long did it take?

T. Najee-ullah: 48 minutes.

L. Mohammed: Okay. That was good.
Edited Interview with Imam Ronald Shaheed

September 3, 2016

Location: Milwaukee, WI

Author/Transcription Note: The notation “inaudible” simply means that a sound obscured what word or phrase was exactly stated in the audio recording.

T. Najee-ullah: I have to ask some questions because this is going to be reviewed by an internal review board so I have to ask do you consent to this interview being recorded?

R. Shaheed: Yes, I do.

T. Najee-ullah: How would you like to be identified?

R. Shaheed: Imam Ronald B. Shaheed.

T. Najee-ullah: Where do you reside?

R. Shaheed: I currently reside in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I'm retired just last few weeks, retired as Imam Sultan Muhammad Masjid and also as director of education for Clara Muhammad School.

T. Najee-ullah: The rest of these questions are demographic questions and I'm going to get to the actual interview. This is going to be basically ... feel free to correct or add anything that you feel is missing. What year were you born and what is your age?


R. Shaheed: I'm very familiar with your father-in-law, Imam Maajid.

T. Najee-ullah: Yes, sir.

R. Shaheed: Very excellent human being. I was an Imam in Tallahassee, Florida, for a while and we would have these Southern Region Imam's meetings that included Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina, North
Carolina, like that. That's how I got to know Imam Maajid. May God forgive him his shortcomings if he had any, accept his soul in his paradise.

T. Najee-ullah: How long have you been a member of the community? When did you join or how long have you considered yourself a member of the community?


T. Najee-ullah: Do you consider yourself a pioneer, or are you considered a pioneer in the community?

R. Shaheed: I guess technically I would be considered a pioneer although I never felt that way. I felt I was part of a youth movement. Yeah, I guess technically I would be considered a pioneer.

T. Najee-ullah: Do you have family members or you see yourself as a legacy member of the community, your family has history in the community or...

R. Shaheed: No, my family at this point in time, if you're talking about grandparents, mother, father, brothers and sisters, I'm the only one who became a part of the community, although my mother applied to her passion. She acknowledged the... I don't want to say she took shahada, but she acknowledged the veracity of it, the truthfulness of my move to become a member of the community under Elijah Muhammad, Imam Mohammed. Nobody in my family formally has taken shahada except myself.

T. Najee-ullah: Okay, so I'm trying to, and then again this is just... You're familiar with the academic process. I have to ask questions. I'm trying to get background questions on interfaith and then I'm going to, the meat of my interview is going to be specifically about Imam Muhammad, Pope John Paul II here in a little bit. You mentioned that your family members are not Muslim, your relatives. How do you feel about interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians and what has your experience been with your family and then we're going to talk about beyond to get that family before we talk about the...

R. Shaheed: Well, my grandfather and grandmother, they raised, quote-quote raised me, although in the south, and maybe even now, even though my grandparents mostly raised me, I went back and forth between my mother and my grandparents. If they stayed in the same town, I would end up sleeping in both places. My mother and her husband, for a long time in my development they followed the seasons in terms of tomatoes and oranges or whatever in order to, because you're in northwest Florida but the jobs for African Americans were, in that time, scarce. They followed the seasons. That meant that they were away a lot. I ended up with my grandparents a lot.
My grandfather was a Baptist, Missionary Baptist, minister. He wasn't a pastor. He didn't have a church, but a great abiding respect in that small town because he was a minister. Everybody predicted that I was going to be a minister like him. I remember that it just was drilled into me. It just seemed a natural thing that when I converted to Islam I became an imam. It was almost like something I just had to do because they had drilled that into me.

My family, I don't know what they said when I wasn't around, but my family was very accepting of me converting. I think part of it was because I was a rebel. I was different in a lot of ways, went away to college, first person in my immediate family to go out of state to be educated and to be away from my family long periods of time. In some ways I guess it was not surprising to them that I chose a religion that most, including myself, didn't know much about.

Because of that experience and then acceptance, I think that it helped me to crystallize my view of relationship between Muslims and Christians. All of my family is still Christian. I don't proselytize. I never did to my family. I never proselytized to them. I thought that was the best way to do it. When Imam Mohammed introduced the, for us to consciously promote interfaith dialog, it was a natural thing for me, a good thing. We're not talking about converting anybody. We're just talking about sharing with each other our faith experience and how can we work together to make the world a better place as faith people. It was easy for me to accept that because of my experience.

T. Najee-ullah: This is, side note, something I wanted to ask you. Are you familiar with when Imam Mohammed started a formal interfaith ministry because in my research from 1975 I find he has relationships with churches and he's speaking at churches or they're speaking. I don't see it as a beginning. I know I found articles and events in the nineties he said something that he had an initiative, but I don't see him ... It's always been, from whatever I've found, he's always been working with interfaith.

R. Shaheed: You're right. From the very beginning it appears that Imam Muhammad was interested in interfaith dialog. As a matter of fact, early on there was this well known visit to a synagogue in DC with Rabbi Habermann. That was his name. They had the big write up in the journal about it. Then shortly thereafter there was a big meeting with the leader of reform Jewish movement. Then some meetings with African American Christian leaders in New York, the head of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. I think in the beginning he modeled interfaith dialog wherever it's seen. I don't know if you're aware of this, but I think that Imam had a debate with Jimmy Swaggart.

T. Najee-ullah: I didn't know that.

R. Shaheed: Yes. I think it probably was in Dallas, maybe. I probably have the tape. If I dug up my tapes, I could find it. He had a ...
T. Najee-ullah: I found one that he did with not Swaggart. It's another. It's a evangelical. I can't think of the man's name right now to save my life, but I wrote it down. I was surprised. I looked him up, he was a televangelist. He wasn't as big as Jimmy Swaggart, but he had a following.

R. Shaheed: You're aware of the C.R.A.I.D. movement, the Committee to Remove all Images of the Divine from Worship. C.R.A.I.D. was designed to make people conscious of how images destroy our humanity, images in religion. Imam shut it down because they were going too far with it. They were going too hard with it.

T. Najee-ullah: It's coming back. I saw a table yesterday, somebody pushing a big C.R.A.I.D. ...

R. Shaheed: I don't see the atmosphere that that should have any promise in. We're not in the position to try to tell people of other religions how they should function. We're not into trying to convert people who are already converted to a religion. Imam discouraged that in the latter years of his life. He discouraged that. In fact, a brother did a publication based on a talk he did at a university in Miami in 2007 where Imam said we shouldn't be going after people who were already converted to faith. That's not what we do. The da'wah should not be aimed at people who profess Christianity or Judaism or whatever.

In a talk he gave at a convention, maybe it was 2004 or something, he said that he had read an article or maybe he said he saw something on television where he says so much percentage of people in the United States don't profess a particular faith. He said, "Now, we reserve the right to go after those people with da'wah." He said, "But we're not going after people who already converted to faith." I don't know if that's off the subject.

T. Najee-ullah: No, that's a reflection. That's why my approach and experience is that we'll always have access to what Muhammad said and just start responding.

R. Shaheed: Now the interfaith thing, where it was really formalized, where the members of the community ... I can't really say where that ... I guess it was a natural evolvement, after you see the leader interacting with people from different faiths, I think it was just a natural consequence, but I do think a lot of religious communities start approaching us about dialog. Her name is Robina Winbush. She's an assistant stated clerk for the Presbyterian Church, USA. The stated clerk is their leadership position. She's assistant stated clerk. Anyway, she recounts a meeting that occurred in California with Imam Shuaibe and a few others and the pastor of a Presbyterian church and some others. They had a dialog several years ... I can't remember the year. It was so excellent, according to her, that it led here and Reverend Jay Rock, who were then both in the administration of the Presbyterian Church, USA in Louisville, to approach Imam Muhammad about having a dialogue.
That plus the fact that Imam was already dialoguing with the Focolare in the Catholic church. They told us, they used that as kind of a model. They knew about the success of that dialogue and they didn't know whether we should go like that or give direction but they wanted to have dialogue. Here's the reason she gave. Reverend Robina Winbush, she said that the reason why Presbyterian USA wanted to dialogue with our community is because most of the members of our community under Imam Muhammad have increased before they felt that we had a perspective that nobody else that they dialogued with had, that is they're Christians, but we had been Christians before and now we're Muslim. I remember her saying that to the stated clerk. We were meeting in his office and I can still see him nodding his head, saying that he agreed with that. The dialogue they wanted to do with us special because we had a perspective on Christianity already. Most of our family members were still Christian.

T. Najee-ullah: You kind of answered some of the questions I was going to ask. These other interfaith experiences, we're going to talk about the Catholic experience, how do they compare to other events that you've experienced? Whether religious events or others. What has been the significance or value of the interfaith relationships. Again, right now, not talking about the Catholic relationship, just-

R. Shaheed: Somebody in general-

T. Najee-ullah: In general, has it been beneficial? Has it broadened your perspective or changed how you think about things? How does it compare to things that you already experienced?

R. Shaheed: Yeah. Imam Mohammed, I would say his commentary or his leadership was a natural growth and development out of Elijah Muhammad's leadership in the sense that ... there's an old saying that we all know that we come into Islam and we are going to have plenty money-

T. Najee-ullah: Good homes, good friends

R. Shaheed: Friends from all walks of life. Now can you imagine that being said to people who were descendants of slaves in a country that they said 9000 miles, they couldn't swim back to where they came from and free and then had to go through Jim Crow and all those things and the civil rights movement. This was before the civil rights movement. Can you imagine that being said to those people and what the expectations were about hey, we really can have a wonderful life like everybody else in this country. Despite the fact that we're experiencing racism and all these things. That's the language out of the nation of Islam. Anybody who was under that language when Imam came along and actually started showing us how to put that into action, you got to go out. You got to come out of the walls of the temple and you have to go out in the world
and you have to let people show you that the world has changed and that you can make a contribution yourself.

That's what Imam ... so I would say his commentary and leadership got us out of those walls instead of just talking about plenty of money and homes, friendship from all walks of life. He showed us that the way to do it is to get out and do it. I saw a document once, and I'll find it for you and try to send it to you. Imam was explaining what he was doing in going all ... speaking all over the place. I don't think there was a state in the union he didn't speak in. There was very few he did if it were because most of the United States ... what was he doing? He said, "When I'm going out there speaking, I am trying to address with an anecdote, the poison that's been put out in the atmosphere that says we can't live our Islamic life fully in this country." He said, "So what I'm doing is introducing the anecdote to that. That we can live our life fully in this country."

When you look at the progress that we made under Imam Muhammad and are still making because of Imam Muhammad's leadership and the continuation of what Elijah Muhammad was hoping for then yes, the experiences have been wonderful and religious dialogue is a way that I can ... if I'm dealing with a Christian person, talking with them, I believe that in dialogue I can fully express my life as a believer in Islam. I can fully accept them as a believer in their religion. We don't have to talk about the ... well, I guess you have to talk about the differences too, but as that leader of Christianity told Ja'far in the history of the prophet when the Americans were trying to say that they don't accept Jesus Christ as the son of God or anything. They said, well, explain. Ja'far explained that all the negative things they used to do before the prophet came. Treating women as chattel property, all that stuff. He may have said well, no, we don't see him as the son of God but ...

T. Najee-ullah: We see him as a prophet ...

R. Shaheed: Yeah and they have a sacred position among us. Jesus and his mother, who was a virgin among us and etc. etc. and so the man stepped up and drew this little small line and said, "The difference between us and you is this little line right here. You can stay as long as you want." That's what our life became in the United States because of Rahm Elijah Muhammad and then Imam Mohammed. Us actually living in the country. Imam said, "Anywhere his father lived, anywhere Elijah Muhammad lived, he always kept his property up. He always cleaned up. He always showed a shining example of where he was."

That's what we should do and that's what we did under the Imam and it had resounding results because I'm one of the blessed ones that travel outside of the country even with the Imam, not just in the country. I saw the kind of deep, abiding respect these people have for Imam, and by consequence, they have
for us. Those lies and everything they told about the African-American and all this negative crap that went in the culture out there, I believe those people said that stuff ain't true. I'm looking at African Americans right here. This has got to be how they are. I saw it in Palestine ...

B. Abdul-Baqi: When we were in Arafat in 1977 for the first hutch the Imam spoke on Arafat. Everybody that was in that tent who was Arab said this is the best we ever heard it since the prophet. We can't dispute what he said. He said, "We've been waiting for him, for you all, to come." You were in all, the ones that the prophet prophesized to become his leaders.

R. Shaheed: Yeah. I had a brother from Pakistan tell me that he was a leader of a Tablighi group that came when I was in Tallahassee Florida. I remember the situation we were outside and he was washing up at a faucet and I'm saying well I'm going to ask him questions. He said, "Well, you know brother you must know we don't come to the United States to do dawah, we only come to ask to speak to those people who have kind of fallen away from their religion. Try to get them to come back." He used the term we, he said, "We recognize that there's leadership in the west." He's talking about Imam. He told me that. I didn't ask him. He said, "No, it's understood there is leadership in the west. We don't come to mess with that." I thought about it when he said that because wasn't that the time that Mawdudi was there? Mawdudi's the one that started the Tablighi thing. Mawdudi said the same thing.

For a long time there have been leaders who recognize that Islam was going to be renewed from the west. There would be a thinking ... you know I asked Imam the last time we met with him, August 21, 2008. We were at a late lunch with him and I said, let me quote this, forgive me if I don't quote it exactly like he said. I said, "When one of the Ramadan sessions, maybe it was a couple years ago you said that ... and I said Brother Imam if I'm not saying it correct, please correct me, you said something like there hasn't been a man like you since Muhammad the prophet." Imam he didn't say anything at first, I sat there, "Oh, hell. I said it wrong." I was getting ready to get busted. He said, "No." That's the first thing he said, he said, "No, there have been others but the world hasn't been ready to support them like they're ready to support me right now." That's what he said and I agree 100%.

The mind, the emphasis, the view toward the destiny that Imam brought. The world is ready to accept that now. Just like he was saying about Syria. How they recognized that you all had some kind of special view or approach and they readily accepted that and wanted to imitate it.

T. Najee-ullah: Exactly, I know what you mean. We're walking around, you know you don't realize I mean, you're in another country, you don't realize you're being watched. Okay let me say to you, you are Warith Deen. I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah, we met your leader, he told us all about you." He said, "How is
school going?" Asking these questions, are you on the job? I was like, whoa! I'm not by the school, you know.

R. Shaheed: Listen now this is kind of funny. I told Imam this. We went to Palestine right? Guests of Yasser Arafat and our present with Arafat. So this one day they took us to Al-Aqsa mosque for Jummah and there was so many people there that Imam, they had him, he was in there but we had to make our prayer outside because there was no room. Okay so when the prayer was finished the host imams and whatever they said something in Arabic to the crowd and then they asked Imam Mohammed to speak and then they translated for him. Imam, you know how he was, he wasn't going to diminish the khutbah the brother gave so Imam might have spoke 5 minutes or less. I can't remember what he said but when Imam finished speaking there was this big uproar. I reasoned that they were cheering because of what he said, being from America.

Now the guys, they come and they get the brothers outside and they going to take us where the Imam is. Once again, it's very crowded so they escorting me and the brothers right and we get halfway in the mosque and they going to take us out the side door. Before we go out the side door this big crowd bum rushed us right? I'm saying, "Oh, my God what's going on?" They were happy. This is no lie. One brother, they were hugging us and everything. This one brother grabbed me, hugged me, kissed me right in my eye, my glasses and all. I tell you, he kissed me. I told him man and we just had a laugh about it.

Brother all over Palestine we experienced that. We'd be walking near the market and we were passing by this house one time they came out of the house, "American!" We had to go in their house and sit down and talk with them and eat fruit and everything. That was the spirit everywhere we went like that brother. They had high school bands playing for us and giving us flowers. It was unbelievable but it's quiet I mean seeing him on there and all these things.

I'll say this last thing, I know we got off ... one time Imam, I was working at a university in Kentucky called Berea College and Imam was invited to speak. When Imam gave his talk he said, "You know, I was just talking to some of my colleagues, some of my associates about our work here in America as Muslims and everything, former slaves and everything." He said, "And we were talking about how people try to the view the work we do as not important and I said to them yes, that's true but maybe that's our lot in life. Maybe we will never be credited with the work we've done. We just have to trust in God and know that God sees it." I never forgot that brother because it's still true. They never talk about us all this going on.

I thought it was good too, in a sense, because all those people who got informed about what direction to go in by Joseph from the scripture. They go out there and they do their thing and everybody forget Joseph in prison. When
the time came and they needed Joseph's input, they all remember him but he had to tell them to check those women out who cut their hands. So I just take it as maybe this is God's protection that we're not being mentioned.

T. Najee-ullah: I think so. I think, my grandmother, 98 years old, passed last week, couple weeks ago. I just came back from her funeral last week, last weekend I was there. They recounted her history. I had heard it but you know, we're able to trace our one side back to the plantation. They were Nigerian people. They chartered a boat in North Carolina they had to dig out a sound. Now a sound is not a canal, a sound is like 70 miles wide, not 70 it was miles wide and in the process I want to say they were from 80 to 17 and everyone else died in the process of working too hard. So out of 17 only 5 of those had children that survived. Only one of those lines was complete enough and that was my grandmother.

When I look at her and I see all these things and I see a lot ... how these people didn't survive and prayed for a better future. It's not a accident that we're here and it's now ... even I look at my grandmother, the things she did. She was mentored by W.E.B. Dubois, she and my grandfather. They went to Columbia law school and Columbia University back in the forties. They went out to California to pioneer the NAACP but they went to Howard Thurman's church out there and they were taught-

R. Shaheed: Howard Thurman's church?

T. Najee-ullah: Yeah. They were taught that there's one God and many ways to worship Him. That's how my mother and my aunt and my uncle became ministers because of them teaching them. Howard Thurman teaches there's one God and many ways to worship Him. That's how I'm Muslim. That's how my mom came to Islam.

R. Shaheed: Have you read his autobiography?

T. Najee-ullah: No sir, I heard about it when I was at Morehouse that's it.

R. Shaheed: Brother he recounts in there meeting Gandhi and when he met Gandhi, he wanted to meet him but he couldn't work the plans out. It just so happens it worked out. He said when he met with Gandhi, you know the first thing Gandhi said to him? He said, "We have studied the situation of Negro people in America and we wondered why introduction of Islam to them hasn't been tried." That's what Gandhi said. Thurman reported that in his book he said, we think that Islam would be the best tool for the advancement of black people in America because Islam doesn't accept any races. He said Gandhi said even more than Hinduism, Buddhism and all the other religions, Islam doesn't do it ... He said, "Even my own religion doesn't compare to Islam in terms of eliminating racism." To me, that would explain to some extent why Thurman
felt comfortable because if he didn't like that he wouldn't have put it in his autobiography. It's in there.

T. Najee-ullah: My grandmother would tell me all the time, when I went to Syria, everything. She would ask me, "Make sure you go see Paul's Church of Damascus. Tell me about it, I never been there. She talked to me but she would say, she would always recount sermons from Howard Thurman. She would say, "He had people from the east that would come talk to us and he would say they weren't Christian but they believe in God." This was back in San Francisco. This was in the late forties, early fifties. She was saying that they would talk to us. She said, "That's the only church I ever felt good in since my father." Her father was an A.M.E. minister in North Carolina. She said, "Since the churches that we grew up in that's the only one I felt like home." She was a C.M.E. member when she passed but she didn't talk about her C.M.E. minister she always talked about Howard Thurman. She said, "You sound like you were at the church." I said, "No, I just started saying I recognize that it's not ... we're just playing out the script, God has this thing planned out."

R. Shaheed: Yeah. I believe that's true. Even myself man, I look back and I see the hand of God. I ain't know it then. I see the hand of God. Now I'm going to tell you something. Imam, he was a strong believer in signs. He told me that. He said it but he also told me that personally. He reiterate that Imam told him that. He said, "But it's just for you, it will be a sign. When I see it all I usually say is Alhamdulillah, I thank you Allah. It's Allah telling you that he's with you. Every one of us has that I believe.

T. Najee-ullah: I believe in signs too, yes sir.

R. Shaheed: You know, Imam said the first way that God communicates to you and me is through signs. Ayat means sign and so the signs in the creation is the language God is speaking but we have to be taught how to read. He said, "That's why they can't master Egyptian wisdom because they put hieroglyphics, the signs and pictures. They're still trying to decipher it." Go ahead brother.

T. Najee-ullah: It's okay. I'm going to read something here briefly about research and then ask you questions about it. I'm going to ask something because you already gave me something that I didn't have. Imam Muhammad went to Rome and met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in October 1996. There were a series of meetings that preceded this first trip between Earl El-Amin, Eric El-Amin, and Imam Earl Abdul-Malik Muhammad with members of the Vatican. Imam Mohammad initially met with Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore in 1995 at a program entering his dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Then Mohammed met afterword with Cardinal Keeler who served as the Archbishop of Baltimore at that time.
In Rome, Imam Mohammed and his delegation met with several Catholic communities, the community with which Imam Mohammed developed an ongoing relationship was the Focolare. Imam Mohammed developed a deep and respectful friendship with Chiara Lubich, the leader of the Focolare movement. In 1997, Chiara Lubich of the Focolare movement spoke with the aid of an Italian translator, at the Malcolm Shabazz Masjid in Harlem, New York with Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and Imam Ezekiel Pasha moderated. Now here also, there are two things that have come up that I need to track and I have my notes. I have that there was a speaking engagement by Chiara Lubich in Washington DC.

R. Shaheed: Yes. It was called, I'll get it for you. I may have it in this package here, I can look through it. It's Faith Communities Together, but I'll find it. The first meeting like that was in San Antonio, Texas. Where all the Focolare and Catholic in that area and the Muslims under Imam Mohammed's leadership came together for really a sort of convention but I think it was only one day. Then it was in D.C. The first one in San Antonio, Chiara she wasn't there. She came to the one in D.C.

T. Najee-ullah: I think, was it the nineties?

R. Shaheed: Yeah. No, no, I think it was 2000. I'll get it for you I have it in here.

T. Najee-ullah: I might have been at that. I might have been at that.

R. Shaheed: Yeah, I think it was 2000.

T. Najee-ullah: Yeah because I've been at something where the Imam and Chiara Lubich were there.

R. Shaheed: I'm pretty sure that was it.

T. Najee-ullah: That was the only one I could have attended was 2000-

R. Shaheed: Yeah, I think it was 2000 but I got it here in these documents somewhere. I can get it for you. They had Focolare from all over the world there because I met a lot of them. Interesting enough, Imam Shaheed, this person's from the Philippines, I never seen them ... but they have that kind of communication. Now I think this is God's way of promoting what Imam represented around the world because the Focolare, they're hooked up. They had these talks ... they still have them ... where it's a phone hookup and every group of Focolare around the world would give input on what's happening in their neck of the woods, so to speak. Quite naturally, they would know what's going on in America because that's what they do. They even know names and everything. That's how extensive that dialogue has been. Go ahead.
T. Najee-ullah: I have Imam Mohammed again traveled to Rome in October of 1999 but you said there was another trip between 96 and 99.

R. Shaheed: Yeah, 1998 and it was called ... I can't give it to you in Italian but it's loosely translated Assembly of Muslim Friends of the Focolare. That's what it was titled. Then by the Muslims who were in dialogue with the Focolare from all parts of the world Algeria, Libya, wherever there were Muslims. Not just our association but Muslims from around the world came so it was the Focolare and the Muslims. They also did it with Jews, they did it with Buddhists, they did it with Hindu. They had these different meetings. They usually did them once every four years, something like that. This particular year was the first year ... we had been there in 1996 when Imam met Pope John Paul and then on the next to the last day we were there John Borelli arranged for us to meet with the Focolare at their international headquarters in Castel Gandolfo. Most of us didn't know who the Focolare were.

Imam, at the 96 convention, which was in White Plains, New York. Imam took a small group of Imams and went to Hyde Park, which is not far away, and met with the Focolare. This was during the time when Imam was elected as an international president of the Religions for Peace international organization. In one of their international meetings, I can't remember where it was, might have been in Poland or some place like that ... he met with Natalia and she was the second convert. She was the first convert in Chiara Lubich's movement, Natalia. He met her because I think either Natalia or Chiara was also president of the Religions for Peace and they elected Imam that same year. Imam observed it and then Natalia told her people in the United States, "You all need to get to know W. Deen Mohammed."

I can't remember if Imam contacted them or they contacted him but he ended up going to their place of residence in Chicago. They gave him this book about Chiara Lubich's life called, "Let It All be One". And Imam took it home and read it and he reported that after he read it, he thought that we should get to know them better. They were told to get to know us better and that Imam wanted to get to know them better. He came back to that house a short while later. He brought one of his daughters and he brought some others with and they had a big conversation. That was how it all started. Then of course the convention where he took them out before the community.

R. Shaheed: It's two blocks away, the National House. The one at Farrakhan bought.

T. Najee-ullah: The National House?

R. Shaheed: The National House, yeah, the place that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad lived in. That was actually constructed.
R. Shaheed: I met the architect. I went to the first Islamic conference at Harvard. They invited Imam. They invited Sherman Jackson. They invited Yvonne Haddad. They invited Amina McCloud, there was several of them there and Imam Mohammed. They had a conference there and I met the man who designed the National House. The reason I remember it is because the other day ... we're moving to another apartment, I'm going through papers and he wrote me a letter and he sent me a picture of the original design for the National House. He was at some school in Texas. What's the school in Lubbock, Texas?

T. Najee-ullah: Texas Tech.

R. Shaheed: Texas Tech. That's where he is. He was an architect and he designed it way back in the sixties, maybe late sixties they designed it. He showed me the original drawing of it. It has an interesting history but Imam, he didn't stay there weeks. He was gone. He said he couldn't live in that museum.

R. Shaheed: He made a lot of people upset in the family because he was taking away their royal digs. They didn’t like that.

R. Shaheed: Good homes-Plenty of money, friends in all walks of life. They thought that was it, we've arrived. This is what they were talking about.

T. Najee-ullah: Imam traveled again to Rome in October 99 and visited with Pope John Paul II. He delivered a testimony and prayer at the closing ceremony Vatican City at the inter-religious assembly before the central committee for the great jubilee of the year 2000 the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The theme was towards a culture of dialogue. So doctor Borelli wrote about this in October 1999 at the inter-religious assembly convened in Rome that Cardinal Arinze is a preparatory event for the celebration of the great jubilee year 2000, Imam Mohammed offered prayers on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica during the closing service. I was told that it was the first time that a Muslim had offered prayer in any formal way in the precincts of St. Peter's an American Muslim prays in a public service at a central spot in the Vatican. I was pinching myself.

He is writing and recounting events so the question I have, did you travel as part of Imam Mohammed's delegation to either of these trips to Rome and were you in attendance at Masjid Malcolm Shabazz.

R. Shaheed: I was not in attendance at Masjid Malcom Shabazz. I did travel to all those events in Rome except the Imam was invited, which I didn't know about it, he was invited to St. Francis of Assisi. I finally went there by a subsequent trip but he was invited along with a few others basically by Pope John Paul to participate in prayer at Assisi. That was the other time Imam went there at the invitation of the Pope.
T. Najee-ullah: Do you know when this was? When this happened?

R. Shaheed: Well, it was after, I'm pretty sure it was after 1999. It might have been ... I don't know. I don't even know if it was in the journal. Imam certainly didn't promote publicly that event but we found out later. I don't even think it was in the journal.

T. Najee-ullah: I have to see if that's even in the public documents that Doctor Borelli shares with me so I don't even know if it's there. He's given-

R. Shaheed: It may not be but I know he went. Yeah, I was at the other events. As a matter of fact when the inter-religious assembly occurred there was a simultaneous meeting with the Muslim Friends of the Focolare. Imam asked me to participate in the series of meetings between these 200 or more religious leaders at the Vatican and then the Friends of the Focolare meeting was going on so Imam asked me to represent him at the assembly of the religious leaders. It was very formal. They would pick us up in buses and we stayed at places for us to say and they would pick us up and bring us to assembly. We had these series of breakout meetings that they would have preliminary recessions and everything. That went on for about, maybe three days. Then the culminating event, I didn't see Imam in the group again until they all brought us to the assembly and Imam spoke.

As a matter of fact, a brother and I, when things kind of settled down with the assembly, we negotiated the train and bus system and found our way up a hill to Castel Gandolfo. That was interesting trying to catch a train we don't know where we're going. Yeah, I was there.

T. Najee-ullah: How did you feel about this experience? Was it what you expected? How would you compare it to other religious places you had visited?

R. Shaheed: I think the meeting at the Vatican for the inter-religious assembly in 1999 was probably the most profound experience I had because of all of those different religious leaders and everything that was there, plus the Catholics. I think there was in the audiences, maybe, they said, they felt quarter of a million people in the audience. When you look out all you could see was people out there in Vatican Square. Plus they had Vatican television was filming it and they were shooting it out across the world.

That was most impressive. Yeah. It was a good day. It was an excellent day. I mean, you couldn't have asked for a better weather and the spirit for interfaith was there. You got all these religious, more than 22 religious leaders from across the world. You even had Native American tribal leaders who were there from the United States. Of course, Pope John Paul, he was an older man and in the eighties and he had Parkinson's and of course he sit there quietly and the only time that he got up was when Imam finished talking. Imam was the only
one who went over to him and he kissed him on his right cheek I think and then on his left shoulder. He kissed him on his right cheek and you could tell they was talking, they were talking and then they shook hands and hugged each other then Imam kissed him on his right shoulder, then he went back to his seat.

T. Najee-ullah: With you?

R. Shaheed: No, and of course the Dalai Lama was there, Chiara Lubich. All the great leaders they were there. Religious leaders. I think it was a ... to me it had world implications for future world. That's how I felt. I felt that this was a picture of what it could be and should be like. Respect for all religions. Respect for all attempts to understand the reality of God that the religions represent and even though it was in the Vatican, it wasn't a quote-quote Catholic thing. It was a religious thing.

T. Najee-ullah: What difference has this experience made in your life? What does it mean to you? How do you value it?

R. Shaheed: I value it as something that I experienced that I can share with other people of faith. In other words, I have something to say to other people of faith because I saw this. I don't know, it gives you confidence I think when you have interfaith dialogue. If you've had a profound experience it makes you comfortable to do something along those lines. In this case, I had a comfortable international religious experience so I have something to say to people in America, or wherever I go because there's not been anything else like that that I'm aware of anywhere in the world since then. So it's profound, it's overwhelming but also whoever participated I believe should have confidence to speak to what the relationship should be between people of faith from here on out. That's how I see it.

T. Najee-ullah: Did you learn anything different about interfaith relationships as a result of this experience?

R. Shaheed: Yes I did. I learned that the common people that all these religious leaders represent, too often they get left out because they didn't have that experience and I'm not sure that those leaders go back and share it with them. If they don't share it with them, then for the common people, there was no advancement in understanding how their religion prepares them for the destiny that God is granting the human being three. I believe that, as Imam taught us, that there is a human destiny. There is a destiny for the group and the picture of it for us is the Hajj. A one destiny before God for all human beings, no matter what the race, the gender and everything. I think that too often religious leaders ... I experienced that when I had these different leaders and everything.
It's however needed but the question is what is it going to be for those common people back in those different countries? When I got a chance to speak and I spoke like three minutes, I said something similar to that. I don't know how it was received, it was on my heart and I said, "Leaders, with all our regalia and whatever, posturing how is it benefitting those common people in our different communities we come from? Because if it isn't then we're betraying this experience." I feel I learned that as great as that was we got to find a way to transfer that understanding so that people can be free. Be what God created them to be.

T. Najee-ullah: Has what you experienced impacted, you kind of answered this. Some of these questions are tailored to ... I don't know how you're going to answer them. I'm trying to get points and analysis from you so I ask similar questions different ways. Has what you experienced impacted how you see religion or if not how you view current events or politics or moral values of society? Like equality or freedom or justice? This experience has it broadened or narrowed your viewpoint with regard to these broader values or has it changed your ideas of thinking since having this experience?

R. Shaheed: Yeah. I think it broadened my perspective of what religion could be, or could become. I remember that when we were ... I came to understand from Imam Mohammed's teaching that the number six represents freedom and in 1996 when we were walking with Imam Mohammed up the hill. Imam was a special guest of Pope John Paul so it was Imam and five imams. Imam Kareem Hassam, Imam Earl El-Amin, Imam Earl Abdul Malik, myself. There was five Imam's

T. Najee-ullah: Was Earl's brother Eric with you all too?

R. Shaheed: Eric, that's right, okay. So it's five Imam's and Imam Mohammed. That makes six. As I was walking up a hill, when the pope has his Wednesday audience it's packed. People come from all over the world and that's every Wednesday and it was packed. Here's these six black men walking up going to have a seat on the same level as the pope up there where he has his canopy. I said to myself, I said, "You know what, it's my understanding that at least one pope blessed the ship that was coming to take our ancestors to become slaves in the Americas. Now here is six, representing freedom, black men, descendants of those slaves, walking up the hill to be in dialogue with the leader of the Catholic church. That wasn't lost to me is what I'm saying.

It was a profound experience to me. What really brought it home to me was I looked at the people as we were coming up the hill and I saw the love and respect on their face. I saw some people were crying. I still remember that. They were crying tears and I don't know what they knew because I didn't get a chance to talk to them but you can tell when people either appreciate
something you're doing or not. I saw appreciation on these people's faces and like I said some of them were crying.

I think that it was a kind of a closure thing. Imam maybe uses, talk about the freedom movement and how it's continuing. Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Denmark Veasey, Nat Turner, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglas, all of them represented contributions to the freedom movement and he connected Elijah Muhammad and himself in that freedom movement. For us to be in Rome with the leader of the Catholic church and to get that kind of reception, talking about our leader, it was kind of a closure thing. I thought about it. I think it informs my thinking in my relationship because you know, Imam said that we live in a Christian country right? Now wouldn't it make sense for us to have good relationships with our Christian neighbors? Doesn't events like that help us have that?

T. Najee-ullah: Wonderful. Are there any insights that you have into why Imam Mohammed pursued this dialogue.

R. Shaheed: Yeah, it's funny you say ... yeah. Before meeting with Pope John Paul and long before the meeting with Chiara Lubich and the Focolare, Imam had said on more than one occasion that he wanted to meet the pope in Rome. He wanted to meet him. He wanted to carry the name of Elijah Muhammad in those venues. My thinking is that he wanted to establish once and for all that God had intervened with his father, with Mr. Farrakhan and with the condition that African Americans were in at that time. Hating their own skin color and having realized that I may be one of the main ones to bring a thinking to black people that the should be proud of their color. All of this was part of that. I lost my thought. What was the question?

T. Najee-ullah: Do you have any insights into why Imam Mohammed pursued the dialogue?

R. Shaheed: Yeah and so him putting out in the atmosphere that he wanted to meet with the pope I think was his way of saying, as I said before, addressing this whole idea that we can not fully live the fullness of our religion in the west, in America or wherever it is in the west. This whole thing of the east versus west and the west is the enemy of Islam and all of that, Imam didn't believe that. He didn't accept that. I think all of his leadership was showing us that we can live our life in America and we can contribute to the greatness of America. He felt and he said that there was no better place on the earth for us to live our religion than America. I think that's why he really was promoting that meeting and dialogue.

T. Najee-ullah: What do you think his intentions were? I think you kind of answered that. What do you think Imam Mohammed hoped would result from these dialogues?
R. Shaheed: He wanted a picture. He wanted a picture to be presented to the world of him embracing Pope John Paul and the Catholics. He wanted that picture to go around the world. He knew that if he did that, the pope being the leader of the Catholic world, it would make its rounds in the Catholic circle but it would also make its rounds outside. Let it be known that Christians are not automatically our enemies. Jews are not automatically our enemies. Just because a person is Jew that doesn't make them our enemy.

One time we were in a hotel, I wanted to say it was somewhere in Florida. It was after he had already met Pope John Paul so somebody said, "Imam you know there are people, leaders in the Islamic world don't like that you shook hands with the Pope, joining hands with the Pope. They say you're joining hands with the big Satan." Imam said, "Yeah. I'm aware of that. That's why I wish there had been a picture of me kissing him." I will bust this up. I will bust ... that's what he said, he said, "Yeah. I hope it had been a picture of me kissing." The next time he met him, he kissed him. Kissed him on his right cheek and then kissed him on his left shoulder.

That was to let them know we ain’t following that stuff you all trying to follow. You all following something that's been put in place all down there. Uh-uh. We're following the way to the human destiny. He ain't just talking about ... God is a God of everybody see? He is a God of just black folk uh-uh, I ain’t going to follow that God, the black God you know? Well we tried that, it don't work.

R. Shaheed: They're still trying.

R. Shaheed: When I was growing up I had this man he was blind, he taught me a lot. I used to spend a lot of time with him and his favorite saying was may God bless them and the undertaker dress them.

T. Najee-ullah: I'm wrapping up now, I have a few questions left. What did Imam Mohammed's meeting at the Vatican with Pope John Paul II mean to you?

R. Shaheed: One thing it meant that the things Imam had pointed us to God had blessed them to find fruition because he had started the interfaith dialogue many years before and I know there's many what the Christians call doubting Thomases. Thomas was a disciple that doubted that Jesus Christ had returned according to the Bible. There are a lot of doubting Thomases among us that the methods Imam was using to advance our presence in the world and to share what we have wasn't working. I think the meeting with Pope John Paul was proof that it was working.

I got to tell you this story this anecdotal report. When we went to the Vatican in 96 we met with various Vatican officials and one of the leaders with the pope's press office, Doctor, his name was Joaquin Navarro-Vales that was his
name. He was from Spain. He was a medical doctor before he became pope's press officer. We met in this big area where the pope would receive reports and everything. He was just as plain as his job and we could ask him questions. He was standing up by the big stage and we was sitting down with Imam in the chairs, the first row talking, talking. Somehow Louis Farrakhan's name came up. Somebody said how does the Vatican view Mr. Farrakhan, et cetera? So Dr. Navarro-Vale said, "Well, I'll tell you this way. This is the way we view it. Mr. Farrakhan is a news maker. Imam W. Deen Mohammed is a history maker."

That's how I view it. That was history. His recent history was also history that I believe is going to unfold and people in the future are going to be writing and talking about these occurrences and their value for where human society has advanced. Chiara Lubich was a white woman leading a group of white women in the Catholic church. That movement ended up to be not just women, but men too and got all races across the world involved in. She joined hands with W. Deen Mohammed who led a group that used to be blackness and they say all white people was devils. Right? Now W. Deen Mohammed and Chiara Lubich are gracing as a picture of how men and women could respect each other, how different races could respect and how different nationalities, all of that.

I said something similar to this in Germany with Imam sitting there representing him. It was an assembly of about 200-300 young people from all over Europe and I was explaining this to them. Almost exactly what I said about the races and sexes and nationalism, religious intolerance. His embracing her represent all of that and when I finished saying that they stood up and gave a standing ovation. They wouldn't sit down. They just kept applauding. I kept touching my heart and saying I recognize it so they could stop applauding. They kept applauding.

The next day we're at breakfast with the leaders of the group and they said Imam Shaheed, we want to talk about the standing ovation yesterday. I said, "Okay, what?" They said now you know that traditionally we don't give standing ovations. As a matter of fact since we established this institution, people living here, there's only been one other standing ovation, and that was when our leader, 25 years ago, spoke and they stood up, standing ovation. They said there hadn't been any standing ovations since then. These were leaders, young people from all over Europe.

I'll just end it by saying Imam always talked to us about hope of the destiny. He told us one time, he said that the destiny is a place you're going to reach after much travel, right? He said, "But if you don't know where you're going, how do you know when you got there? If you get on a train in Chicago and say you're going to travel to Los Angeles but if you don't know what Los Angeles look like you can get off in St. Louis, thinking you in Los Angeles. If you're traveling a road to the destiny, you must know what the destiny is." What is
the destiny? The destiny is a place where all human beings find that this is where I'm supposed to be.

He said a picture of it is a Hajj. He said when you get to the Hajj the reason why you say "Labayk Allahuma Labayk", here I am oh God, here I am because you recognize this is where you were trying to go all the time. What's at the Hajj? He said "A Hajj is a global family reunion. You got people every part of the world there." He said, "That's a picture of the destiny." All human beings have reached their purpose before God that they were created for and that's where we going. Not black destiny, not the Muslim destiny, not the Christian destiny, not European destiny, the destiny of the human person that God created. If God blessed people who were brought here to be slaves to help somebody else reach their manifest destiny. Horace Greeley and them guys and it turns out that they brought us here and now we're here to help meet the destiny for the human person, isn't that a blessing from God?

T. Najee-ullah: Only God can do that.

R. Shaheed: There you go. There you go. That's, to me, sums up what Imam Mohammed was all about. You can focus on him as a individual person if you want to but El-Islam is not about my Islam or your Islam. It's about Islam as God understands for all human beings. This is what we became a part of. Now you come into it and you try to make Islam just for black folk or just for Americans or just for Arabs whatever I think that's the wrong approach. Imam Mohammed was blessed by God to see that. Over a series of many years, over our thinking if we were willing to accept it to be in the best position to see Islam as for all people.

Like he said a person may not ever say that they're Muslim but if they, theyself that Muslims have something to offer for the final destiny should we want more than that? According to the prophet, the prophet saw all the inhabitants of paradise and he saw followers of Moses, followers of Jesus right? I tell this sometimes before Christian groups and they always laugh. I said, "But we believe he saw more Muslims there then ..." Then I say, "I'm sure that you feel the same way too. There are many more Christians in heavens of the paradise than Muslims."

That's that competition thing that God calls us to strive in the real God toward all that is good. We ain't trying to trip up Christians because you know there was a thing in the Olympics where one of the women from the United States she couldn't hand off her baton because the Brazilian runner-

T. Najee-ullah: Tripped her.

R. Shaheed: Thank you.
R. Shaheed: So the rule says you can't get in somebody else's way. This should be true for religion. Don't try to trip up Christians or Jews. No, run harder than they're running because their running makes you run hard and Imam taught us that's the way we're supposed to see religious efforts. You'll hear some people, they'll say as a little dialogue I found a way to be a better Christian and then the Muslims say, "Hey, I appreciate my Al-Islam better because I had this dialogue. I think that's the end result of what all this is about. We become more focused in our faith. Become a better, you know.

T. Najee-ullah: I think you answered this because I was going to ask you what does the meeting with Chiara Lubich mean but you answered that too. The last few questions have something else that came up in a previous interview I wanted to ask you. In your opinion were these dialogues successful? Why or why not? Were they effective?

R. Shaheed: Yes. They were effective, excellent, all of that. I say that because we see results of it. For example I told you off, I wasn't being recorded but earlier in the week we get a call that a member of the Focolare was coming in on the train here in Milwaukee. There are new leaders in Chicago and they took that as an opportunity to meet with us. They came to the school, we showed them around the school and then we went to the coffee shop that's right across the street from where the train comes in and we sat down and we had a conversation.

There was two women from Korea, there was a woman from Italy, there was a woman from Brazil and there was a woman from Portugal. It was just a beautiful circumstance. That's what is the end result of these dialogues and the work of people like Pope John Paul, Chiara Lubich, Imam W. Deen Mohammed and others that it's almost like God has ordered that this is where it's going to go. It's so natural for human beings to just sit out ... You know a few years ago we were bringing Imam to Viterbo College in Lacrosse, Wisconsin and he was going to dialogue with Bishop Raymond Burke. You may know him recently because he was the man that said if a Catholic does abortion or whatever they shouldn't get sacrament. They were criticized and everything.

Bishop Burke, he was the Bishop in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, Lacrosse diocese. Right after we went to Palestine with Yasser Arafat, Imam came to a dialogue with Bishop Burke and in preparation for that we were meeting with ... Viterbo used to be a women's college, Catholic school. I remember Sister Anita, I can't remember her last name. Sister Anita and I were talking and she says, "You know Imam Shaheed, a few years ago a Catholic wouldn't be dialoguing with a Muslim. We wouldn't even be dialoguing with Presbyterians or Baptists or
anything. We just didn't do that. You would be frowned on if you had that kind of dialogue. It was just a few years earlier, like ten years prior to that."

The world has changed and the human being is now ready to dialogue and talk with each other, and share because I may never visit Savannah or I may never visit Washington D.C. but if you come from there, you can share with me about Savannah and about Washington D.C. in ways that I would never even read in a book. That's what dialogue does between human beings. It gives us a chance to share our experiences and each one of us walk away more knowledgeable and preparing to function as human beings should function than we were before we met and talked. It's an educational, spiritual kind of experience that can't be had any other way.

T. Najee-ullah: So these two questions I'm going to ask you if you could quantify or qualify the benefit in some type of measurement, how would you describe it? Another example would be if you could rate this experience on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most meaningful, 1 being the least meaningful or impactful, how would you rate it?

R. Shaheed: Yeah, I would say 10. Sure. Like I said to me, it's like when a pebble hits the water and the vibration goes out and touches every part of the water. You don't see it. These experiences of dialogue and interaction have had that kind of effect. I actually went to a meeting in D.C., that meeting in D.C. I think it was 2000 and I was standing somewhere in the crowd and somebody yelled, "Imam Shaheed!" I looked around, I'm looking for somebody I know. Eventually it was a Filipino Focolare member who had seen something on film or something, had seen me at the Vatican or somewhere with the Imam, maybe in Rome, whatever. She knew my name. She came and embraced me like she had known me all her life.

That was the first such experience but it happened so many times that day. You would think, here's a young man who grew up in segregation, little small town and was among the first group that went to integrated school and got called the N-word every day would end up in a position like that in another part the world or another part of the country it's unbelievable. Only God could do it I believe. There's a passage from the Koran that says and you were on the brink of the pit of fire and God saved you from it, and you were enemies and God joined your hearts in love. That's a powerful statement of God in the Koran. You were enemies and God joined your hearts in love for each other.

To me, that's the substance of these dialogues and I think it will continue. I think it was supposed to happen and I think God is in control of it and if you could call it ... you know they'll say in conversation, MR. Shaheed, that's a can of worms you just opened. What they mean is now the worms are going everywhere, they can't control. I think if there's an element that one of the key races divide it, religions divide it, etc., etc. The gig is up. Even Mr. Drum is in
the church today in Detroit, black church. Speaking humbly and reading from something prepared. Yep. So that's powerful stuff brother.

T. Najee-ullah: I have one last question, I have two things that I wanted to ... well, I'll ask the last question and then I'll tell you two things that came up in a previous interview that I wanted to ask you, you know, have more information. Closing questions are, did you learn anything else from this experience that you'd like to share or comment?

R. Shaheed: Anything else? No, except that I enjoyed the interaction with different people from different countries. I've always enjoyed ... my first roommate when I was in college was from Ethiopia and I still remember all the things that came to me in that experience. This dialogue has taken us all across the world, all across the United States and meeting all kind of people. All races, all religions and we didn't even talk about the Presbyterian thing but we dialogued with Presbyterians for four years.

We would come together before Imam died, they laid out the plans for it because we had two meetings with Presbyterian leaders to set up the dialogue and when Imam passed away they contacted me, said, "Well, Imam Shaheed, you think we should go ahead with this now that he ..." I said, "I think he'd expect us to go ahead." A few weeks after Imam died we had our first meeting in Chicago. We met, and we would meet for three or four days and we would have dialogue between ... we had like seven, eight Presbyterian members and we had seven or eight Muslim members. This was the core group that was going to meet all the time.

On the next to the last day we invited the Presbyterians and the members of Imam Mohammed's association into this big meeting. We had lunch or dinner and we'd just talk. We did that in Chicago. We would do that every six months for four years. We did it Chicago, we did it in Indianapolis, we did it in Louisville, we did it in Atlanta. In Atlanta we had it at the school there, the seminary there.

T. Najee-ullah: In St Louis?

R. Shaheed: No in Atlanta.

T. Najee-ullah: I know what you're talking about. Not Emory but-

R. Shaheed: It's a theological seminary.

T. Najee-ullah: Oglethorpe?

R. Shaheed: No, no.
T. Najee-ullah: Not Oglethorpe, my father-in-law used to go there all the time.


T. Najee-ullah: Oh, ITC.

R. Shaheed: That's where we had it. That's right. We had it in Philadelphia. We had it in Oakland, California. This big church was a Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, outside of Philadelphia put up the money and they financed the whole thing, food, trip and lodging, for those eight years. Reverend Jay Rock and myself we had to go to a meeting two years in to meet with the church members, to let them know how it was going but yeah, that's how we did it. We did that for four years.

In fact he just called me three days ago. He lives in Sarasota, Florida now. He's since retired. We were talking about getting together for a reunion, but yeah, four years of that, as one, because we lived together, ate together, argued together. I mean, it got down. We got in some kind of touchy areas. We fought through it. Interfaith dialogue, that's where it is brother. Chance to just ... oh, I didn't tell you two years straight I went to a interfaith thing for a week long at St. John's University in Minnesota. That was interesting. It was excellent. We had eight different religious traditions there, two summers. There's a document, I could find it for you at home somewhere, but yeah, interfaith preparation and dialogue is the way to go.

T. Najee-ullah: That's how Allah’s put me in this position. It wasn't my, I don't want to say passion, it's my experience, just like yours. My family most of them are not Muslim, some of them did,... my parents did have siblings convert, like you but for the most part its been a natural progression.

I was in D.C. after Syria at Masjid Muhammad and there was a sister that came that was doing a program at one of the seminaries and said they needed a representative of the Imam's office and the Imam Yusuf was supposed to go, said he couldn't do it and he asked the other fella, the older one said, "No I can't do it either. Tariq go do this." I did it, I ended up out of that was the IIIT Institute out of Virginia they were sponsoring that and they wanted me to do a program.

I did a program with them. They used to do a chaplaincy program that got, after 9/11, got shut down but they still do the interfaith program, a portion of it so I did that certificate with them then they encouraged me to go through I said, "This is not necessarily ..." It's okay but it wasn't what I was planning so I did go to Georgetown and once I met Dr. Borelli and I saw that okay, this is what Allah has me here to do so that's what I find humbling about doing at this point.
T. Najee-ullah: The question I wanted to ask you is as I’ve been interviewing what has come up is there are some type of pact or promise or contract between Imam Mohammed and Chiara Lubich and I'm not really clear on what that is or what that was or when that happened or?

R. Shaheed: Yeah, the Focolare have this thing they call the pact and it's ... I can't give you the exact words or the exact contract but it's that we dedicate our life that we'll defend...I dedicate myself to you with my life and that I'll lay out my life for you. Something like that it's a pact that they say to each other and they said it to us.

I think Chiara said it to Imam. That they would work with each other like that and defend each other. They were very close even though she didn't speak English and he didn't speak Italian. I remember so the exact words of the pact I can get it for you but it was this agreement to work together to help the world become one, a world that is one. They agreed to that. I'm pretty sure that's what they were talking about.

I was going to tell you that one time I was on a plane with Imam and it was just he and I and I said to him ... I didn't say it exactly I was thinking it. I said give me the real scoop on Chiara Lubich. We're not in the public or anything. I didn't say it that way but I'm sure Imam saw what I was saying. I didn't say it in a kind of a condescending way or anything. I just said Imam, give me your commentary on Chiara Lubich and he said, "She is an inspired woman. I believe she is inspired and I believe that God has lifted her above all women on earth." That's what he said about her. Like I said this was a private conversation. There was nobody else in the conversation. He saw her as a genuine article. We went on trips in her town where she lived in and everything and you can tell by, especially the women, the men to but more importantly the women. When you interact with them, they channel Chiara Lubich, no doubt about it. I don't think they were even aware of it as much but the way that God blessed them and teach them to grasp a certain character and disposition as a believer you should see it, it's something special.

I don’t know how many you've met, but anywhere in the world. I think the untrained person would think, they I don't know, flighty and you know, but it's not that. It's that they have a true feeling that permeates everything they're about and they believe it. Love is what it's about, right, and they try to embody that. Once you meet them and get to know them you could probably pick them out. There's a crowd of people and they kind of start, you know who they were. That's not consistent though.

I told Imam that once. I said, "Imam why do you really want us to have this close relationship with the Focolare?" He said, "Well what do you think?"
said, "Well, they have worked on the concept of love in all its aspects and they try to live and embody that." I said, "We are people," talking about Americans, "who have had the opposite experience, and so much so that we don't even extend it to each other like we should." I said, "I'm thinking that you want us to interact with them so we can learn from that." He said, "You're exactly right." He didn't make any other comments.

I'm not sure I was right on the money in terms of what he wanted but that's what he said, he said, "You're exactly right." He didn't make any other comments.

T. Najee-ullah: I want to tell you thank you again. It was quite an honor and a pleasure for the time that you've extended I'm extended and just been a tremendous, tremendous help in documenting this and presenting it in the proper way.

R. Shaheed: Not at all. My pleasure brother. My pleasure. I'm going to get you some. Here I give you that.
Edited Interview with Imam Earl El-Amin

September 18, 2016

Location: Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD

Author/Transcription Note: The notation “inaudible” simply means that a sound obscured what word or phrase was exactly stated in the audio recording.

Tariq Najee-ullah: As-Salaam ‘Alaikum Do you consent to this interview being recorded.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yes, I do.

Tariq Najee-ullah: How would you like to be identified?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Imam Earl El-Amin. Resident Imam at the Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Well, you just answered that. Where do you reside?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I reside in the city of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland

Tariq Najee-ullah: What year were you born. What is your age?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I was born in 1951, I am 65 years of age.

Tariq Najee-ullah: How old were you when you became Muslim, or when you joined this community?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I was 22 years of age when I became a Muslim. '72, yeah.

Tariq Najee-ullah: And when did you join the ... accepted the leadership of being a Mohamed or how long would you consider yourself a part of, or a member of this community?

Imam Earl El-Amin: When I initially joined this community as a college student at Morgan State University, I joined the Nation of Islam around 1972, '73. And in 1975, after the death of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, I matriculated, along with Imam Warithuddeen Muhammad, and followed his leadership since 1975.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Do you consider yourself a pioneer or are you considered a pioneer in the community?

Imam Earl El-Amin: No, I don't consider myself a pioneer in a certain context. But I do consider myself a pioneer in another context. If you understand the community, you find that the Nation of Islam, under the leadership of the Imam Elijah Muhammad, pioneered people, what I would say, out of America. Taking them out of certain psychological and religious conditioning. We ate one meal a day, we weren't allowed to be involved in sport and play. They were just some of the examples. So, we did not vote. And so that took us out of the context of being in fabric of the society somewhat. Upon Imam W. D. Muhammad becoming the leader, he pioneered us back into society. Being involved in the political life. Being involved in social justice organizations. Working in your neighborhoods. So, I guess I am a pioneer in that context as one who helped to pioneer back into America. Interfaith dialogue was very prominent in his mission. So, I guess I am a pioneer in that context, yes.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. Do you consider yourself a legacy member of community, or does your family have a history of involvement--any of your siblings, relatives?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I don't consider myself a legacy. That's very, very, very big shoes. I consider myself a helper. My parents did leave a legacy. They weren't Muslims. My mother is 93 years of age just celebrated her birthday August 27th. And she is a very vibrant woman, who still is involved in community. She still is the secretary of the neighborhood association. They celebrated their 60th anniversary on the day of her birthday they celebrated it also in the community. The upcoming mayor, Congressman Elijah Cummings, Kwesi Mfume, City Council Person Nick Mosby, all of those people came out. Catherine Pugh. So, and my father was a coach. He coached a lot of sandlot, and ultimately he also was the baseball coach at Morgan State. That legacy, working with African-American males and working with people in community was, I guess that was the legacy that was given to me and my late brother. I guess this is part of the continuum.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So your brother came into the religion with you as well?
Imam Earl El-Amin: My brother and I. My brother is three years younger than I. And we came into this way of life together. Ironically, he came in before I did. Technically, he came in before I did, yes.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. So, you are familiar with the content of my thesis or its focus. I am going to ask you some background questions now on interfaith, and then I am going to speak about some of the facts that I have for the historic event. And then I'll ask you some specific questions about Rome and Imam Muhammad and Vatican, and Pope John Paul II, Chiara Lubich, and the Focolare. Right now I'm going to get some background on interfaith. How do you feel about interfaith relationships between Muslims and Christians?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I wouldn't say how I feel about it. I would say what I think of it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay.

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think that, and the reason why I am saying that is because it isn't ... If you read the Qur’an carefully, I think that we have an obligation to establish interfaith relationships to improve the quality of life. And so I think that, for me, it's a no-brainer. It's a no-brainer. It's something that must be done based on the context of where we are here in America in a predominantly Christian society. Then, it is imperative that we establish those meaningful relationships. And based on our historical context of how we came to America, and many of our family members are Christians, then it is a no-brainer for us to establish meaningful relationships with the Christian community.

Tariq Najee-ullah: You kind of led into my next question. I was going to ask what is your experience with interfaith relationships between Muslims and other faiths. And you talked about having, you know, having non-Muslim family members. What additional experiences would you describe ... And you also talked about us living in an American society that is predominantly non-Muslim. So, any other experience that you have ... 

Imam Earl El-Amin: As a young man growing up, I was a pretty good baseball player. And I played in the little league that was predominantly Jewish. So, my interaction with Jewish children and adults was at a very early age--before I was 12 years of age. And so, and even in school. So I began my interaction, socially and I guess
athletically at that period of time. And then as time went on, as an athlete here in Baltimore playing a few sports, then my interaction athletically continued with Christians and Jews, and in the concept of teams. So I got an opportunity to experience working together for the greater good, for the victory, so to speak. And so I never was uncomfortable ... And at that period of time, I wasn't a Christian and I wasn't a Muslim, I was just a ... I guess my father and mother weren't church people. So I just was a spiritual guy. My father was a very spiritual man, but he never converted to Christianity or Islam.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. Very interesting. Some of these questions have been answered to, but I am going somewhere. Have you ever been a part of a Muslim community interfaith event or program?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I have been involved with interfaith probably before most people in our national community have been. I think Baltimore city probably was the forerunner for developing interfaith dialogue and initiatives. I think we started out in maybe the mid-80s, maybe even before then doing interfaith initiatives and dialogues.

Tariq Najee-ullah: What inspired that?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think the influence was of Imam WD Muhammad and his vision in understanding how human beings, not just Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but how human beings interact with one another and that they ... You work with people so that you get to know them. We have a ... In the Qur’an it says that God has created all nations and tribes so that we can get to know one another. And his word is a powerful one. In the Arabic language it is much more expansive that just know one another. It entails working with one another, traveling with one another, as our prophet has said, three ways that you know a person, live, work, and travel with them. So I think that it is much more expansive than that.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, this is not actually in my questions, but in my research I've been trying to pin point a date that Imam Muhammad began interfaith work. I have not been able to find one because, from the very beginning, the earliest documents from the time that he became Chief Minister in 1975, I find correspondence or interviews or interaction with him and Rabbis and Priests.
Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, I've been ... In my conversations people have said something about a meeting in Washington DC, others said it was a meeting in Chicago. I'm not certain, I haven't been able to track down what it was, but I know that, based upon my perspective by looking at documents, it looks like, from the very beginning, he has always been involved.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Imam from the very, very beginning was involved in interfaith dialogue. He alludes to it ... As a matter of fact, before he became Imam was involved in having dialogue. I remember vividly him speaking about when he was a conscientious objector, and he was in Sandstone, Minnesota, and he was incarcerated along with some of the members of the Nation of Islam, of the conversations that he used to have with the Jehovah Witness gentleman. Ironically, many, many years later, at one of our Ramadan sessions that gentleman, Imam introduced that gentleman to us. So, his interaction and involvement with people of other faiths and traditions was even before he became the leader. So I hope that continues ... But I can't ... I think the first major interfaith dialogue was in Washington DC. I can't remember the year.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. The next question I have is, you've said you have been a part of numerous events. This is a qualitative interview, so that's why I have asked, "how did you feel," "what you thought" about it, as well as works. How do you feel about these types of events? Where they what you expected?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Initially, in a sense, we were the new people on the block as Muslims. And our interactions with Christians and Jews and the ... I think everybody was playing it safe at first. And then as people got to know one another, they found out that they were all human beings. They just had separate faith traditions. And that they had some of the same issues. In many instances, they were confronted with the same issues as parents, as neighbors, as ... All of that. So, I thought that here in Baltimore there was this real nice natural progression towards establishing meaningful relationships, and as we were talking you'll see the culmination of those things that happened. Numerous things that happened for the culmination of those relationships. And that actually helped to improve our overall community nationwide.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. How would you compare ... Is there a way to compare these types of events you've experienced? Are they similar or different? For instance, if the Muslim community hosts and interfaith event, does it have a certain feel to it, is it different or do you have a different approach to it as opposed to when you would go to an interfaith event hosted by non-Muslims or ... I don't know if you can make a comparison, but ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think that, initially, we did not do a lot of hosting. We did more traveling to the other synagogues and churches. And then, I think, when we felt more comfortable with our community overall, then we would host certain events for everyone. So, based on what the event was, was based on how things turned out, so to speak. I just couldn't put a blanket statement on that.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. It's not ... It's a ... It's not a necessarily what blanket you had, but an example of something that stood out to you just prior to understanding in a progression, this is in general, then we are going to get to the specific events. Because my focus is evaluating the effectiveness of these events as opposed to the run-of-the-mill dialogue that may be photo ops or hand-shaking sessions when you may or may not have true fruitful relationships that come out of it.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah. Yeah.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, I'm trying to get, when I say comparison, like, it can be examples. I am not necessarily trying to generalize, but if you remember specific examples that you can think of making some type of comparison, and then I am going to ask a couple of questions that may try to give a value.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Let me say that I've been involved in so many of them, I'm trying to go back in my mind in some that were really or very, very productive. Initially, I was involved in what was called "Blacks and Jews Leadership Training Program." Which necessarily wasn't just African Americans who were Muslim. Some of those dialogues stuck out because they were very, very intense. More around race than it was around religion, in a sense. Then, the relationships that we established around ...but one of the things that was so important was that via our language, we had already distinguished ourselves. So people could make that distinction. We were so ... Our language was so
logical and rational that we were ... People heard a different and
a refreshing perspective on religious life. And I don't like to use
the word religion a lot, but on religious life. I think that that is
real narrow, but, yeah. To give you another example is some
years ago I spoke on Saturday in an Orthodox, a modern Jewish
Orthodox synagogue. And then I spoke on another occasion ... It
was a dialogue that happened at a conservative synagogue,
where the sisters were covered and the Jewish women were
covered, and actually that spawned a greater conversation. A lot
of this was published in The Jewish Times, also.

So, and then in the Catholic community, one of the things that
stuck out for me was a motorcade that came into Baltimore to
Catholic Relief Services on Fayette Street, a four or five car
motorcade. And this little man gets out, and the people are
wondering ... The police ... There's motorcycles in the front and
wondering who this guy is. People are asking, actually. Then
Imam Mohammed, Cardinal Arinze, Dr. Sulayman Nyang ... I
believe we had a major meeting there. Cardinal Keeler, who
played a prominent, prominent, prominent role in this whole
interfaith, especially in Baltimore City, and nationally. But those
things ... And just, not just the religious leaders, but things like
Habitat For Humanity. People working together, building a
house together. Muslims, Christians, Jews doing those types of
social ... Even on that level, those things stick out to me. The
house was completed and you can see what you did working
together. The end result of something, and that a family is going
to benefit from the work that you put in as people of faith. So,
those types of things, yeah, they stick out to me.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, if you could assign a ... Based on those experiences, what
would you say the value of interfaith experiences, especially
between Muslims and Christians, how would you describe the
value of what it means to you?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think that the value of that is that ... For us as Muslims, and
what we have had to go through via the media and some extreme
aspects of our way of life and things that have occurred over
time and throughout the world, those sincere relationships that
were established helped up to navigate in America. And what I
mean is, is that we had advocates that were outside the
parameters of Islam, but who actually knew.
I read a letter last year or year before last that a woman that befriended my brother and I many, many years ago, who actually was the catalyst for establishing the relationship with the Jewish community. She's an orthodox Jew, and I used to live in the Jewish community at one time, and I used to see this woman. And you know, I was an avid runner at one time. And I'd see this woman every morning running with a German Shepherd and a long dress and a head cover. She already knew my brother because my brother was a community planner all through northwest Baltimore. And so we struck up this relationship. She lived around the corner from me, and she also at the time was working at the Baltimore Jewish Council.

And years later she ... She came back here last year and I had lunch with her, Imam Derrick Amin and myself. But she wrote a beautiful letter to us. She lives in Israel, and that the perceptions of Muslims from the Jewish community where she lives out in a kibbutz, I guess you call it, community. And she says that she is always advocating that that is not the Muslims that I know. The Muslims that I know are kind, considerate, are ... And so I read that to the community one week. We would email back and forth, but I'll try to see if I can find that because I think that that is worthwhile, you know. It was really something for her to say that and to say that right there in Israel and what is happening over there.

So, that's an example of what I am talking about. What it produced.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. That's very, I thank you, more for the interview, I guess, toward the meat of what we are discussing. I'm going to read to you briefly a summary of historic events, and then I ... Feel free to correct me, because this is based on documentation that I have accumulated from Dr. Borelli, for The Living City Magazines, from the Muslim Journal, and now from Imam Ronald Shaheed, the information that he has given me, the documents that he has given me.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Okay.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Imam Muhammad went to Rome and met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in October of 1996. There were a series of meetings that proceeded this first trip between Imam Earl Al
Amin, Imam Eric Al Amin and a later stage between Imam Earl Abdu Malic Muhammad with members of the Vatican. Imam Muhammad initially met with Cardinal Arinze in Baltimore in 1995 at a program on inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. Imam Muhammad met afterwards with Cardinal Keeler, who served as Arch-Bishop of Baltimore at that time. In Rome, Imam Muhammad and the delegation met with several Catholic communities. The community which Imam Muhammad developed an on-going relationship with was [inaudible 00:26:49].

Imam Muhammad developed a deep and respectful friendship with Chiara Lubich leader of the Focolare movement. In 1997, Chiara Lubich spoke with the aid of an Italian translator in Malcolm Shabazz Masjid in Harlem, New York, with Imam WD Muhammad. Imam Ezekiel Pasha moderating

Imam Muhammad again traveled to Rome ... Oh, I have a note here that Imam Muhammad also met in 1996 with Focolare.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, he went up to Mariapolis.

Tariq Najee-ullah: In New York?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, up-state New York. He went up to Mariapolis. And the reason why I know that, is because I did not attend. I was assigned the task of ... That day the Imam was supposed to meet with ... It was in White Plains, which is in West Chester County, New York. To meet with the county executive of White Planes and some other officials. I was given the task of meeting with them. So, I know he went to Mariapolis. As a matter of fact, at that time I was working in the Governor's office. So, they called me as someone who could deal with that. I know he did, that that is absolutely correct.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. Afterwards, I still haven't found a date for this, but there was a ... Chiara Lubich and Imam Muhammad spoke in Washington DC at some time called Faith Community Development?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Uh hum.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I don't have a year for that.
Imam Earl El-Amin: That's later on.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. So, in 1998 there's a trip. Imam Muhammad went to Italy on a trip with the Focolare, to meet the Focolare with an assembly of Muslim friends and the Focolare.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, that was a world-wide ... I was a participant in that. He took a group of maybe 80 of us had come from America. Not just all Imams. It was just members of the community. Imam Plemon was part of that delegation. Ezekiel Pasha was part of that delegation. And ironically, that is when the idea of hosting Chiara Lubich came about. The Imam gave the instruction ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: This trip was hosted here in New York?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Hosted here in New York.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, this could have been '98 then?

Imam Earl El-Amin: The trip was '97.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay.

Imam Earl El-Amin: The trip was '97. The next year we went back.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So then, there was another trip in '98?

Imam Earl El-Amin: There was another trip in '98. No. The next trip was '99.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, I have '99 written on here. This was ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: The next trip ... We went back the next year after the ... We went back the next year.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I have yet to interview anyone from the Focolare. I'm supposed to meet with them. They have a representative in Silver Springs, Maryland.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Well, the best person to meet with, probably, is Bill. Because he was involved ... Let me show you this guy. This is the first time we ever met with him. He was the initial companion of Chiara Lubich. He is the oldest member of the Focolare. But Bill is ...
This is the first picture we ever took, and this is the guy you might want to meet.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, this is the '96 trip?

Imam Earl El-Amin: This is the '96 trip. This is Borelli, Bishop Fitzgerald,

Tariq Najee-ullah: That's Dr. Borelli right here?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah. Right there. Dr. Borelli right there. The initial trip. Sharry Silvi, Julian Sabatini. They were the North American leadership.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I've met them before a couple of times when I was in DC. They came to see Masjid Muhammad a couple of times. I've talked to them. I was doing ... That was before I was at Georgetown, but I was doing interfaith work then, and the Imam introduced me to them.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That's the individuals. There was also something that took place in Rome, also. We all received Medals of Honor from Lake Community, and then the Imam spoke ... Do you remember when the Imam spoke at Georgetown? Remember that? It was at a National Day of Prayer. Oh man, what year was that? I was the Resident Imam here then. It was later on. Because this gentleman graduated from Georgetown, and he wanted to have a National Day of Prayer at Georgetown. Yusuf was there. Yusuf and I were there because had dinner that night with the Imam, just he and I. Do you know why I know that? Because I introduced Imam to Emergen-C. He saw me pouring Emergen-C into a glass and asked me what that was. Yeah, Yeah. I introduced him to it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I have heard about this story from the Imam's perspective and also from Dr. Esposito.

Imam Earl El-Amin: About the Imam speaking at Georgetown. He spoke on two occasions at Georgetown. Once in the Library. John was there. Borelli was there. But he spoke at big ... They had the ... This was the large leadership contingency. They had ... There is a picture of me there. Up there at that. And Yusuf is behind me. I am sitting there next to the Imam.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Because this is what happened. When Imam Mohammed passed, Dr. Esposito wrote about it in the Washington Post about seeing the motorcade and all of that. And when I told him the research I was doing, he said the same thing. He said he remembered it. He met him a couple of times.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Right.

Tariq Najee-ullah: And what he remembers was this big motorcade. He said, "I thought it was the President." He said, "The Imam was so humble, it didn't go with the motorcade." But I never did know what the event was. He didn't remember what the event was. He just remembered that ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: The community at San Egidio community is the lay community that we also had dinner at I was showing with the gentleman. And they feed like 1,000, 2,000 people a day, homeless people. This guy was a graduate of Georgetown. In the San Egidio community.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So I need to pin point and find out when the Focolare was, the exact date of this trip to ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: It was '96, '97. We went back the next year. Uh, Plemon might remember. Yeah, it was the next year. I remember going back the next year. You know who else you might ask? Sister Amina out in Kansas City, because she went and her daughter. They all went. I'm a call. I'll call here and ask her.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Because Imam Ronald was definitely saying it was '98.

Imam Earl El-Amin: '98. It was up in the ... It was up at ... This was up at the Pope's Summer Residence. In the San Egidio, and it was not just our community. There were Muslims from all over the world.

Tariq Najee-ullah: That's what he said. He said was an assembly of Muslim friends of the Focolare.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That right.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Muslims from all over the world, and that he went. He said the Imam had, might have had some private meetings cause the Imam wasn't always with the whole group.
Imam Earl El-Amin: He wasn't always with ... Yeah. The Imam did have private meetings. But we wasn't involved in these dialogues, because you put the headphones on, you had translators ... Because they translated in 12 different languages. Freeman was there? Yeah, I remember that, clearly. That was '97. Ask ... Get in touch with Imam Plemon.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I sent it in and it came back. Lastly, do you have a date on the ... Well, I'll read this part and then go to those.

Imam Mohammad again traveled to Rome in 1999 in October and visited with the Pope John Paul II. And then Mohammad delivered a testimony and a prayer at closing ceremony in the Vatican City at the inter-religious assembly before the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000 for Participating Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. The theme was toward a culture of dialogue.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Remark ing on this, Dr. John Borelli writes, "In October 1999, at the interim assembly convened in Rome by Cardinal Arinze was the preparatory event for the celebration of the Great Jubilee Year 2000. Imam Mohammad offered prayer on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica during the closing service. I was told it was the first time that a Muslim offered a prayer in formal in the precincts of St. Peter's. An American Muslim praying in a public service at the central spot in the Vatican--I was pinching myself."

There are two other points that have been raised in addition to the trip that I kind of need to find out where documentation exists so I can put that included. One is that the meeting Chiara Lubich was in Washington DC with Imam Mohammad together. What I had, I got this. I believe that is November of 2000.


Tariq Najee-ullah: I just wanted to make sure that was the right thing.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That's it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I was actually ...
Tariq Najee-ullah: And then ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: He went to that American University of Southern ... Catholic University.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Catholic University.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Right. That's it. That's it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: In the Basilica of The National Shrine.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That's right.

Tariq Najee-ullah: And at the Convention Center.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That's right.

Tariq Najee-ullah: This is a big thing.

Imam Earl El-Amin: It's a big thing. That's it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I was here that summer that Imam Muhammad spoke. Cardinal Keeler spoke...

Imam Earl El-Amin: Convention Center.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That was on that board there. Baltimore Welcomes ... That was here. That was at the Convention Center.

Tariq Najee-ullah: At the Convention Center?

Imam Earl El-Amin: The largest Muslim ... The largest group ... The largest number of people that ever attended an event.

Tariq Najee-ullah: At the Convention Center? Downtown? It was downtown?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, that's right. The pictures right there on the wall. I'll show it to you.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Right there on the right, right here?

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, the second thing that I just want to date to see if there was something was a ... Imam Ronald Shaheed was very certain that
Imam had prayer with Pope John Paul II at Saint Francis of Assisi.

Imam Earl El-Amin: '99?

Tariq Najee-ullah: He doesn't know when it was. But he said he knew there was none of us there. He said he did not doubt it was a separate trip. He said the Imam spoke of it.

Imam Earl El-Amin: I'm not going to comment because I don't know.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. He said he knew the Imam spoke of it, but he did not give him ... There was no time, no place. He said it very well could have been a separate trip because the part of the trips he already had. He said maybe somebody else knows. But he couldn't speak on that.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah. I don't know.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. Let's go through this process real quick. Number one, did you travel as part of the Imam Mohammad delegation to either of these trips to Rome?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yes, I did. I traveled with the Imam Mohammad on the initial trip. And I traveled with Imam Mohammad the second year that we went.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, these are the '96 and the '99 trips?

Imam Earl El-Amin: '96 and '97 trips.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay.

Imam Earl El-Amin: The '99 trip was when he gave the prayer on the steps.

Tariq Najee-ullah: And you were there as well?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yes, '99.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. Were you in attendance in Harlem at Masjid Malcolm Shabazz?
Imam Earl El-Amin: I was in attendance at Masjid Malcolm Shabazz because later that week we met with Grand Mufti of Syria. Imam traveled to Buffalo. He asked my brother and I to come to Buffalo, but we couldn't get tickets then. It was too expensive to go. He was coming to Baltimore the next day. After he met with him, and then we met with the Grand Mufti here in Baltimore. As a matter of fact, he did a talk at An-Nur at that time. Imam Bashar Arafat was the Imam there.

Imam Earl El-Amin: I knew you in Atlanta.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I met you at that thing at the Convention Center, that's where I met you.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yup. That's right.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Yeah, that's who introduced me to you.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, I was coordinating the whole thing. Earl Abdul Malik and Eric were up on the stage as always. I won't be in any of these pictures because I was the guy that took all the pictures every time we went. I carried a big bag with me all the time, over my shoulder. And they played the ... And that's all right with me, I mean, man, that's what I do. I'm like, the lime light wasn't my thing.

Tariq Najee-ullah: You do the work, Alhamdulillah.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Just get it done. What's your next ... We can digress with this history.

Tariq Najee-ullah: We don't need to. I just think it is amazing that Allah put us together all this time. From so many years ago, that's almost 20 years ago.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I didn't know you from anything, nothing. But how integrated our lives were even then at that point for the next decision I was going to make. Even then, what I was involved in, that you were setting up the opportunity that Allah was using you to do it and I was going to come back here and write it down.
Imam Earl El-Amin: Write it down. And the irony is I stood on the steps of Saint Peter’s in March of this year. Twenty years ago, I was here with Imam Muhammad was part of the initial delegation. And 20 years later, 20 years later, I'm back with the interfaith delegation. So that speaks volumes to me about his vision. About Imam W. D. Mohammed.

Tariq Najee-ullah: It does.

Imam Earl El-Amin: It speaks volumes to me. To meet two different Popes in my lifetime is unbelievable. Not me, I'm talking about the work that Allah blessed us to be able to do with the vision this man had. Most people don't even get it, even in our community. So I think a lot, and when I have the opportunity to answer question sometimes you think, "That's enough for tonight" I can ask him thousands of questions about things, because we wanted to know. And his vision, his vision in my heart and my mind is pristine. I know what his vision is. I know what his vision is. I know what he wanted, because I had numerous conversations with him about it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, I'm going to skip ahead a little bit. Because that's one of my questions. Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammad pursued these dialogues?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think Imam Mohammad pursued these dialogues solely based on understanding the mind and traditions of Mohammad the Prophet in our time, space, reality here in America.

Tariq Najee-ullah: What do you mean by time, space, reality here in America?

Imam Earl El-Amin: As I have alluded to before, we were in a minority as African Americans. We were also in a minority as Muslims. And that the Qur’an calls us to get to know one another. I think that the model the Imam was following based on what he saw in the prophet in Medina. I think this is a culmination of all of that in his vision of what he wanted. And I think that he also wanted to put a cloaking device on this community. And I know that's what he wanted to do predicated on a decision that he made in Desert Storm. In Desert Storm, he took the position with the United States and he took a lot of flak for it. Ironically, we had at the time a Congressional Black Caucus that voted against the war. And Imam Earl Abdul Malik came to Baltimore and we
met with ... At the time the head of the Congressional Black Congress was Kwesi Mfume, who was a friend of my brother and I. And we met with him and he verbatimly told Kwesi why, and the Imam said that I have to protect my community here in America. And that was the vision. And twice he said, "I can respect that wholeheartedly and I will convey that back to the Congressional Black Caucus."

So, I think the Imam understood protecting his community also. And he was very sensitive to that. To his community and to protecting his community. He had a heck of a sensitivity to that.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, you've given a little bit of what you think his intentions were. What do you think Imam Mohammad hoped would result from these dialogues? You mentioned protection.

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think that the end result was what's you're seeing in America today. A group of Muslims ... And what's you're seeing embodied in an individual who wasn't an Imam and who wasn't a Sheikh, but who captured the world and later influenced the world. Muhammad Ali. What's you're seeing in Congressmen Andre Carson and Keith Ellison. What's your seeing in Judge Hassan El-Amin. What's you're seeing in people that are in the fabric of American society as Muslims, but as Muslim-Americans who everyday do the same thing that Americans do, work hard, make a significant contribution to their family and their neighborhood. That's what his vision was. And to distinguish ourselves, being excellent human beings. That's what his vision was. I know it. I know it like I know the back of my hand. And what you are seeing now in the embodiment of Imam W. D. Mohammed is Delilah ... Delilah Mohammad, who just won the

Tariq Najee-ullah: I'll turn that off.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Back to the [Muslim Americans representing the United States in the Rio Olympics], Delilah Mohammad, Imam Askia’s daughter, who won the 400 meter high hurdles. Nia Ali who won second in the hurdles. The young lady Ibtihaj Muhammad, who was the young fencer. That's part of Imam Mohammad's vision. And in every fabric, every segment of society, we pop up, and we demonstrate excellence. Be it athletic or be
academics or be it in culture, in the arts, in the sciences. That's his vision.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, we're rapping up, there are some questions I want to get. You've kind of mentioned this, but I want to go back to Rome. How did you feel about your experience in being in Rome? Was it what you expected or was it even ... I know you don't compare something like that to hajj, but can you compare it to other religious experiences that you've had, places that you've visited?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Well, in my opinion, there is nothing like make the hajj. But I also understand that for Catholics, this is like a pseudo-pilgrimage for them. Nothing in depth and detail what we go through. Because we are the largest gathering in the world. Hajj is the largest religious gathering in the world. But seeing people walk down the isle, and to see throngs of people, and you're going to be sitting on the stage, on the platform, on the dais, and see people like that, that many people out there in St. Peter's Square, and you're sitting right here, that's unbelievable, man. We were escorted by Bishop Michael Fitzgerald after meeting with the Pope's physician and his spokesperson, Dr. Navarro Valls. And it's a statement that he made that I will always cherish, and I always try to say when I'm talking about Imam Mohammad. He said, "Imam, we recognize you, not as a newsmaker, but as a history maker." And so when you ask me about Imam Mohammad, he is a history maker. But he is probably one of the great history makers that is a stealth leader. He's a stealth master.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So this was in Rome? [looking at pictures of the Rome and the Vatican]

Imam Earl El-Amin: That's the largest masjid in Rome. That's the Imam there. He's from Egypt. Has the largest Qur'an in the world. We joke about that. I'll tell you about that. But this is the head of the Pontifical Order of Justice. This general is from France. And his assistant was from the Congo, so he translated. He didn't speak English. And he asked us what tribe we were from? I almost blurted out, "The lost tribe of Shabazz." And so after I left, we got in the car, and I told Imam, "You know Imam, I almost slipped in there." He said, "You should have said that." So, this is a dialogue with them. We met with all the Pontifical Orders. So that experience ... This is the Muslim, Islamic, the Qur’ans and documents on
Islam from everywhere in the world. And there is Qur’an spoken in every language in here in the world. So, the San Egidio people we have dinner with in Rome. This is the library in the Vatican. You have to have special access to that library. And then we were given a special tour of ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: The Sistine Chapel.

Imam Earl El-Amin: The Sistine Chapel.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Oh, wow.

Imam Earl El-Amin: So we were given a special tour of the Sistine Chapel. Can you imagine something that was profound for me at this time. Anyone who lay on his back and to paint that had to be inspired by God. This man saw beyond where we were all the time. He always found that place, the most pristine place. You know what I’m saying? He always found that. That was so amazing to me, how he could find that. He could always find that in his logic and his spiritual self.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I’ve heard stories of, and I think from, and I don't know if it is from this trip, about Dr. Nasr Ahmad and ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: He was on that trip with us.

Tariq Najee-ullah: It was '99 or?

Imam Earl El-Amin: '98. He was on the second trip.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay, '98.

Imam Earl El-Amin: '98.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Uh, '97. Well, it's disputable. Yours sounds better. '97 trip but Ahmad and Makram El-Amin too ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: Imam Makram was there.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Let's talk about how Imam was very keen and aware of symbolism and giving like Ramadan Session type wisdom this whole time.
Imam Earl El-Amin: See we ... You're absolutely correct. And we had ... The year before we had been privy to just a small group sitting in the lobby of a hotel and he would start to teach. And give you a symbolisms of all those things. It was amazing how he could grab it. One of the things that I think we miss the Imam on ... and this is for all of the so-called religious leaders in America, Muslim leaders. One of the things that separates Imam Mohammad from all those leaders, you name him, all of them, is his profound understanding of the Bible and being able to correlate the Bible and the, make the correlations between the Bible and the Qur’an. And I've never ever heard any other scholar and leader in America make those correlations. Really in the world.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Yeah, the only person I ever heard same thing, it wasn't in the depth of Imam Mohammad, Sheikh Kuftaro would make analogies to the Bible.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Sheikh Kuftaro's vision and the Imam's vision were very, very, very, very similar. What he saw for Islam and the world ... do you know the story of Sheikh Kuftaro in this whole thing? Were you at the Imam's Janazah? Did you know Imam Dogar who did Janazah? Janazah is always wondering why one of us didn't do it? I was a pallbearer, but one of us didn't do it. I was told the story by Ayesha Mustafaa. In 1966, in early 1966, Imam Mohammad was at his father's house. And some of the leadership in our community at that time in the Nation of Islam was there. But there was some brothers from Pakistan who had come to talk to Elijah Muhammad because there was a young Sheikh that was coming to America and wanted to meet with us. Typical sit down and relax with Mohammad. The Sheikh's name was Ahmad Kuftaro.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I haven't heard this part of the story. I've heard other parts from Syrians.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro. What happened at that meeting at that house before he came was that the Imam was excommunicated from the community at that day. Sheikh Dogar supported the Imam during his expulsion. Imam would go to gym up there. Imam would stay in touch with him the whole time. I know this for a fact, because in the initial conference call with Sheikh Kuftaro, he alluded to meeting the honorable Imam Mohammad
in 1966. He said I met your father in 1966, and was very impressed. So, that's why ... So he ... that was the one that stayed with Imam the whole time? He supported him and everything the whole time. So that is why he was very close to him. If you notice, he traveled with him before.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I didn't know that part of the story. I did know ... They alluded to the fact that the Imam was excommunicated right before they visited. And that ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: Do you know why he was excommunicated? Because he told his father he wasn't the messenger of God.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I did not know that. I didn't know how to take it because it was a Syrian telling me. Sheikh Kuftaro’s translator told the story, I recorded the story, told the story about Elijah Mohammad. She did not know ... They did not know, apparently, how it was orchestrated. When they got there and went to the house, but it shows there was some preparation because they the word out there ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: It was preparation.

Tariq Najee-ullah: But they, everybody said, "No, you can't meet with Elijah Mohammad, he's not Muslim, we can't guarantee your safety." They got a big push back from the Syrian Muslims and other Muslims and so the Pakistanis went. Because their people would not set up the meeting with the Honorable Elijah Mohammad. They did tell us that much. They said the Syrian people would not set up the meeting with the Honorable Elijah Mohammad. But Sheikh Kuftaro was intent, he was adamant about it. Yeah, they said he had back surgery. And he was like, I'm going to go see Honorable Elijah Mohammad. They were trying to ... You know, that' their leader. I got that from ... So him and Mohammad did never meet ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: He never met Sheikh Kuftaro until he met him in Buffalo.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. '96

Imam Earl El-Amin: He met Chiara Lubich on a Sunday. Chiara Lubich came to Malcolm Shabazz on a Sunday. On a Wednesday he met with
Sheikh Kuftaro in Buffalo, New York. And I'll tell you who was there.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Hold on. White Plains was '96, '97. '97?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I can't remember.

Tariq Najee-ullah: But you are saying this happened in '97.

Imam Earl El-Amin: When ever she went to Harlem

Tariq Najee-ullah: Harlem.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Harlem.

Tariq Najee-ullah: That was '97.

Imam Earl El-Amin: He met that following week.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So he met with the Focolare in Hyde Park and Mariapolis the same time or when they were here before?

Imam Earl El-Amin: No, he met with them that Labor Day weekend.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. The year before?

Imam Earl El-Amin: The year before. But that was the first time meeting Chiara Lubich

Tariq Najee-ullah: Oh, she wasn't in when you went ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: She wasn't in Hyde Park. I mean Mariapolis.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I know, but when you were with friends afterwards.

Imam Earl El-Amin: See, we met her in '97 when we went to ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: Italy.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, let me ask you this question. Prayer time is about to catch us. What difference have you experienced ... I am going to separate two experiences. There's more than two experiences here, but I'm separating the Focolare experience from the Rome/Vatican
experience. Right now, we are talking about the Rome/Vatican experience. What difference has this experience made in your life? What does it mean to you, if you can put a value on it? Like what value has it ... What's the value of the experience to you?

Imam Earl El-Amin: For me, the value is being able to have experienced something that I never, ever thought that I would experience. And to be able to take from that experience and impart that to other people of other faith traditions, not just Muslims. And to see the benefit of what that experience has been able to do locally and nationally. And how it impacted so many people in their lives and understanding throughout our community, the Catholic community, the Jewish community--all of those communities. To see how the ex-slave was able to influence and assume his rightful place in humanity. I'll never forget the first day we were in Rome. We got on the elevator, and Imam turned to us in the hotel and "We know we have been all over the world and we ain't nobody's boy." I'll never forget that, brother. He looked us dead in the eye and said, "We ain't nobody's boy."

And I remember the pictures when we were in the Vatican. All of us had pictures, as you very well know. And the Imam had about seven copies, and he took us and showed us and asked, "Which one do you think is best?" Because we were sending them back to the United States for a newspaper. And we said, "All this one and this one." He said, "Well, let no one have this one. The enemies within our community and outside of our community are saying that we are kissing the Pope's ring." So, the picture you see at events beside of the Pontiff ensure that's who he is. What do you all think?" That's the leader.

Tariq Najee-ullah: What did you learn about interfaith relationships from this experience?

Imam Earl El-Amin: That the possibilities are unlimited. And that experience showed me 20 years later that the possibilities are unlimited.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Has what you experienced impacted how you see religion?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Of course. I couldn't ... It has influenced me so much how I see religion and how I see faith. I said I don't like the word religion, but how I see religion.
Tariq Najee-ullah: Would you say it has expanded, broadened or narrowed your viewpoint? Could you describe what you mean?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I'm wide and I'm deep now. At one time I was wide, but now I'm deep. Do you understand? If I can use that ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: Have you changed your ideas, widened and deepened your thinking since this visit.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Of course. The event allowed me to view life, people, in a completely different context. To see people as the Qur’an calls us to. Oh, you who believe. I am thinking of the Qur’an which says, "Oh you Muslims" maybe 12 times. But, Oh, you who believe. Believe in what? Believe in God in the last days.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Have what you've experienced here changed how you see current events or politics, moral values, equality, freedom?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Of course.

Tariq Najee-ullah: We can answer that, and I'll stop.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Say it again.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Has what you've experienced impacted how you see current events, politics, equality, moral values in society?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah. Yeah. I see people in the best and I see people in their worst in those things, politics, morality. I see some at their best and I see some at their worst, and I think that I can use my interaction with people of other faiths and traditions as a lens to view people in their best and people in their worst.

Tariq Najee-ullah: So, I close the ...

Tariq Najee-ullah: I'm still talking about the Vatican and Pope John Paul II, and Mohammed. In your opinion were these dialogues successful?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think that they were. Just look around you. Look, the dialogues, I think, were extremely successful. There's a continuum going on throughout the United States with these dialogues. Of course. Not only just the dialogue. The dialogue led people into working together. We have the Baltimore Interfaith
Coalition here in Baltimore where we work together. As a matter of fact, I do a lot of work with Catholic charities.

Just got this in the mail. Yeah, those dialogues were very, very productive. They led to working together for the common good.

Tariq Najee-ullah: In your opinion were these dialogues effective?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think they are. I'm going to say are, because they are effective. I just as a matter of fact had a conversation with the urban vicar, the number-two person here in Baltimore, ArchBishop Madden, around a discussion around partnering with the local Catholic church in our area here to be at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Do probably a monthly medical clinic and to house it there. Their facility's a little larger than ours. They're beneficial. It's still working, man. Still going strong.

Tariq Najee-ullah: You definitely would describe the experience of beneficial to you and to our community?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Beneficial to me and our community very much.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Both communities I guess. Communities-

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, the Catholic community and the Muslim community. Any time you ask a Imam to address the nuns, mother superiors, that nun order, those types of things. Come on, man, you think 25 years ago we would have been able? Maybe 20 years ago maybe we could do that but over time because the relationships that have been established ... This is what's happening. Speak at the seminary.

Tariq Najee-ullah: How would you quantify or qualify the benefits that resulted from this dialogue, if you could?

Imam Earl El-Amin: What did the Honorable Elijah Muhammad say? Good friends in all walks of life.

Tariq Najee-ullah: You're not the only person who's said that.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah, that, and across the board in relationships and government, politics, culture, education. All of those things. That's good friends in all walks of life. I think all, we benefited
immensely from all of that. It was a catholic governor that appointed first Muslim circuit court judge in state of Maryland. I think that that bodes well with our ... what we've been able to do. Just not locally, but nationally, with the Catholic community.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I'm going to pivot now, ask you a similar set of questions about the meetings with Chiara Lubich and the Focolare movement. I understand, based on our conversation and what I've read so far, that the first trip in 1996, in addition to meeting with the Pope, and the administrative officials at the Vatican, that you were introduced to several of the Catholic communities, the lay communities where they weren't Priests.

Imam Earl El-Amin: San Egidio. We were introduced to San Egidio community when we were introduced to Focolare. It was a recommendation by Cardinal Keeler to the Imam, that he might want to pursue a relationship with the Focolare community. While we were in Rome we were hosted, dinner, at the ambassador to the Vatican's home, who at the time was Ray Flynn, who was the former mayor of Boston. This is the first time, as I was showing you in these pictures, it's the first time that we ever met anyone from Focolare. That relationship began there, and it evolved to where it is now, where throughout the country, there's relationships, we participate in some of their activities and initiatives and they participate in some of our activities and initiatives.

Yes, ironically I was, a few months ago, was in New Jersey, at Imam Wali Mohammed's retirement. At his retirement, and then a young lady came over to me, to whom I didn't know. She says, "You're Imam El-Amin, would you be willing to take a picture with us?" It was a group from Focolare there. "We know the work that you did." I said, "Yeah." They introduced me to the person in Washington who was a member of Focolare now. Ironically, the first North American meeting that took place with the officials took place right here in this masjid. There's a picture on the wall there. With Sharry Silvi, Julian Sabotini and two other members of the Focolare community. My brother and myself. Participated in that first meeting. Mapping out what we wanted to do and where we wanted to go. Alhamdulillah.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Are there any insights you have as to why Imam Mohammed pursued that dialogue with Focolare? Just telling me about Cardinal Keeler's recommendation ...
Imam Earl El-Amin: Well, ironically, that night, leaving the dinner that was hosted for Imam Mohammed at the ambassador’s, Imam was questioned by my late brother, Eric. He said, "Imam, I mean, what's the deal with the folks here, with these folks?" He's standing behind us. "Who are these folks?" Imam said, "These people from everything that I know, these are good people, and that they love one another and they work very well together. I think that our community could benefit seeing them working together and loving one another." That was his response to my brother.

Tariq Najee-ullah: That being said, what do you think he hoped would result from these dialogues? That we would love one another? What ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: That the community, overall community would benefit from seeing Focolare, their ethic. Their work ethic and their relationships, but also working with Focolare on issues and initiatives, jointly, to benefit the whole of our society.

Tariq Najee-ullah: You were present at the meeting with the Focolare in Rome. You were present at the meeting with Chiara Lubich in Washington, DC, and prior to that ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: New York.

Tariq Najee-ullah: ... the trip to, in New York. Prior to that the trip to the assembly of Friends of the Focolare in 97. You got to witness that relationship. How did you feel about your experience in that, seeing the relationship? What was the relationship that Imam Mohammed had with Chiara Lubich?

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think it was one of mutual respect. If you understand the history of Chiara Lubich, and how she, the level of her faith, I think the Imam had a profound respect for that. What she was able to accomplish in the capacity of a layperson. I think the Imam appreciated that. That's about it.

Tariq Najee-ullah: What did that relationship teach you about interfaith relationships in particular, or the relationship with the Focolare? This is a, I would say different, than meeting with the administrators. This was a community.

Imam Earl El-Amin: You have to realize, I think, not just for me, but for many of our membership in our community, this probably was the first time
that they interacted with people that didn't look like them. I think that it helped them in their growth and development to deal with quote-unquote white people. I think vice versa, it helped the Focolare people also.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I just want to clarify further. Your statement. Get additional clarity from you. Excuse me. You said that we didn't, we interact with, I guess, European Americans on a regular basis. When you say this was different, what was different about interacting with the Focolare than the interactions that we have here in America?

Imam Earl El-Amin: Our interactions with European-Americans in America are a little different. You might be buying something from me, you might be a consumer. You might pay your rent to them. This had nothing to do with that. You extract all of that out of it, and it's more of a person to person, heart to heart relationships that being established, and dialogues that are happening, rather than any normal way African Americans interact with European Americans.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. Help us get beyond racial prejudice.

Imam Earl El-Amin: Of course. As you know, you talking about a organization that was fresh out of saying the man was the devil and didn't understand the symbolic language, but embraced some of that. Many people who came from marginalized background, didn't have that level of exposure to people like that. It's a different context.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I'm going to ask you, I think you kind of covered some of these things, but just for the sake of being consistent with the question. What did you learn about interfaith relationships or human relationships from relationships with the Focolare? Again, you might have addressed this already.

Imam Earl El-Amin: I think you have to approach things, rightly intended. You have to be rightly intended to get anything out of it. If you're rightly intended then you'll get something out of it that's beneficial to you and to the Focolare.

Tariq Najee-ullah: I think we just have a couple of minutes left. Has this experience with the Focolare impacted how you see religion, or current
events, politics, equality, freedom, moral values, society, in a different way than, say, the Vatican experience?

Imam Earl El-Amin: No. I'd say they're all one to me. That's how, I think, the Imam saw it. He didn't compartmentalize it. He saw it as all one.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Is there a different message that you got coming out of Mohammed's meeting with Chiara Lubich? Did it mean something different to you than the meeting with the Pope, or ...

Imam Earl El-Amin: It's all one. To me, it's the same message I got when he met with Yasser Arafat, when he met with whoever he met with. It's all part of what Muhammad the Prophet would've done. One of the things the Imam always said, he always questioned, he said, "How would the Prophet approach this?"

Tariq Najee-ullah: In your opinion, again, you said it's all one, so I think that kind of sums it up. These dialogues being successful and effective. There's anything you want to say about that, with relation to Focolare or what you said before [inaudible 00:15:46].

Imam Earl El-Amin: Yeah. I think I'm pretty well covered.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Okay. The final question. Did you learn anything else from this experience you care to share?

Imam Earl El-Amin: With Focolare or the whole experience?

Tariq Najee-ullah: Everything.

Imam Earl El-Amin: That if, in fact, human beings can form strategic alliances, they can impact the rest of the world. I think that, within the next few years, that's what you'll see. Any strategic alliances across faith traditions are going to be, are formed, and some are forming, and they will have a profound impact on a lot of the society. Especially the society's ills.

Tariq Najee-ullah: Is there anything else you'd like to share or comment?

Imam Earl El-Amin: That I thank God that I was able to, that he's allowed me to participate at this level, and hopefully be able to impact other people's lives going forward. To strictly adhere to the vision of Imam W. D. Mohammed in doing so.
Tariq Najee-ullah: I want to thank you for your time. I appreciate it, I know its been a long Sunday.
APPENDIX 3

Paul
Bishop, Servant of the Servants of God,
Together with the Fathers of the Sacred Council
Commits to Permanent Record

THE DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH
TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

(Translated by Thomas F. Stransky, CSP
and given to Tariq S. Najee-ullah to cite in his MA Thesis at Georgetown University)

1. In our time, when day by day humankind is being drawn ever closer together and the ties between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care her relation to non-Christian religions. In her task of fostering unity and love among individuals, indeed among peoples, she considers above all in this Declaration what human beings have in common and what draws them to live together their destiny.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live on all the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. God’s providence, manifestation of goodness, and saving designs extend to all, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the peoples will walk in its light.

One expects from the various religions answers to the profound enigmas of the human condition, which today, even as of old, deeply stir human hearts: What is the human being? What is the meaning, the purpose of our life? What is moral good, and what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the way to genuine happiness? What are death, judgment, and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?

2. Already from ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that mysterious power abiding in the course of nature and in the happenings of human life; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being or even a Father. This perception and recognition penetrate their lives with a profound religious sense. However, religions that are intertwined with a developing culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus, in Hinduism men and women contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiries. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical
practices or through profound meditation or through a flight to God with love and trust. Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which persons, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or to attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing ways, comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of acting and of living, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the one she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim, Christ as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn. 14:6), in whom men and women may find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.\textsuperscript{iv}

The Church therefore exhorts her sons and daughters to recognize, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions. This is done through conversations and collaboration with them, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life.

3. The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, who is living and subsisting in himself, merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,\textsuperscript{v} who has spoken to humans; they strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam is gladly linked, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, his virgin mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. Moreover, they look forward to the day of judgment when God will reward all those raised up. For this reason, they value the moral life and worship God, especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

In the course of centuries there have indeed arisen not a few quarrels and hostilities between Christians and Muslims. But now this Sacred Synod pleads with all to forget the past, to make sincere efforts for mutual understanding, and so to work together for the preservation and fostering of social justice, moral welfare, and peace and freedom, for all humankind.

4. As this Sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bonds that spiritually tie the people of the New Covenant to the offspring of Abraham.

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God’s mysterious saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are already found among the Patriarchs, Moses and the Prophets. She professes that all who believe in the Christ, Abraham’s children by faith,\textsuperscript{vi} are included in this Patriarch’s call, and, likewise, that the salvation of the Church is symbolically prefigured in the exodus of the chosen people from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she
received the Revelation of the Old Testament through that people with whom God in His ineffable mercy was pleased to enter into the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by his cross Christ, who is our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, and in Himself making the two one.

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsfolk: “To them belong the adoption as children, and the glory, and the covenant, and the giving of the law, and the worship, and the promises; to them belong the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church’s foundation stones and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews, in large numbers, accept the Gospel; indeed, not a few of them opposed its dissemination. Nevertheless, now as before, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; he does not repent of the gifts he makes or revoke the call he issues—such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord with a single voice and “serve him with one accord” (Zeph. 3:9).

Since the spiritual heritage common to Christians and Jews is thus so rich, this Sacred Synod wishes to foster and commend mutual understanding and esteem. This is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies and of friendly conversations. True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from Holy Scripture. May all, then, should see to it that in catechetical work and in preaching of the Word of God they teach nothing save what conforms to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

The Church, moreover, rejects all persecutions against any person. Mindful of the inheritance she shares with the Jews, the Church decries hatreds, persecutions, and manifestations of antisemitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. She does so not impelled by political reasons, but moved by the spiritual love of the Gospel.

Besides, Christ underwent his passion and death freely, out of infinite love, because of the sins of humans in order that all might reach salvation. This the Church has always taught and teaches still; it is therefore the duty of the Church to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God’s all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.
5. We cannot truly call upon God, the Father of all, if we refuse to behave as sisters and brothers with anyone, created as all are in the image of God. The relation of man and woman to God, the Father, and their relation to their fellow human beings are linked to such a degree that Holy Scripture says, “Whoever does not love does not know God” (1 Jn. 4:8).

No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between person and person and between people and people insofar as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned.

The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination or harassment against men or women because of their race or color, condition in life or religion. On the contrary, following the footsteps of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this Sacred Synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to “maintain good conduct among the peoples” (1 Pet. 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all, xv so that they may truly be sons and daughters of the Father who is in heaven.xv

Each and every point stated in this Declaration has satisfied the Fathers of the Sacred Council. And we, by the Apostolic Authority bestowed on us by Christ, together with the venerable Fathers, approve it in the Holy Spirit, we decree it and we enact it; and we order the promulgation, to God’s glory, of what has been enacted synodically.

Rome, in St. Peter’s Basilica
October 28, 1965

I, Paul, Bishop of the Catholic Church
(The signatures of all council fathers present and voting on this day follow)
\textsuperscript{x} Cf. Rom. 11:28.


\textsuperscript{xii} Cf. Is. 66:23; Ps. 65:4; Rom. 11:11-32.

\textsuperscript{xiii} Cf. Jn. 19:6.

\textsuperscript{xiv} cf. Rom. 12:18.

\textsuperscript{xv} Cf. Mt. 5:45.


"Edited Interview with Dr. Mikal Ramadan." Interview by author. September 2, 2016.

"Edited Interview with Imam Earl El-Amin." Interview by author. September 18, 2016.

"Edited Interview with Sister Amatullah Sharif." Interview by author. September 1, 2016.


