

Background article: Sources, Leaders in the mosque

Who can build and own a mosque?

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that “the whole world is my mosque”. This is interpreted to mean that a Muslim man or woman can pray anywhere as long as the place is clean. Nevertheless from the earliest days of Muslims in Makka, places have been set aside for prayer. The word mosque, from the Arabic *masjid*, literally means ‘a place of prostration’.

There is no equivalent to a church structure in Islam, so any individual, family, organisation, group or public body can decide to build a mosque. It will then be owned by the people who built it, or they may choose to put it into the hands of a Trust or other charitable body. A mosque is a place dedicated to the worship of God and therefore it should be open to anyone who wants to pray there.

In Britain some mosques were built by an individual, a family or a group of families; such then normally own the title deeds and form the management of the mosque. Many mosques have been established as a charity and registered with the Charity Commissioners; such mosques will be governed by a Trust Deed that lays down the make-up of the Trustees, who will have control of the building. A few organisations have a number of mosques in different parts of the country but most mosques are independent. One way or another, the day-to-day running of the mosque is likely to be in the hands of a Management Committee, who may be elected or appointed in various ways.

Leaders of the prayers

The Islamic way of life is ordered and so when two or more people come together to pray, one will lead and the others will follow the leader. Such a leader is called an imam. There is no ordained priesthood or ministry in Islam, no-one has powers like a priesthood that other Muslims do not have. This means that any Muslim can be the imam for a group who are going to pray together. The criteria for who should lead the prayer are the common ones in Islam: piety and wisdom. This means that the imam should be someone who is known to lead a pious life in observance of the Muslim code of law and should have sufficient knowledge to lead the prayers without error, which includes reciting verses from the Qur'an in those prayers when the imam recites aloud on behalf of the whole congregation. If a group of women, or women and young children, gather for prayers, then one of the women will act as imam. If the group comprises men, or both men and women, then the imam will be a man for reasons of modesty. The imam stands in front of the congregation, facing the same direction as the congregation, that is, towards the *ka'ba* in Makka. This direction is called the *qibla*.

In a mosque or any other place where people regularly gather for prayer, it is not practical to hold a discussion each time as to who is the best equipped person to lead the prayers, so the mosque committee will be responsible for drawing up a list of people who are authorised by them to lead the prayers in that place and it will be the responsibility of those people to ensure that at least one of them is present for each formal prayer to act as imam. Often there will be others present in the congregation who could step forward and take over the lead if for any reason the imam has to withdraw, for example, if the imam was suddenly taken ill. Similarly those people present will listen attentively to the Qur'an recitation and call out a correction if the imam should make a mistake. The dignity of the correct recitation of the Qur'an takes priority over the dignity of the imam reciting.

When a mosque is sufficiently established and has the necessary funds, the management committee might decide to appoint a 'professional' imam to lead worship in that mosque. The first thing that the management committee needs to do is to draw up a job description of the duties that they wish their imam to fulfil. These are likely to include some or all of the following:

- To be present for and lead the five-times-daily formal prayers
- To deliver the address (*khutba*) at Friday Prayers
- To lead funeral prayers
- To preside at marriages
- To have responsibility for the religious education of children
- To teach the memorisation of the Qur'an for those who wish to memorise it and potentially become *hafiz* or *hafizah* (a male or female who has memorised the entire Qur'an)
- To instruct those who wish to convert to become Muslims and preside at the declaration of the *shahada* which marks the formal conversion
- To deliver classes on the Islamic sciences: the meaning of the Qur'an, the formulated creeds and ways of life of a Muslim
- To act as a wise counsellor to those who are in doubt about the correct way of Muslim life and practice
- To act as an arbiter or judge in matters that may be in dispute within the community
- To act as a formal spokesperson on behalf of the mosque in relations with the wider society.

Once the particular job description has been drawn up, the management committee will then be responsible for deciding on the necessary qualifications for the person to be appointed as imam. These are likely to include some or all of the following:

- To have followed a recognised course of study in the Islamic sciences
- To command the necessary languages to interact with the congregation (e.g., Arabic, English and other languages spoken by regular attendees)
- To have experience in teaching about Islam at the appropriate levels
- To be a *hafiz* of the Qur'an

- To have graduated to an advanced level to be able to act as a *mufti* or arbiter on Islamic matters.

Shi'a mosques, working under the direction of a particular Grand Ayatollah (*marja*), have their own system for appointing a scholar to act as spiritual guide (Resident Alim). Some mosques have sufficient funds to be able to appoint a team of imams, who may have specialist areas of responsibility. Some mosques will appoint a female scholar to the team with special responsibility to oversee the education of girls and women. Suitably qualified women scholars might also offer classes in specialist areas of study to both men and women. It will be the responsibility of the management committee to appoint members of the team, to issue contracts of employment and to ensure that the necessary funds are available to pay them appropriately. Matters such as health and safety provision in the mosque, the safeguarding of children attending the mosque and due legal procedures will likewise be the responsibility of the management committee. They will also be responsible for the fabric of the building, its repair and development to meet the needs of those who worship there.

Muhammad himself appointed a member of the community in Madina to be responsible for giving the call to prayer (*adhan*) before each of the times of formal prayer. This led to the role of the *mu'adhin* (also commonly spelt *mu'adhdhin* and *muezzin*), who traditionally called people to prayer using a loud and melodic voice from the tower alongside the mosque (*minaret*), although this is often now replaced by directional loudspeakers. Some larger mosques will maintain a mosque office staffed by a secretarial team of men and women to deal with administrative matters.