

## Muhammad and Constance Ameen Transcript

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Interviewee: Muhammad and Constance Ameen

Interviewer: Hannah \*Gutu\*

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Notes:

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Hannah: As-Salam-u-Alaikum.

Muhammad and Constance Ameen: Wa-Alaikumussalam.

H: My name is Hannah \*Gutu\* and today is July 21 and it's 11:44 AM. On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, \*aspire\* 2014, Rhodes College, and all other partners, thank you for making time for this interview.

C: Your welcome.

M: Thank you for inviting us. Thank you.

H: Can you tell us a little about yourself?

M: Ladies first [laughs].

C: My name is Constance Ameen, you want to know like how long I've been a Muslim? I was raised in Cleveland, Ohio. I came to Memphis in 1978. I met my husband in 1979, and he invited me to come to a meeting at the Masjid. I used to go skating every week and there was a skating rink right across the street from the Masjid and I came to the Masjid and after coming about three times I accepted

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Islam. About a year later we got married and we have three children and we've been married for thirty-four years now.

M: Wonderful. My name is Muhammad Ameen and I am from Arkansas. Not far from Memphis, a little town called Turrell, Arkansas, and back in 1973 a friend of mine was living in Chicago and he was telling me about Islam and I was the choir director at our church and everything that I had heard about Islam was not good. It was bad. But he was such a good friend and a very intelligent person. I always admired his intelligence.

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That was kind of what got me to... influenced me to come to Memphis to visit, to just visit. Visiting, I think at that time... I don't know if you're familiar with the native Islam, but we were native Islam at that time, but I was visiting. The Elijah Muhammad was living at that particular time, but I did not accept. I was just really coming out of the good graces of my friend inviting me and he was nice and I figured well I'll go and prove how wrong these people are. That was my mind because I was also a good friend of our minister at our church, and without taking the whole story, here I am now.

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Forty-something years later and Imam in the religion. I don't know if I answered what you were asking.

H: Okay, can you tell us why exactly you embraced Islam?

M: For me, there was a lot of reasons but the main reason, the main reason was it sounded so truthful. It just sounded- it made sense to me. It appealed to everything about me. I've always been a person that loves peace and truth. I understood the greetingment piece, peace be unto you. The religionment piece, Musliment piece- all that and I was a basketball player and long before I knew anything

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about Islam, on the back of my jersey- we would put names on our jerseys and I put the name "Peace" on my jersey. I can't help thought that maybe it was meant to be because I always was a person who wanted peace. And it just so happened when I came to Islam and I heard that that's what it meant, I was like maybe that was a sign from God. I don't want to be too spooky, but I remember that was- and then I read a verse, and that verse was Surah 13, and the verse was verse 49, and when I read that- I was convinced. I was like this is where I need to be, and the verse simply says that God Almighty did not favor people based on their race, religion, any of those things, but he favored people based upon their truthfulness, and their honesty and their decency. And in my mind I was like, oh

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this is what everybody should- I couldn't imagine anybody not agreeing with that, because racism was so strong when I was coming up as a boy. I was born in 1951 and racism during the 50's was very strong in Arkansas- very strong. And here was something saying that we shouldn't judge people by race. Oh I just fell in love with that. I was like this is what the whole world needs, we all need this. That was the main reason for me.

C: And for myself, I guess when I was in Cleveland I kind of had stopped going to church because there was such a conflict of what was taught and what was actually supposed to be in the Bible. So when I came to Memphis I went to different churches looking for a church home, as they say, and I hadn't found one. When I went to the Masjid and heard that message, that touched my soul

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and made me closer- okay this is how I can really serve God. So that was my search and it was founded right there at the Masjid with the message of there's only one God. I can agree, I could accept that, and that you didn't have to go through an intercessor. You know that the imagery they had, I didn't agree with that, so everything was consistent with my logic and my rational- so I say yes, this is where I need to be. And I've been there ever since.

H: What were the reactions of your family and friends?

M: Oh wow. My father- my mother had passed in 1974, and actually when I took the Shahadatan, the declaration of faith as you know, my mother was deceased, but my father- he was like me. He had heard all bad things.

[7:00]

All bad. And he could just not imagine. You were in the church, you were the choir director. Why on earth would you get with these people who don't even believe in God. So my father thought like most people at that time; it has changed quite a bit now, but he thought that it was bad. But my brothers and sisters, they were not like that. They didn't embrace the religion, but they still- we stayed very close. My immediate family, my brothers and sisters, we stayed very close. Friends... they thought, God this guy has lost his mind. But, uncles and aunts and so forth, they were very supportive. Very supportive. I was amazed to find out they didn't- I had some relatives that lived in Chicago and still

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live there and they were familiar with Islam through Elijah Muhammad and they had seen the Muslims, the native Islam selling papers and wearing bowties and they were very, very impressed as to how Elijah Muhammad had taken many African Americans off of the streets and were doing good. They were really just super impressed. My family was from Chicago, so that's my part.

C: Well, when I told my mom, she was... all she said was if that makes you close to God. And that's because my mom passed. And my family was accepting because we had had exposure before- you know, to Nation of Islam- but I never couldn't get with that teaching.

[9:00]

And Ashley my sister was married to a brother, his family was associated with the Nation of Islam- her first husband. And then her husband when she get married again- he was raised in the Nation of Islam and his mom was, I think she's in the- I don't know if she still goes to the temple, but she still considers herself Muslim. But my family was supportive and I was explaining to them what Islam was, and my aunt was telling me oh those people believe that God is a man, and I was like, what are you talking about? And she was talking about the Nation of Islam which I was not really familiar with those teachings and I was like no, no, no. So I had to tell her all the things that Islam is and about the colors and everything and that gave them a better understanding. So my family was supportive

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and my friends that I met here in Memphis- they're still my friends and we're still close so it's just been a positive journey for me.

H: Can you guys tell us a little about Nation of Islam versus the \*Sunni Islam\*.

M: Well like she said, she never got into the Nation of Islam. Number one I would say is the view of God. Native Islam took more up a view as Christianity, like God came in the person of Jesus. Well Native Islam said the same thing- God came in the person of \*Fard\* Muhammad. And Fard was Indian and he had told them that when he came- when Fard came, what Fard did was looked at

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African Americans in particular and said, these people are steeped in Christianity and the belief that Jesus was God's son. So he took that principle and told them that this was Islam. And believe it or not this was in 1930, and if you know anything about the history of the United States, most African Americans were not very well educated. I would say probably not very well educated even today, but in 1930 was kind of bad. So it was very easy for a person to tell them certain things and they believed him. So number one was the concept of how to see God. Number two was the belief that black people were the original people. So I'm saying what native- you already know what Islam is- but

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Native Islam was saying those type things. One God came into person of this- we said Arab man, but actually he was Indian. So it was the belief that God looked like Indian people- there was that belief. Then there was the other belief that the black man- he told Elijah who later became Elijah Muhammad- he told Elijah Poole that black people were the original people and he also said that we were not supposed to associate with white folks. Now this was before I was born, but that concept was believable by many people back in 1930 simply because of how racist America was and black people were not very well educated if you know what I'm saying. Education is the key. When you know something,

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people are not able to tell you just anything. But that concept of what the Native Islam was presenting was easily accepted and I mean that's the main two thing: how to see God and also emphasize a racial thing.

C: And I guess when people ask me that, because you need to know your history, I just tell them Nation of Islam is an organization as opposed to a religion and it has the name of Islam in it. You know now they're trying to practice more of what we call Islam, but it's basically an organization. And how they see God and some of the things that Muslims believe, that's what Nation of Islam believes as opposed to what is universal to all those who say there's only one God.

[14:00]

H: Okay, what was your perception of Islam before you converted?

C: Okay, I was like really? Because all I heard was from Nation of Islam, okay? I didn't hear any teachings of Islam as it is taught from the Quran when I was growing up, but you would see these guys and they would have the X and they would be selling these papers, and what was on the back of that paper was something I could not agree on because it says they wanted to put everybody in one area, give them their 40 acres or some whatever, and get all the African American people in one area, and I was like, "So they can kill me? I don't think so." So my concept was that I couldn't accept that because that didn't satisfy my logic on the things that they asked. It was the people that I met that were associated, they were okay. I didn't talk about religion or politics so we were alright.

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M: And my case is I was not even familiar with Native Islam, I'm talking before prior because in the little town that I'm from- but her being from a big city, Native Islam in Chicago, Cleveland, those places was much more popular- but where I was from that didn't exist. All I had seen about Muslim was something you saw on TV and it was always somebody that say was from Saudi Arabia or Africa and it was all negative. They always showed the negative through the media. I didn't know anything about- later on I heard something about Native Islam, but my information came from just them showing Muslims from overseas so negative. And the United- I'm not going to say United States- but the media did it. And it was United States media. It just showed anybody that was in Islam from overseas in a negative, very negative role.

H: Can you recall some of the things that you heard?

M: Oh my god,

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very disrespectful to women, wouldn't allow the women to drive cars, I mean all kind of negative, I've heard all- I've heard just horrible things. Disrespectful to the children, the men hating each other, want to fight each other, but not in the United States because there was nothing like that for where I was at. It was just... it showed... I don't know if you've ever heard of anything called Ali Baba and the seven something? Well they used to show on TV this guy who had a prayer rug, but it would fly. And he would have the turban on, and the prayer rug, and he would be doing all this crazy stuff, and the women would be dancing so seductive. It was just very... it was a way of... now that I have grown,

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it was a way of them not directly, but indirectly saying anybody that associated with this was going to be backwards. They're not going to be modern. The people are not going to school. They're not very well educated. It was horrible. It was just bad, and then I think coming into Islam then I found out this was none of this was correct. I mean we do have some people that disrespect women, but people in America disrespect women. So we got intelligent Muslims, we got nicer intelligent Muslims, we got sensible Muslims, we got some that are not. But that's in

everything. That's every religion. Jews have the same problem. Christians. It's not something that's isolated to one particular group, and that's what really educated me. It helped me to understand somebody wanted the American public to have a bad image. Now who's idea I don't know, but

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somebody and they worked it very well. And then after hearing about Native Islam I said, Native Islam just fit into that what they wanted. They wanted this- okay these people are saying something that's very negative. Oh this is really going to help what we're doing. And I think in my own opinion, humble opinion, I think the reason that the media would give that side- Native Islam I'll say- more publicity than say people who were associated with say W. Deen Mohammed I'm saying- they would...I think that they did that intentionally to make sure the public would have this bad perception, and so to me it was bad. It was not good. It was not good.

H: Did your perception of Islam change when you converted?

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C: My perception- yes, well considering that there was the Nation of Islam and realizing what true Islam was, they gave me a good understanding. I was able to distinguish between the two and then I just studied, which is something I did not do when I was in Christianity. Just to study to know what the religion was asking of me, and what to expect because I thought it's important to know what you're getting into so you can explain it to yourself, explain to other people, but more so know what the expectations are. I was on a \*paddle\* one time with Dr. Madison who was the president of [inaudible] and I was telling them women need to know what religion is in Islam because otherwise you might end up practicing his Islam instead of

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Islam as it is for you because people can tell you anything and you just go along with it. So my perception was you have to study and get knowledge and get a good understanding of God has asked of you as an individual.

M: Yes. Excuse me. It changes 100% and it hasn't deviated an ounce and as Constance said, studying is the key because I was under the impression that if you grew up Muslim you knew Islam. Since that time I've come to find that's not true. You might have a person that know Arabic but still don't know Islam. And so it helped me understand just the world- it helped me understand people are just people. You can be in something and not know it like people in Christianity over here. And they still don't know

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what they in. And a person can recite like I learned how to recite Arabic but it doesn't mean that you know how to explain this like she say it. We have seen women in all kind of different things that are Muslim and they have such a horrible understanding and it's not because the religion is saying these things, it's just because they don't know the religion. And if you don't know Islam, you can be in it and still be confused. And here's what I'm- I don't mean that you can be in it- you

can be around people, but if you don't know what the teaching are yourself for yourself, then you'll here a person that's a sheikh or somebody saying something. I was \*on the panel like her\*, I was sitting there and the sheikh was saying something- I said that's not correct. And the people in the audience were surprised to hear me say that to the sheikh. And I said the Quran says such and such a thing. And he said, "You are so right brother, you are so right." This no disrespect

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to him. He had been taught from being a little boy what Islam was. In his mind he had a perception. So when you have Islam being taught, the main thing is the Quran is the book. The Hadith is report on what Muhammad said soon as how he lived it. If you have a Hadith or something that is said that is not in agreement with the Quran, Muslims should go with the Quran and realize that somebody has reported that the prophet did something that- sometimes people will say prophet Muhammad did such and such a thing and the prophet would not have done it. But if you don't know the Quran, you will think well this Hadith, because I have missed so many Muslims, well the Hadith said- and he said well that's not what the Quran's saying. And some people will take Hadith over Quran. So one of the things I have found among Muslims worldwide: we have to know

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the Quran. You have to know the Quran. You have to really study it. Intensely. Not just go to a Masjid, and we all do- all of us- and just here the Imam saying yes. But the Imam could be wrong. Not saying that he is, now don't get me wrong. But Allah says in the Quran, nobody should touch it but the purified ones. I have met people thought it meant touch the book physically. It doesn't- that's not what it's talking about. And you have in the Bible many verses and those verses will be explained clearly in the Quran. So the Quran is the book that really explains the Bible. But if you talk to Christians they don't know that and most of them don't believe it and over time \*I understand\*- maybe if I was still in Christianity I wouldn't believe it either,

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but the Quran helps you understand the Bible because it will explain why this is saying- like for example, if you say Christ, it means to be clean. Well the Quran say nobody is going touch it but the clean. It doesn't mean that the person has to be a Christian, but you should be a sincere, truthful person. And that's what everybody in religion if they're serious- I'm talking about Christian, Jew, whoever they are- everybody is trying to be sincere. Just people are misinformed, but they don't know that they misinformed. They're like I'm not misinformed. Everybody think they know. Everybody thinks that they know. So Allah says in the Quran, he will be the one to settle all arguments on the day of judgment. All arguments will be settled by God himself. Because man don't believe each other anyway. So I may have

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gone on, but I know I can talk about why [inaudible]. I hope I haven't gone too far.

H: Was there a Muslim community at the time when you came to Memphis.

C: Yes. It was right across the street from the skating rink.

H: How large was it? And how active?

M: Well, when I first came in it was very large. We had 500 brothers, just men. Over the process of coming from Nation of Islam to the correct Sunni, it dwindled because a lot of people that came under the Nation of Islam came in my opinion, as the Hadith say, heals my [inaudible] for Allah and his messenger- it was for Allah and his messenger for he who migrated for some worldly good or some woman or something- that's what they migrated for. So I found out that

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that huge number that we had- just 500 men by themselves, not counting the women- that huge number was there because the people came because they like that radical teaching. The white man is low down and he ain't this, and you know because racism, Dr. King, all that stuff was going on and a lot of people were being attracted thinking that Islam was about that. That wasn't Islam, but they were being attracted like Constance said, people were coming to it so when Islam proper was being explained, those wayfarers dropped off. They just left and really it left the sincere ones- those who really came for Allah and his messenger. They were there for Allah and his messenger.

H: Did it ever continue to grow after that?

M: Oh, yes.

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C: I think it's growing now, because when I came in 79' it was still a large number of people there, but they were still going through that transition and it was under the leadership of Imam [inaudible] Muhammad. So, the people who were sincere then are still and there and then additional people. We don't have the large numbers, but we have a much better understanding and I think that's more important than a thousand insincere people, it's better to have a hundred sincere ones.

M: Yes, amen.

H: How was the transition in Memphis?

M: It was very smooth, when I say that I mean with no balance. It was- there were people who were uneducated about Islam, and so when we would meet sometime

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there would be disagreements. But, I would say basically it was very smooth. It just been very smooth. It was like she said- the people who came for the different reasons, they strayed away. I don't want to say vanished, but they just disappeared. But the people who really came for the religion are still around and it was- that's what I mean when I say smooth. It was smooth.



H: Did you take part in the community at that time?

M: Oh, yes. Yes. Because I was the assistant Imam under the brother and then eventually I became the head Imam and [inaudible] and still assisted under Imam Sharif. Now, we, when Imam Muhammad came in in 1975,

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he asked us to start interfaith programs. And we started interfaith in 1976, 77', 78', and we have been doing it ever since and we just recently enjoyed the beautiful one that was out in Cordova as you know, but that was something that we started back in 75', 76', interfaith. It was called- the first one that we had was called A Spiritual Jubilee, and we had Christians, Jews and Muslims come together. Big I'm talking about these were big. Big events. We would have them at convention centers and they would be huge. Very big. So we had worked in the community for that.

H: What was your first experience like at one of those dinners or gatherings?

M: For me, it was

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wonderful, because like I said what brought me in, what really helped me was the verses said God did not favor people based on their race or religion. In my mind I felt like this is what we need to do. This is what people all over this Earth, and I still believe that same way, the thing that we need to do is recognize we're just human beings. Everybody. Regardless of what you call yourself- Muslim, Christian, Jew, whatever you call yourself. And I was just super excited. Not semi- I was super excited.

H: What were some other interfaith efforts [inaudible]?

M: There was an organization at that time called the national conference of Christians and Jews. That organization invited us in,

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and by me being the Imam, I was invited to be- part of the adventure became a board member. And now that organization is called-

C: Diversity Memphis

M: Diversity Memphis, but it went from Diversity Memphis to the National Community for Justice. National Community, National, National Community for... it still had the NCCJ, now it's Diversity Memphis. And I like to think we had something to do with it, and when I say we I mean Muslims, because there were so many people there from Christianity and Judaism who were getting to know us too, because they didn't- they hadn't heard these negative things and many of them were, I would like to say, impressed just to find out our positions and so forth. One of the things that we did was

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we partnered up with Christians, Jews and Muslims. And we became partnered with the Unitarian Church, but each church was partnered with another church, or synagogue, or whatever, and we partnered up. And we would just go to their church, give a sermon- they would come to our mosques and give a sermon. And from that relationship I had an opportunity to go out to the synagogue, Temple Israel, which I later on found out that was first time they had ever had a Muslim Imam come there and speak. Well I went out there and spoke and then, because the rabbi and I were such good friends and we still are, it was just- it was wonderful. It was just a wonderful, wonderful- we have built friendships from that time up to this day now.

C: And there was also, what is that? Something about that peace?

M: Oh, yes. Yes.

C: Where all the congregations get together

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and they would visit one another for Buddhist, Hindu, and everybody would take a turn every month and go to the other person's place of worship. So we've had that interface as well.

H: [inaudible]

C: I can't remember the name of it, something for peace- I can't remember the name of it.

M: Because that developed out of that...

C: That, that's recent. That's not that far in history.

M: And that's how it developed. It came out of that idea of us doing an interfaith.

C: I can't think of the name.

H: Can you tell us a little about the history of Islam in Memphis?

C: Islam in Memphis?

M: Well, I'll tell you the first temple was on Florida St. No, I'm sorry, not Florida- it was on Beale Street. Beale Street

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downtown Memphis. That was long time ago. This was back in the 60's. And it moved from Beale St to Florida St many years ago. But that association was, again that was, through the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam, when it came to Memphis, the organization- because wherever the Nation of Islam went, it wouldn't call it \*Masjid\* or mosque- it would be called a temple. And they would put a number on it. And Memphis was called Temple No. 55, meaning that this was the 55<sup>th</sup> temple that was opened up under Nation of Islam. The organization, when they started on Florida St, it was...

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let's see, what's the right way to say...from people that I have talked to who were around during that time, because I obviously wasn't, I just got it from them. Like one of the brothers was Brother Isaac, another brother was Brother Akbar, and they were telling me how it was and they just had a little storefront place maybe as big as this room here, and they didn't know what they just thought they had Islam, and they was so proud to say that they was Muslims. And then that little group grew and went to a place on Florida St that was about twice the size of this room- it wasn't that big either. But that history was very proud- it was very, very proud. Very proud history. It was like a

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transition time, and the people were coming away from Nation of Islam because Elijah Muhammad got arrested, so he passed in 1975. He got sick in 1974...73' really, but it was really came down on him in 74' and he passed in 75'. But when he passed and the leadership went from him to his son, his son was in Sunni Islam, and that history, what it did was it helped explain all that Beale Street and Florida, because we all begin down the stair- the destiny was to come to Islam proper anyway. That was what Mr. \*Perot\*, the brother I was telling you about that was from India. That was his plan. There was a sister who was doing her doctorate in Chicago and she did it on the \*ahkmedia\* Muslims and the \*ahkmedia\* family-

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they had a history of doing, what you might call things that Mr. \*Perot\* did. They would take something that was really foreign to Islam, but the idea was to bring it to Islam. And their method was to tell people Islam is the religion, the Quran is the book, and Muhammad is the prophet. And say, instead of the Quran, with the idea that eventually the people are going to come to the true religion. And I didn't know that that was a real thought, this was like 1800 and something, there were Muslims in this country, but they had that philosophy. And when the sister was given, she was at one of the conventions that we were at- she was the guest speaker. And she had written

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this book on the history of how the \*Akhmedia\* people did that and Mr. \*Perot\* was from that group. It worked. It obviously worked because here we are, when I say me and Muhammad Ali, when you think about Islam and United States of America, it worked. People had not heard of it, it was kind of squashed. The African Americans in particular were so fed up with Christianity and so ignorant on what Islam was, just the fact that they thought they had it made us- and I put myself because I am African American- feel so proud. I don't know if I'm off or on but I'm trying best to answer that the best I can.

C: Well one of the things I noticed,

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even coming in 75', the transition that we went through under the leadership of Imam Muhammad was a reflection, was reflecting in Memphis. We went from Nation of Islam they

were, and then was the World Community of al Islam in the West. That was the name of the organization. Then there was America Muslim Mission and then following he say you don't need a label- this is not an organization, this is a religion. Take away the labels and when someone ask you what are you, say you are Muslim. And that was it.

M: Beautiful.

H: Can you guys tell us a little bit about Masjid Al-Mu'minum?

M: We left Florida Street- Temple 55- and when we left Florida Street, Imam Muhammad- his father had just passed. The brother who was the minister out in California,

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he was sent to Memphis and when he got here and saw the little bitty building that we were in, he said we'll have no more meetings in this building. But from him coming from Chicago and got here and that was one of the first things he said; he said we're not having any more meetings here. We were like this is where we meet, he said we gone meet somewhere else. But we just started meeting in a hotel. We started looking for a building- I remember this because I was around during that time- and we were looking and looking and then finally we found this building that was on 3<sup>rd</sup> St and went through the real estate and all that, got the building. At that time we were not even having Jummah prayer, believe it or not. There was no Jummah prayer occurring for a- well we were called

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Masjid Al-Mu'minum at that time. Imam Muhammad said start Jummah prayer and we did. We started Jummah prayer. Took all the cheers out because we had cheers like a church- took all the cheers out and one Wednesday night we were having a meeting and it was suggested that we get a name, and at that time I was the Imam. The brother who was the Imam before me- we didn't have a name prior to that. We were just called Memphis Mosque. Memphis Mosque. We were looking at a group of names and somewhere in there somebody suggested "The Believers." That's how Al-Mu'minum got there. It was like a Wednesday night I remember it specifically because I was the person conducting the meeting we were all talking about what to do, and that's how the name came about. And we voted on them. We had- I think we had a couple names,

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but Al-Mu'minum was the one that we voted on and I can't remember, do you remember the year?

C: It must have been like 79', 80' or something like that.

M: Something like that.

C: Were you the Imam?

M: I was the Imam.

C: Okay, then it was 1982. Because, from the Imam \*Aiden or Reed\* that was the one who was Imam and then he became Imam in 81' I believe, because it was after we got married.

Incorporated the Masjid and changed from Mosque No. 55- because that's what it was- to Masjid Al-Mu'minun and it was always having prayer when I was there. But can you imagine these people here are African American. Some of us, some people, knowing the English language

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pretty good but now you have to learn the Arabic and reciting prayers so you always have all these prayer sheets everywhere with the transliterations so that you could try to pronounce the words correctly when you're saying the prayer. And that whole transition in itself was admirable because people had no idea and then if you trying to learn something and you don't hear anybody say it, that's really difficult. I think we've grown a lot because now people listen to recitation so you can get the proper pronunciation and not just looking at something that's transliterated and putting your own remix on it. That's what I got when they start saying what they think is a remix.

M: She is so right.

H: Did you encounter any problems when establishing the Masjid?

M: Just normal difficulties but not, not really.

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We never dealt with any hate crimes or anything like that. I mean just the difficulty of paying bills and like that, but never- we never had to deal with- like I've heard of people having- trying to burn down the building, hate crime- we never had to deal with that, thank G-d. Thank G-d, thank Allah for that.

H: Who were the other founders of the Masjid Al-Mu'minun?

M: Oh boy, it was just a host of us, it was so many people. Like she said, like Constance said, it wasn't called Masjid Al-Mu'minun, but I give him a lot of credit. He was the brother who was the Imam before myself- Imam [inaudible]. And then there were people like the Matt \*Huen\* family, the Sharif family, Imam Sharif, who's now the Imam, the Bayrock family,

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oh G-d just so many, and I really kind of hesitate to say because I don't want to leave anybody out. There were group- there was a strong, strong group of people there. As Constance said, many of them are still there. We've gotten older, but at that time we were young like yourself. We were youngsters then, but it was in my opinion the most wonderful experience that could have had in my life. I wouldn't give it up for anything. It was absolutely wonderful. Even just like she said- you know, you're trying to... we would say something is comical now, but I had- we used to- whenever you were to give a sermon you had to record it, and then you'd have the little cassette player with you, because that disk in there and I eventually became the \*Muezzin\* and when I look back,

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I heard one of those calling the call to prayer. It was really interesting because you didn't know you were reading off someone transliterating and you thought you could read it in English and say it, so it was very interesting. The brothers who were like at say from Stratford, because there was no Stratford at that time but Dr. \*Uzmoney\* was very instrumental when they would come to Masjid on [inaudible] they were so wonderfully polite to us and nice. Like some time he would say I remember when Dr. \*Uzmoney\* pulled me over to the side and he would say in his heavy accent, brother oh brother Imam, I love you so much. You might try to say this word like that. But he would never hurt my feelings, you know? I mean he could have said, "You said that so wrong!" But he never

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did that and I pray Allah give him the highest place in heaven- he has passed now, but he was just such a beautiful- not just him, it was so many people that did us like- they didn't come and just say, "Y'all are messing that up," because they could have. They could have, I'm sure they probably was behind us praying, because I would go to Stratford and give the Khutbah and somebody would come to Masjid Al-Mu'minin. We would do that once a month. Every month I would go to Stratford to give the Khutbah. I'm sure I was saying the prayer incorrect. I know I had to have been, but the brothers were so nice, and every night there somebody would come and say, "Say this like that," and you know, just so building that community up, it was just wonderful and the kind of compassion that we had for Muslims that were...what am I saying

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right...Muslims that were...

C: International.

M: International, yes. Thank you dear.

H: How was the relationship with Muslim Society of Memphis?

C: That was very- I think we had a very good relationship. When he was talking about how many people came to our community to help us with our Arabic, we had so many Arabic classes, and every time they had one I would go. So we had a whole lot of different teachers from different backgrounds, because we had a brother that was... he was not from Kuwait... but you know, it would just be their natural language and they would come over and they would help us with our Arabic, help us with the prayers, and give us some enlightenment on just the recitation and that really helped me a lot. You could

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tell those people who would go to the classes and then those who just were still going with the transliteration. I think it was a supportive relationship. Tried to get you on the right path and doing it gently.

M: Amen. You might say \*Dr. Mordine, Dr. Khaneka, Dr. Uzmoney\* they come to my but they weren't the only ones now. We were all young people- \*Dr. Uzmoney\* was older, but \*Dr.

Khaneka, Dr. Mordine\*, myself- we were younger men at that time. I was messaging to him before, I said when we first met we all had a full head of hair. I said when we had to [inaudible], but everybody in my opinion was very helpful. Very, I mean very helpful. We would have somebody interfaith and I remember

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\*Dr. Uzmoney\* would be almost always on guest speaker. We had a prison ministry back in 75', 76', 77', 78', and \*Dr. Uzmoney\* and I would ride to prison together, and he would help me with my pronunciation. I mean way back. Way back. This was like in the 70s. But was never a person- you know how was \*scolding\*- he was not like that. Just a good person. Just good. So if there was one word I would say, it was wonderful. That's how I would describe it. It was absolutely wonderful.

H: What steps did you and the other founders take to involve the Muslims in the community and to make Muslims' community more active?

C: [inaudible]

M: Well-

C: and different programs like \*cred\*. We had a school. We

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established the first Islamic school in Memphis and the \*dower\* program that they had- they still sold the papers, only the names changed in the transition. It was [inaudible] and I don't know what...now it's Muslim Journal, which is still there. That's just getting out the word and people still sell those papers and everything. Just focusing on education and our school, we don't have it now but it had gone up to the eighth grade, but then as our community got older and we didn't have the students and then \*Pleasant View\* opened up as well, so there was another place for people to send their children that could better handle that \*balance\*.

M: Because at first Muslims before Pleasant View opened they were sending them to Masjid Al-Mu'minin because we were the only school

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like she said. But we also, every year Masjid Al-Mu'minin would have an annual banquet. Yearly. We started that with the Imam \*Aiden Al-Salaam\* and we still have a night that's under Muslims in Memphis, but originally- and it was always be interfaith, it was always interfaith- it was where we were inviting Christians, Jews and Hindu- whoever, we were inviting people of other religious faith. That was just part of what we did. It was always about getting involved with the community. Getting involved with the community.

H: How did Ramadan activities and Eid prayer in Memphis change as the Muslim community started growing?

C: Well,

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the Eid prayers we started having joint Eid prayers with all of the \*messages\* as the years went by, instead of just everybody having their own. That was something just for everybody to get together. So, now you have a choice and people- you can go to your little Masjid or you can go to the conglomerate like what happened the one downtown or wherever we might have it. And I think it's just more of a coming together, which is like Hajj. But I think it's grown. I can say it's grown, so now everybody is together more.

H: Now let's talk a little bit about 9/11 and Muslims in Memphis at the time. What was your reaction to the 9/11 attack.

M: Oh gosh it was horrible. When 9/11 happened

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for me, what I was praying was this- that it wouldn't be Muslims. Just before I ever saw, I just was looking on the news and I say I hope they don't say there were Muslims involved. That was my prayer. Then when they said it was Muslims involved, I was heartbroken. I was- it really messed me up, I was like- it messed me up. It was for, I don't know, even to this day I think I still suffer some side effects, kind of like a person been in a war. I still have some 9/11 withdrawals, because I knew it would serve our enemies because they wanted to make it look like this is what Islam was about. It reminded me personally as how I felt as a

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very young person, I'm 64 years old- 63, I'll be 64 my birthday- and I remember being a young person and most of the time in the United States at that time, if they showed African Americans on television, it would be negative. And I grew up with this period like, "Oh if something happens negative, don't let it be African American." Then when I came to Islam, that changed and I started saying, "Oh don't let it be Muslim," because it seemed like for some reason, the media likes to highlight the negative. Seems like they want to highlight the negative, and when they came to Islam, it seemed like they really wanted to highlight the negative. More so than they did when I was a boy and it was African American. So it affected my life- I remember specifically how it just-

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it really just kind of messed me up. It was a while before- it was bad. I don't know the right words to use, it kind of messed me up.

H: What was your reaction to the 9/11 attack?

C: I guess I was just waiting to see what would happen, because I did not... I remember we had a school at that time and I had just come home from work because I work nights, and my friend called me and said, "Turn on the television," and that's when the second plane had hit and we were waiting to see if they were Muslim and I was so glad when they said- when people, even



though they say they were Muslim- they were saying, "This is not Islam. These people do not reflect the religion."

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That's just the...that's the stance I took. That people can call themselves whatever, that doesn't mean that they showing the best of what it is for the religion, and so we had people call the Masjid, and some people had horrible things to say, but we had more people that would call the Masjid and they would leave a positive reflection saying, "We know this is not Islam. We know how you are," because at least we had done part of our work ahead of time and they knew- I knew that can't be what you all are about. I was not so traumatized, I thought it was a horrible thing to happen period. That these people said they were Muslim, okay. People can call themselves whatever they want to, I didn't agree with that.

M: Our sister church, unitarians, they- the pastor over there, Reverend \*Cawley\*, he called me. He said...he asked me how I was doing, he said, "How are you doing my friend?" And I told

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him I was doing pretty good, hated what had happened. He said his church had discussed it, and he said "Would you come over here? Would you all- would your church come over here- would your mass come to our church and you be our speaker?" And I was so grateful, I was so grateful until I could not even speak. Every time I would say something I would start crying, do you remember that? It was very difficult for me because I felt so grateful that...like she said, they were saying, "We know this not Islam. We know you all," because we had already established a relationship with them. That was- I was very happy that they did that.

H: What are your guys' occupations?

C: He's a chapter

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minister, you can tell that. I'm a nurse. I'm a registered nurse.

H: We know that you work with the Memphis Muslim medical clinic, can you tell us more about that?

C: Oh, yes. It was 9 years ago and I was on sick leave from my job- I worked for the Veterans Administration hospital, I guess I can say that. I got a call because I had worked with so many of our Muslim physicians as they went through their residency and I got a call saying, "We want to start a clinic, and your name came up, would you come by for an interview? We need a nurse." I said, "Sure, I'll come by." I was so excited, we going to have a clinic, great! So I went over there and they were talking to me, and I said okay, so we going to- how we going to do that and everything? Well yeah, and I wanted to volunteer there and they wouldn't let me. "No,

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we have to give you a salary!"

"Are you getting a salary?"

"No-"

"Then I need to volunteer."

"No, no, no, we have to have you on salary."

Okay, so we negotiated. I was like, "Can I go on salary no matter how many hours?" And Dr. \*Sheikh\* was so enthusiastic with it, and I had worked with Dr. \*Nassir\* previously, so they agreed that I would be the nurse and we hired another helping hand. They hired somebody that they interviewed and our clerk that we have now, and then our office manager. So it was a conglomeration- the interfaith clinic, right from the beginning. It was a reflection of society. They passed out fliers for the opening. Dr. \*Uzmaney\* of course cut the ribbon. When we opened our clinic and now we have almost 2,000 patients.

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Is that what you want to know?

H: Now transitioning to a talk about the present Muslim community of Memphis. What advice would you give to any Muslim leaders in the Memphis community?

M: So much. I would say number one would be faithful in your religion- be faithful to your religion. Study. Have a plan as to what you want to get accomplished and stick to it. Stick to it. Have a plan and stick to it and Allah will be with you. Allah will be with you.

C: And what would I tell them? Be the example that you want the children to see.

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Follow through on things and give them- be relevant as to things that they're going to come against. Situations that they may be in to help them to handle those situations, because you know it's different for every generation what challenges you may meet. Give them the tools to deal with those challenges that would really be applicable.

H: What do you think the future of the Muslim community of Memphis will be like?

C: Only Allah knows. I can't answer that. What will it be like? I have no idea. I don't even know what I would hope that it would just grow and understanding I pray for an increase in understanding more than numbers. In sincerity, that people will get a good understanding this is what Islam

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is. This is what G-d has for you. Has in mind for you. And they will see the value, because the whole thing is saying value individuals. That we will value one another and value family and value our community.

M: Yeah, I think the future is very bright. I think it is very bright and I think that when I see the young people that we have, I think where we were not able to go certain places, I just see that they're going to go much farther. Like Constance, what she said, [inaudible] relative-

C: Relevant

M: Yeah, relevant. Because what we were first faced with,

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our generation is different than what you all are faced with. It's totally different. And you all see things that we don't see. It's just the way life is. In other words, it's not a bad thing. It's a wonderful thing. You see things and you know where it needs to go, than the generation that come behind you all will see thing you all will be our age one day, but you all will be telling to those younger people, and they will see things and God willing they will take you all advice and go forward. But I think it's very bright. I do. I think it's very bright. Without me telling you all the reasons because I would give another sermon, [laughs] I'll just say that.

H: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

C: I can't think of it right now.

M: Well I'm happy that you all are doing this. To me, this is

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part of what in my mind what I mean when I say the future is bright. This is a very wonderful thing to even have the mindset to put this into a historical perspective, wonderful. And you all will do things like this and even more. There are other things that you can do as well and you might be brighter than even this. And don't let me just talk, I love you all. You all are our future and you all are so, in my opinion whenever I meet young people, you all are so bright. It's as if Allah has made you all- I ain't going to say geniuses but semi- you all are so bright. So bright, there's so many of you all. I'm talking about from Masjid Al-Mu'minun, from Stratford, minus all these Masjids around here, we have some... we're in good hands, I'll put it like that.

[66:00]

The future's in good hands.

C: I agree with that.

H: Thank you for being with us today.

M: No, thank you.

