Governance Issues in American Mosques: Exploring the Present and Making Recommendations for the Future

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This paper explores existing organizational structures of mosques in the United States, and the issues related to these structures. The paper then makes recommendations for how to improve mosque organizational structure. Research is largely based on the "Needs Assessment of ISNA/NAIT Mosques" conducted in 2014. The sections of the paper include a discussion of the various types of mosque governance structures, the issue of elections in mosques, the question of who is the mosque leader, and finally the role of the imam in the mosque. The paper's analysis points out both the strengths and weaknesses in mosque governance. Recommendations focus on ways that mosques can better follow best practices in nonprofit management.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Mosques, Islam in America, imam

American mosques on the surface are doing quite well: their numbers are increasing (74% increase in the number of mosques from 2000 to 2011)[1]; mosque attendance is growing (292 average jum'ah attendance in 2000 to 353 in 2011).[2] However, there are many obstacles facing mosques as they strive to move to the next level of advancement. One of those obstacles is the lack of clarity on the best and most appropriate mosque organizational structure. This paper explores the existing organizational structures of mosques in the United States, and then makes recommendations for how to improve mosque organizational structure.

The exploration of mosque organizational structures uses data primarily from the 2013 "National Needs Assessment of Mosques Associated with ISNA/NAIT" and secondarily from the "US Mosque Survey 2011."[3] The reason for focusing on the "National Needs Assessment" is its inclusion of many more questions about mosque organization than the "US Mosque Survey 2011." However, the deficiency of the "National Needs Assessment" is that it did not include many African American mosques, so the findings of this paper deal with mosques that are attended largely by first and second generation immigrants. The second section of this paper includes my recommendations about mosque organizational structure, based on an analysis of this data, a review of literature on governance in non-profits and congregations, and the guidance of Islam as found in Qurʾān and the sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. The goal of this paper, therefore, is both to depict the present

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[1] Ihsan Bagby, *The American Mosque 2011: Report Number 1 from the US Mosque Study 2011* (Washington, DC: CAIR, 2011), p. 5.

[2] Ibid, p. 7.

[3] The National Needs Assessment consisted of 112 interviews of mosque leaders, sampled from a total of 331 mosques which are associated with Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and North American Islamic Trust (NAIT). This group of mosques represents mainstream immigrant mosques. The margin of error is ± 7.5%. Few African American mosques are associated with ISNA/NAIT, and therefore are not well represented in this sample. Many questions in the National Needs Assessment were about mosque governance. The U.S. Mosque Survey 2011 was a random sampled survey of all mosques in America which resulted in three reports. Report 2 focused on issues of mosque governance.

situation of mosque governance and to make recommendations about how best to organize mosques.

Mosques as a gathering place for worship have existed in Islam since the beginning—the first act of Prophet Muhammad in Madinah was to establish a mosque. Thus, it was natural for Muslims in America, whether first generation immigrants or first generation converts, to establish houses of worship to symbolize their abiding commitment to establish Islam in this land. However, there is no specific guidance in the Islamic texts of Qurʾān and hadith about how to organize a mosque, and since Muslims are not organized under a centralized "church" there is no denominational entity providing instructions about governance. Muslims in the United States are, therefore, challenged to develop on their own the most appropriate and effective mosque organizational structure.

Mosques in America are congregations, and therefore they have followed the typical American pattern of how religious groups have organized themselves. A simplified understanding of a congregation is a group of people who assemble regularly to worship at a particular place. However, agreeing with Wind and Lewis, I would add that a congregation also represents "an organizational pattern that places considerable power in the hands of the local body of lay leaders."[4] Thus almost all American mosques have been founded and managed by lay leaders and not imams.

While the American mosque is a congregation, the traditional mosque in classical Islamic civilization and in the Muslim world today is not a congregation. These mosques were and are places of worship, but attendees do not have any voice in the governing of the mosque. Instead these mosques are controlled by the government, a rich patron or an endowment. Thus, the Muslims who established mosques in America did not have a ready model to follow.

In America, mosques were founded when Muslims came together to practice and preserve their religion. They organized themselves, raised money, and conducted programs. Moreover, since there is no traditional "church" in Islam, mosques at this point in history are completely self-governed and independent.

Although there is no specific guidance for how to organize a mosque, there are general guidelines and practices established in the teachings of Islam. Guidelines include (1) *shura* which is the principle in the Qurʾān that the affairs of Muslims should be decided in consultation with one another (the Qurʾān says the affairs of Muslims "are conducted by mutual consultation [*shura*]" 42:38), (2) having a clear leader for any group ("when there are three of you traveling, appoint one to be the leader [amir]," narrated by Abu Dawud, Ahmad. and al-Tabari with a good chain of narrators), and (3) doing everything with excellence [*ihsan* or *itqan*] which includes the idea of seeking knowledge wherever you find it ("God as enjoined excellence [*ihsan*] in everything" narrated by Muslim; and "seek knowledge even to China" narrated by al-Baihaqi). The one traditional practice is that mosques had an imam who served as the prayer leader of the mosque, and some of them served as a scholar. However, the imam was not a pastor or leader of a congregation. All these general instructions point to an understanding that the affairs of the mosque should be done in consultation with the congregation; mosques should have recognizable leadership; mosques should strive to conduct their affairs in an excellent manner, unafraid to learn from non-Muslims; and finally mosques should have an imam.

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[4] James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, "Introduction" in *American Congregations Vol. 1*, edited by James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 2.

Basic Organizational Structures of ISNA/NAIT Mosques

There are four basic organizational structures among ISNA/NAIT mosques. The majority of ISNA/NAIT mosques (60%) have both a board of trustees and an executive committee; 38% have only one governing body which is usually called an executive committee; 2% have a board and a full-time staff; and finally 2% have neither a board, executive committee or staff.[5]

Basic Organizational Structures of ISNA/NAIT Mosques*

Board and executive committee (board/ec)	60%
Executive committee only (ec-only)	37%
Board only plus staff (board/staff)	2%
Neither board or executive committee—caretaker mosque	2%

*Percentages throughout this paper might not total 100% due to rounding.

In the mosques that have a board and executive committee (board/ec), the board typically controls the property and is the final authority in the mosque, while the executive committee manages the day-to-day operations of the mosque. Most mosques have little to no staff (50% have no staff, and 31% have one full-time, paid staff person), and therefore, the executive committee manages the mosque and all its activities. In mosques with only an executive committee (37%), the executive committee is typically a carryover from a time when the mosque was very small and only needed one body. The executive committee in these mosques runs all the affairs of the mosque. The 2% of mosques, which have a board and full-time staff, are mega-mosques with jum'ah attendance over 1000. They have a sufficient number of full-time staff such that it has outgrown the need for an executive committee in managing the mosque—the staff in other words has replaced the executive committee. The mosque which has neither board nor executive committee is a caretaker mosque which is extremely small and has only a caretaker who keeps the mosque open for prayers.

Mosques, which have a board and an executive committee, tend to have larger jum'ah attendance and larger budgets than mosques with only an executive committee. The average jum'ah attendance for a board/ec mosque is 829 as compared to 302 for a mosque with only an executive committee. The board/ec mosque has an average budget of $306,383 (median budget is $200,000) as compared to an ec-only mosque which has an average budget of $88,500 (median budget is $90,000).

Jum'ah Attendance and Organizational Structure

	ec-only	Board/ec
1-50	15.0%	2%
51-100	12.5%	5%
101-200	27.5%	15%
201-500	32.5%	37%
501 +	12.5%	42%

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[5] While the most common terms for the governing entities of a mosque are board of trustees and executive committee, mosques have used various names for their governing entities. Thus I am using the term board of trustees as a generic term to describe mosque entities that hold the position of a board. Similarly I am using executive committee as a generic term to describe a body that has the responsibilities to manage the organization.

Budget and Organizational Structure

	ec-only	Board/ec
$10,000-$39,999	23%	10%
$40,000-$99,999	27%	17%
$100,000-$499,999	50%	55%
$500,000 +	0%	18%

Although the board/ec mosque is fairly well-to-do, it averages only two full-time staff persons. Only in 54% of these mosques is that full-time person an imam. In many cases the full-time person is a janitor. Thus, the board/executive committee model serves a community that is fairly large but has little staff, and therefore it requires an executive committee to focus on the day-to-day functioning of the mosque. This is a logical, effective way of organizing a mosque that is by necessity managed by volunteers. In comparison, the mosques with a board and staff average five full-time staff members, and thus they do not need volunteers to bear the main responsibility of managing the mosque.

The study of ISNA/NAIT mosques does not shed light on whether the board/ec mosque evolved from an ec-only mosque over time or whether the mosque was founded on that model. On average, board/ec mosques were founded in 1981 so most have been in existence for 30-40 years. A few interviews with ISNA/NAIT mosque leaders indicated that some of these mosques did start small with only an executive committee and added a board of trustees when they built or purchased a new building. Their motivation was to form a board in order to hold the deed and thereby protect the property. The creation of the board, therefore, was not to serve as an oversight body and a vehicle for strategic planning, which is the best practice model advocated in the literature on non-profits. Many other board/ec mosques started with both a board and executive committee because they began as a fairly large mosque with plans to build or purchase. Anecdotally many mosques have retained this view of a board as simply a holder of the deed with little other purpose. Thus, many mosques have adopted the nonprofit model of a board and executive body, but many have not adopted the recommended functions of a board, which include oversight and direction-setting.

Mosques with only an executive committee span the spectrum of size and budget, but they are largely small to mid-sized mosques. On average, these mosques were founded in 1986 so many have been around long enough and many have grown large enough to have evolved into a board/ec mosque, but it has not happened. It might be assumed that the reluctance to evolve is due to an executive committee that is comprised of the founding generation and therefore reluctant to change or share power. Possibly another important factor is simply inertia—the mosque has run for years with one body, and growth has not forced a re-consideration of their governance model.

The three models of board/ec mosque, ec-only mosque and board/staff mosque can each be seen as a natural progression in size and staff. The ec-only mosques are small to mid-sized and have no staff or only one staff. The board/ec mosque is mid-sized to large and has an average of two full-time staff, which is still not enough to handle the day-to-day functions of the mosque. The few mosques which have only a board with staff are mega-mosques with at least five full-time staff.

I will argue in my recommendations that the best model for mid-sized to large mosques is to have a board of trustees and an executive committee, because the best practice model for non-profits is to have a board that does oversight and direction-setting, and an executive body that focuses exclusively on management. However, as we have seen, many mosques do not have a board

of trustees, and other mosques have a board which does not function as a board of trustees that does oversight and direction-setting.

Elections

The congregational nature of ISNA/NAIT mosques in being self-governing is manifest in the fact that the vast majority of ISNA/NAIT mosques (89%) hold elections for their board and/or executive committee. Of the 11% who have a board and/or executive committee, but do not conduct elections, 2% are run by an endowment (waqf) and the other 9% represent founder boards and/or executive committees who do not hold elections in order to retain power.

The founder syndrome refers to a common phenomenon whereby the founders of an institution are reluctant to hand the reins of power to others, because the founders feel they are best able to preserve the original vision of the institution. It is commonly observed that the founder syndrome is very much a factor in many mosques today, whether the mosque holds elections or not. In many mosques, the founding generation is still in power but growing old, and the younger generation remains outside the circle of leadership. Researchers and consultants in all faith groups bemoan the existence of the founder syndrome, because over time the founders' tenacious hold on power alienates members and inevitably leads to conflicts.[6]

Board/ec mosques have a variety of ways of electing their leaders. The majority (55%) elect both the board and the executive committee. n 19% of these mosques the board is not elected but the executive committee is elected. In this case a founding board has no term limits, and new board members are selected by the board. In 18% of the mosques with a board and executive committee, the board is elected but the executive committee is not. In this case the elected board appoints the executive committee. Another version of this same model is when some members of the board along with a few other members constitute an executive committee—the leader of the board serves also as the leader of the executive committee. In 8% of the board/ec mosques there are no elections for either body. These mosques include the un-elected founding board that appoints an executive committee or an endowment-controlled mosque where the endowment appoints the mosque board, and the board then appoints an executive committee.

Elections

Both board and executive committee elected	55%
Board not elected-executive committee elected	19%
Board elected—executive committee not elected	18%
Neither board nor executive committee elected	8%

I will argue in the section on recommendations that the best model is where the board and executive committee are both elected. Elections allow members to have a sense of involvement and empowerment, and elections provide for the possibility of change which is a natural and beneficial occurrence in any organism.

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[6] See William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014).

Mosque Leadership: Who is the Leader?

The ISNA/NAIT mosque survey asked the mosque leader, who is the leader of the mosque? In most cases the question was followed by hesitation and indecision, because interviewees were not clear on who was the leader of the mosque. In the vast majority of these mosques, there were officers of the board/executive committee and there was an imam, but it had not been spelled out who should be considered the mosque leader. When respondents did hesitate, interviewers were instructed to ask: who would mosque attendees consider the leader? Inevitably a response was given. The mosque leader in over two-thirds of ISNA/NAIT mosques (67%) is the head of the executive committee whose title is usually president.[7] The imam is considered the leader in 23% of mosques, and the chair of the board is the leader in 7% of the mosques. Of the remaining mosques, 1% have a full-time, paid executive director who serves as the leader; and in 2% the caretaker is the only leader.

Who is the Masjid Leader?

Leader of the Executive Committee (president)	67%
Imam	23%
Leader of the Board (Chair)	7%
Executive Director	1%
Other: Caretaker	2%

The president of the executive committee is more likely the mosque leader when the executive committee is elected. When the executive committee is elected, over 80% of these mosques consider the president as the mosque leader. When the executive committee is not elected, only 33% of those mosques have the president as the leader.

The executive committee president is typically the leader in all sizes of mosques except the large mosque with jum'ah attendance over 501. In mosques with attendance over 501, 40% of these mosques have the president as the mosque leader, but 43% of these mosques have the imam as the leader. In all other sized mosques, approximately 80% have the president as the leader.

Leader and Attendance

	1-50	51-100	101-200	201-500	501 +
Imam	0%	13%	24%	13%	43%
President	78%	75%	76%	82%	40%
Chair of board	0%	13%	0%	5%	14%
Caretaker	22%	0%	0%	0%	0%

An explanation of this phenomena is that very large mosques have in many cases hired a highly qualified, experienced imam, and thus the imam has become over time the clear leader of the mosque. Based on interviews, it is clear that the imam was not given this role of leader—he earned it.

I will argue in my recommendations that the best arrangement for mosques is to have a qualified imam who can serve as the leader of the mosque, because the imam is the one who is out

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[7] The title of the executive head of the mosque varies. Thus I use president as a generic term that describes the head of the executive entity.

front delivering the message and leading religious services, and therefore he can be the most effective leader.

Imams and Mosques

The imam in ISNA/NAIT mosques holds a fairly precarious position, which undoubtedly reflects an underlying tension between lay mosque leadership and imams. A portion of this tension stems from the lack of consensus among American Muslims on the appropriate role of the imam, which is demonstrated in the fact that many mosque constitutions do not even mention the imam. Remarkably only about half (49%) of ISNA/NAIT mosque have a full-time, paid imam. Even more remarkable is the fact that one-third of ISNA/NAIT mosques do not even have an imam. Of the remaining mosques, 9% have a part-time, paid imam, and 9% have a volunteer imam.

Employment Status of Imams in ISNA/NAIT Mosques

Full-time paid	49%
Part-time paid	9%
Volunteer	9%
No Imam	33%

The large number of ISNA/NAIT mosques that do not have an imam is not explained by their inability to hire an imam. In almost all cases the ISNA/NAIT mosques have a sufficient number of attendees (643 average jum'ah) and sufficient budget ($266,000 average budget) to hire an imam. The reluctance is best explained by the comments of many mosque leaders that they are uncomfortable about having an imam who is unfamiliar with American mosques and possibly more conservative than the congregation. Thus, it is better not to hire an imam who might be a source of conflict. This viewpoint undoubtedly stems from the fact that 90% of all imams in ISNA/NAIT mosques were born outside America, and 98% of all imams who have a formal degree were educated overseas. Compounding the problem is that overseas educational programs for imams prepare students to be Islamic scholars but do not prepare them to act as pastors or congregational leaders.

The majority of imams in ISNA/NAIT mosques (60%) have at least a BA degree or equivalent from an Islamic institution—compared to 48% of all imams in American mosques. Only 15% of imams in ISNA/NAIT mosques have no formal training, and the majority of these imams function as volunteer imams. Almost one-fourth of imams have a certificate which in most cases certifies that they have memorized the entire Qurʾān.

As might be expected, the vast majority (80%) of full-time, paid imams have a formal Islamic degree, and 85% of imams with a degree serve in larger mosques with jum'ah attendance over 201. Very small mosques tend to have volunteer imams, and small to mid-sized mosques have part-time imams.

As mentioned earlier, only 23% of ISNA/NAIT mosques indicate that their leader is the imam. To complete the picture, 44% of mosques do not consider the imam the mosque leader, and 33% of mosques do not have an imam.

Imam as Leader

Imam is the leader	23%
Imam is not the leader	44%
No imam in mosque	33%

Another way of thinking about this situation is that 67% of mosques have an imam along with a board and executive committee. Of these mosques about two-thirds of them do not consider the imam as the leader, and in about 35% of these mosques, the imam is considered the leader. Thus, even if there is an imam in an ISNA/NAIT mosque, the likelihood is that the imam is not considered the leader of the mosque. Not being considered the leader of the mosque is true for full-time paid and degreed imams. The majority (60%) of these imams are not considered the leader of the mosque.

The fact that over three-fourths of ISNA/NAIT mosques do not consider their imam as the mosque leader demonstrates the weak position of imams. It might be assumed that the imam holds a similar position as the pastor or rabbi, and is therefore viewed as the natural leader because he is the spiritual leader of the congregation, the one with the most knowledge of the religion, and the one who usually gives the weekly sermon. However, imams do not hold a similar position.

One of the possible reasons for the weak position of the imam in ISNA/NAIT mosques is the same reason for the large number of mosques that have no imam: the sense that imams from overseas are not prepared or qualified to be leaders in an American mosque. There is some logic in this argument. The reasonableness of this point of view is confirmed by the fact that imams who are the leaders of American mosques have been on the job more years than imams who are not leaders. Through experience, they have learned the culture and the demands of the job, and thus have earned the position of leader.

Leader and years on the job

	0-3 years	4-8 years	9-13 years	14 +
Imam is leader	14%	24%	64%	55%
Imam is not leader	86%	76%	36%	45%

However, another possible reason for the weak position of imams, based on interviews with ISNA/NAIT mosque leaders, is that boards and executive committees are fearful of giving up power to imams. If the imam gains a prominent position of leadership, they are fearful that the imam will misuse his power.

The 2013 survey of ISNA/NAIT mosques asked mosques that have an imam the question of whether (1) the imam is in charge of all aspects of the mosque such that the imam is the religious and executive leader—this is the strong imam model, or (2) the functions of the mosque are split such that the executive committee runs the administrative aspects, and the imam manages the religious and educational aspects—this is the shared model of leadership; or (3) the executive committee or board dominates all aspects, and the imam has a limited role of simply leading prayers and conducting some classes—this is the strong executive committee model. The results show that close to two-thirds of ISNA/NAIT mosques (63%) prefer the shared model. Only 4% have the strong imam model, and 33% have the strong executive committee model.

The shared model divides the functions of the mosque between religious and educational matters which are under the imam, and then all other functions of the mosque are under the executive head. Usually the imam has full authority over religious affairs, and the executive committee has full authority over the other aspects of the mosque. This division is the reason why most mosque leaders were perplexed as to question of who is the leader of the mosque—there are two leaders.

The imam's authority over religious and educational matters means that the imam controls prayers, sermons, the giving of Islamic legal opinions, and adult education classes (usually children classes are controlled by the executive committee). The executive committee has authority over all other aspects which includes the bulk of what the mosque does: events, programs, committee activities, facility maintenance, etc. The stated rationale is typically that this arrangement allows the imam to be a religious scholar without the bother of being concerned with the day-to-day operations of the mosque. Typically each—especially the imam—guard their territory vigorously.

Imams, however, have the disadvantage in terms of authority because the final decision-maker in the mosque is either the executive committee (41% of ISNA/NAIT mosques) or the board of trustees (51% of mosques). Thus imams in these mosques typically think of themselves as junior partners in the power-sharing arrangement, and the leaders of the executive committee and board think of themselves as the ultimate authority.

The shared model is associated with the degreed, full-time paid imam: 83% of imams in the shared model arrangement have a formal degree, and 89% of them are full-time, paid. Undoubtedly the authority given to the imam in the shared model is due to the prestige of the formal degree, and thus the reward of the degree is that the imam is given some authority in the mosque.

However, the imam in the shared model is not always considered the leader of the mosque. In fact imams in the shared model are virtually divided between those imams who are considered the leader (52%) and those who are not considered the leader (48%). Where the imam is not considered the leader, the mosque leader is almost in all cases the president. As per the discussion about who is considered the mosque leader, the imam's degree and full-time, paid position does not influence whether the imam is considered the leader. The best predictor is the imam's length of time at the mosque. In the shared model, the longer the imam has been on the job, the greater likelihood that he will be considered the leader. Imams in the shared model who have not been on the job long, are less likely to be considered the leader. The formal degree gets the imam some authority in the ISNA/NAIT mosque, but it does not raise the imam to the status of the mosque's leader. To be considered the leader, the imam must apparently earn the position by years of experience which demonstrates to attendees and mosque officers that he has acculturated and is capable of handling the role of an imam in an American mosque.

Only a handful of ISNA/NAIT mosques (4%) have the strong imam model where the imam is both the executive and religious leader. In all these mosques the imam does not have a formal degree and in most cases is not even full-time, paid. This pattern is more typical of African American mosques where the imam is the executive head and usually has no formal Islamic degree.[8] The strong imam model is also typical of the few immigrant mosques which have been established by an imam who runs the mosque as his own. In all of these cases, the mosque was founded when the imam broke away from another mosque.

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[8] Ihsan Bagby, *The American Mosque 2011: Report 2 from the US Mosque Study 2011* (Plainfield, IN: Islamic Society of North America, 2012), p. 16.

The strong board model represents those mosques where the imam has little to no authority and the executive committee runs everything. More typically, the imam in this model does not have a degree: 55% of imams in the strong board model have a certificate and 18% have no training as compared to 27% who have a formal degree.

Recommendations

1. *Mosques with jum'ah attendance over 50 and under 1000 should have a board of trustees and an executive committee, but the functions of each must be distinct.*

A board of trustees and an executive committee are needed because both have essential jobs in contributing to the well-being of the mosque. The board is needed to oversee and set direction for the executive officers, while the executive committee is needed to manage the actual day-to-day work of the mosque. The complementary yet distinct roles of oversight and management are best realized in separate bodies—a board and an executive committee.

The well-established organizational model for non-profits is to have a board that fulfills the following functions:[9]

- Set direction by defining the vision, mission and goals through a continuing process of strategic planning.
- Oversee the management of the mosque by evaluating and monitoring the performance of executives to keep the mosque progressing towards its mission and goals, to hold accountable mosque leaders and to ensure the financial viability of the mosque.
- Support fundraising and ensuring financial stability
- Approve a budget and ensure financial accountability

The challenge is that many ISNA/NAIT mosques do not have a board of trustees, and in those that do have one, often those boards do not carry out the proper functions of a board.

Approximately 39% of all ISNA/NAIT mosques have only one governing body, usually called the executive committee. While it is perfectly logical for a very small mosque to have only one governing board, because there are not enough people to fill all positions, most ISNA/NAIT are not small. Among the ISNA/NAIT mosques that have only one governing body, 85% have an average jum'ah attendance over 50, and 45% have attendance over 200. My suggested thumb rule is that any mosque that has a jum'ah attendance over 50 people should have two bodies: a board of trustees and an executive committee.

Jum'ah Attendance and Organizational Structure

	Ec only	Board and ec
1-50	15.0%	2%
51-100	12.5%	5%
101-200	27.5%	15%
201-500	32.5%	37%
501 +	12.5%	42%

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[9] David O. Renz, "Leadership, Governance, and the Work of the Board," in *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, Third Edition, ed. David O. Renz and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), pp.130-134.

The model of having only one governing body—an executive committee—means that the executive committee should do the job of a board and executive committee. However, the executive committee inevitably will fail in fulfilling the functions of a board. The executive committee cannot properly provide oversight over itself, and it is invariably too busy with the everyday grind of running the mosque to conduct strategic planning and to keep their eyes on the big picture of vision and mission.

The second challenge is that most mosque boards do not serve the functions of oversight and direction-setting. Some boards were formed to hold the deed and that is all they do. Some boards are founder boards, and as such they were formed to ensure that the mosque does not stray from the original vision of the founders. Some boards simply do not understand their role, and often try to micro-manage and interfere in the work of the Imam and executive officers.

The proper function of the executive committee is to focus on the management of the mosque. The executive committee should be led by a president who serves as the executive leader of the mosque. The executive committee must be given full responsibility and authority by the board to manage the mosque based on the mission and goals set by the board.

The roles of each body must be kept distinct such that the board does not micro-manage or interfere with the executive committee; and the executive committee does not overstep the board in setting direction.

The very small mosque needs only one body to be both board and executive committee; and the mega-mosque with over 6 full-time employees does not need an executive committee because the staff manages day-to-day activities.

2. *Boards and executive officers should be elected*

Elections in mosques exemplify the quote, "democracy is the worse form of government except for all the others." Elections can be a headache, but they are the best way to involve the community in decision making (*shura*), and the best way to protect a mosque from being dominated by a clique.

The safest and wisest course is to elect both board members and executive officers. It is good news that 55% of ISNA/NAIT mosques hold elections for both the board and the executive committee. Of course, the terms of each should differ. The board's job of oversight and direction-setting requires a longer term, and the executive committee and its officers require a shorter term to ensure that change can be made if things go badly.

Although board terms should be lengthy to provide stability, their terms should not be perpetual, because change is natural and necessary. Many mosques, where the board is not elected, have founder boards which are averse to giving up power due to their fear of new members who will change the direction of the mosque. Such fears eventually lead to stagnation and the frustration of mosque attendees who feel that their voices are not being heard and that their presence does not count. A possible compromise, which certain mosques have adopted, is to split the board between permanent members and elected members, with the elected members of the board always being the majority.

In the absence of a full staff, executive officers and the executive committee must bear the full responsibility of managing the mosque. Executive officers must be empowered to lead and must be perceived as leaders. The best way to do this is to have mosque members vote them into power.

If the executive officers, especially the president, are appointed by the board, then the board is empowered. Typically, when executives are appointed by the board, the view is that real power lies with the board, and as a result executives are not viewed as having full authority. While boards do have the final authority, a non-profit works best when the executives have been assigned full authority to manage the institution. All eyes, therefore, should be on the executives. The board is in the background ensuring that the institution is fulfilling its mission and goals. To better ensure that all eyes are on the executives, they should be elected by the members of the mosque.

3. *The shared model of management is the most appropriate model, but ideally the imam should be considered the leader of the mosque.*

In the shared mosque model, the management of the mosque is divided between the imam and the president—the imam manages religious affairs and the president manages all other aspects of the mosque. Within this model, I recommend that the imam be considered the leader of the mosque.

The imam is the one who leads the prayer, delivers the khutbahs, performs the marriages, leads the funeral prayers, and provides Islamic guidance. The imam is thus the primary face of the mosque. To best utilize that role as the face of the mosque, the imam should be viewed as the leader. This does not mean that the imam sets the vision, mission and goals of the mosque—that is the function of the board in collaboration with the imam and other stake holders. The job of the imam, instead, is to convey the vision, mission, and goals to the congregation. The imam, as the one who gives the khutbah, is the best one to convey that message. If the imam is viewed as the leader, he can do his job more effectively, because he can speak even more authoritatively in delivering the message.

The recommendation is that the authority in the mosque be split between the imam and the president, but that the imam be presented to the community as the principal leader of the mosque. This can be done by making clear to the congregation that the imam is the religious leader of the mosque, and the president is the administrative leader, but the imam as the religious leader is the prime leader of the mosque. Structurally the imam's position, as the principle leader, can be enhanced by having the imam, president, and other important leaders meet to coordinate activities and discuss direction with the imam as chair of this coordinating group.

Recognizing that imams who were raised and educated abroad are not prepared to serve as the leader of an American mosque, my recommendation for the present situation is to groom imams from overseas so that they can be leaders. Mosques must require imams to seek educational opportunities to learn about America and American Muslims, and imams must seek training courses to learn the duties of an American imam such as counselling and leadership. Actually, the urgent task of providing supplemental education programs for newly arrived imams is a national issue that requires the joint efforts of mosques and other Muslim organizations.

4. *Recommended organizational model for the various sizes of mosques.*

Small mosques under 50 jum'ah attendance

Small mosques which have 50 or less attendance, typically have only one governing body—an executive committee—and this seems appropriate due to the scarcity of people to fill positions. Without a qualified imam, it is best for the mosque to elect a leader of the executive committee (president) and delegate a volunteer imam to the duties of leading prayer. However, if a small mosque finds the wherewithal to purchase or build a mosque, or hire a full-time imam, then a board

should be created to safeguard the property and to take on the duties of direction-setting and oversight.

The mid-sized to large mosque

Mid-sized to large mosques, which have a jum'ah attendance of 51-500 and have a staff of one full-time paid imam should have a board of trustees and an executive committee, consisting of elected executive officers including a president. At this point in the history of the American Muslim community, I recommend that the management of the mosque be split between the imam who controls religious affairs and the president who controls all other aspects. To coordinate between the imam and president, the two along with other key personnel should meet regularly to coordinate and plan activities. The disadvantage of dividing authority in this manner is that it can easily lead to guarded silos and separate agendas instead of a unified managerial structure for implementing the vision, mission and goals of the mosque.

Mega-Mosques

Mega-mosques, which have an average jum'ah attendance of 1000 or more, typically have at least five paid staff positions, including an imam and an executive director. For the mosque with sufficient staff there is no need for an executive committee and president. The staff takes the place of executive committee and the executive director takes the place of the president. If the executive committee continues to exist alongside the staff, the executive committee gets in the way of the staff and causes conflicts of authority. The executive committee thinks it has authority, but as volunteers, it cannot keep up with the full-time staff, and inevitably the staff feels disrespected and slowed down. When the staff can handle the management of the mosque, the need for an executive committee ceases to exist. Of course, there will always be a need for volunteer committees who will work under the staff.

5. *With more American-trained imams, mosques should move toward an imam-centered mosque.*

The bifurcation of authority between the imam and a president is the best solution for the moment but it is not an ideal situation. When the imam and president function separately and each reports directly to the board, a unified managerial structure is difficult, and the opportunities for conflict and tension are multiplied. Thus, it is better if the imam is both the religious and administrative leader.[10]

This does not mean that the imam should become entangled in all the minute details of administrating the mosque. An executive director should be appointed to handle those details. The imam should not do the job of the executive director, but the executive director should report to the imam. The imam should remain primarily the Islamic scholar, preacher and counsellor, but a unified managerial structure is best served by one person who is the leader of the staff. The person best fitted to be the head is the imam because when he sits on the minbar (which is like a throne) he speaks with the moral authority of Islam, and he is thus better able to convey the vision of the mosque, to promote programs, and to mobilize attendees to become involved.

While the imam is not first a manager, he must learn enough managerial skills to supervise the staff. The imam becomes like a CEO who is not involved in the day-to-day workings of the

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[10] See Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership Second Edition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

organization but focuses on messaging and supervising to ensure that all parts of the organization are working towards a common vision, mission and goals.

Conclusion

Today, mosques in America have numerous indicators of health and vitality. However, because American mosques are still relatively young and still in their formative stage of development, mosque organizational structures are largely on shaky grounds. There is much to improve in terms of distinguishing the roles of the mosque board and executive committee, projecting mosque leadership, and effectively using the full-time imam. It is my hope that the recommendations in this paper will contribute towards beginning a dialogue between researchers and mosque leaders of how American mosques can be strengthened.

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