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In last month's reflection, we heard about the important role that faith communities can play in people's lives. As everything opens up, people who use our services are exploring new options and faith communities are open to new possibilities for access and inclusion. In this Reflection, I will share a story of a time I stepped outside of my comfort zone to support someone in their faith journey.

Mo and I were chatting at an Our Voices Matter party when he told me he misses going to mosque. He grew up closely connected to the Islamic faith and community life (adherents of Islam are called Muslims) but since his parents passed away, years ago, he has struggled to find a mosque of his own. He listed the reasons he found it difficult to find a mosque: most services are offered in Arabic while Mo speaks Urdu, there are two main branches of Islam so not every mosque is the right fit, many faith communities still have limited accessibility for people using wheelchairs, and Mo wasn't sure how female staff would be able to support him to attend since there are different roles for men and women in mosque.



I offered to help Mo find and establish a connection to a mosque in Ottawa and we started working on a plan together. Mo clarified what he was looking for and I started searching on the internet. Using Google, I found Sunni Urdu-speaking mosques. Street view was helpful to see if mosques had ramps for access. I emailed and called several locations until I narrowed down the search to one that seemed like the best fit. The mosque imam (worship leader) I contacted was eager to connect, so we set a time and date

to visit. I asked one of my Muslim friends to teach me to wear a headscarf properly. I clarified the other modesty guidelines (covered to wrists and ankles) and I felt better prepared for the upcoming visit.

Mo and I met at the mosque in time for him to join noon prayer before our meeting with the imam. Mo guided me and another direct support professional who was with us through etiquette around shoes, head coverings, and which doorways to use. Mo was the expert, so we followed his lead! When we entered the building, Mo immediately rolled into the main worship room and began to pray. Although I am not familiar with Islam, I know what it feels like to connect with God and my own faith community. It was a joy to see Mo participate fully in a space that was obviously meaningful to him.

Once Mo finished praying, we met with the imams, got a tour of the mosque, and asked questions about accessibility. We clarified together how Mo wanted to participate in community life as well as the role our direct support professionals would play in assisting him. We planned for our staff

to gradually reduce support until they were no longer needed. The mosque offered their assistance in various ways. Much of the meeting took place as a conversation in Urdu between Mo and one of the imams. Every few minutes, Mo turned to translate for me in English so I could take notes to share with the rest of his support team afterward.

I learned a lot through this process. Thankfully, Mo was a patient teacher!

Here are some of the things I learned were important if you are helping someone connect with a faith community:

- Get clear information on what the person wants through conversations, their personal plan, their history, or by asking others in their life.
- Ask people who have more experience with this tradition to help you navigate it. Think beyond just the worship service to religious and cultural expectations.
- Make contact before showing up! Introduce yourself and the person you are supporting or let the person you're with take the lead if they are willing.
- Be willing to ask for help and don't be afraid to make mistakes.
- Make sure you're clear on community etiquette and expectations.
- Keep an open mind – come with curiosity rather than judgement.
- Be professional, which includes being on time and bringing a list of good questions. Take notes and communicate clearly to the rest of the team. From the start, plan to fade out staff support when possible.
- Encourage the person you're supporting to take the lead. They are the expert in their own life, faith, and community.

Making the Connection

- If you have time, watch this (7 min) video of Mo telling the story of visiting the mosque together: bit.ly/mosque4mo
- What is one thing that stood out to you from this reflection, or something that you learned from it?
- Have you supported someone in their faith journey before? What was impactful or surprising in your experience? What advice would you have for others?
- ICYMI: The webinar recording of "DSP's – Accompanying People in their Spiritual Journeys" is available to watch at respectability.org/2023/02/aaidd-february-2023-webinar/

