

Dr. Abdulatif Heresha

Profiled by: Usman Mohammed.



Dr. Abdulatif Haresha is a Pediatrician and Family Physician, who has been a very important resource to the Muslim community in Winnipeg for over a decade and half. Since his arrival in Winnipeg in 1995, he has been actively involved in public speaking and conducting Friday prayers at the University of Manitoba, all of the mosques in Winnipeg, various penitentiaries in the city as well as the Health Sciences Centre. We caught up with him recently to get his perspective on his journey so far and reflections on various events and changes in the community. Below is an excerpt of his interview with the Manitoba Muslim.

Q. Could you give us a brief history of your background?

A. I was born in downtown Tripoli, Libya in an old part of town with Ottoman architecture. As you know, Libya was colonized by the Ottoman Empire, and I was raised in Tripoli where I completed all my education. I completed primary, secondary and seven years of medical training, including pre-med. In 1993 I finished one year of internship after completing medical training. Shortly after, I decided to move to Canada, in July 1993. since then I have been here. Interestingly I stayed in Winnipeg all that time. Many people ask me about my decision to stay here and not leave to bigger cities. One of the reasons I stayed was because of my brother, who spent eleven years in Winnipeg, from 1983 until 1993 when he moved back to Libya. I also didn't move because I love this community and still do, I had the opportunity over time to move to other cities after completing further medical training that enabled me to work anywhere in North America and other parts of the world, but I didn't move. I feel that I have a strong attachment to the city and it was largely responsible for keeping me here.

Q. you mentioned your love for this community and I could see the passion and sincerity in your eyes when you talked about not moving from Winnipeg. What is it about Winnipeg and this community that kept you here?

A. We had one united community and it has been the case as far as I can remember, regardless of some minor differences, which was largely overcome. It has been that way since 1993 when I came and got involved in various community activities at the masjid. I avoided any executive roles for a number of reasons at the time. Firstly, I was a medical student and was very busy and I was not fully settled in Winnipeg, having only recently arrived Canada at

the time. Even after I became settled, I did not want any executive role because I was busy with my medical training and doing my residency and felt I could not truly fulfill the responsibilities required of that position. However, I was active, and gave khutbah and was an Imam at the Health Sciences Centre for 5 years and I was going weekly to the penitentiary in 2001. I felt that the community gave me a lot of support and encouragement that enabled me to participate and felt like giving something back. The community gave me a lot of opportunities to serve them, and I felt that staying in it was a way of giving back. Also majority of the people I met and worked with were good to me and cooperative, they reached out even if they weren't here for long because of the dynamics of pursuing academic and economic opportunities elsewhere. I started out as family physician. I had the opportunity to move to the United States after I got the license to practice there, but turned it down. One of my colleagues advised me not to move. At the time I had just got married in 1996 and he told me that social life here was much better. So I decided to stay here and practice family medicine. I worked as a family physician for 2 years at the McGregor Medical Centre. Later on I decided to do more training and specialize and become a Pediatrician as well as a full license family physician since 2006, for almost 5 years now.

Q. How and what inspired you to acquire the Islamic knowledge that enabled you serve the community in a variety of ways since you arrived in Winnipeg?

A. Thank you, this is a very good question, and I have been asked this question many times. I did study with scholars in Libya for a number of years, particularly a scholar called Abdulatif Al-Shuwaish, we have the same first name. To be honest, I don't think I learnt a lot on my own. However I learnt much about character from this scholar. He had health problems and was often sick, yet he would come and give the lessons in spite of his ill health. He was also an old man, and I was touched by his commitment and it moved me greatly and inspired to seek knowledge and actively use it. For example, he was leading night prayers for 3 hours. Many people could not keep up and would sit, but he stood in spite of his health. He was sick but so strong and you could see the light from his face because of his wonderful character. Although I learnt some fiqh, hadith and tafseer in the four years that I was with him, but I feel that all that is little in comparison to what I learnt from his character. I advise my respected brothers and sisters of all ages, to seek knowledge and start at anytime. One of the Shafeeh scholars Ibn Battor, started seeking knowledge in his forties. He didn't know anything and started from scratch. He slowly acquired the knowledge and became one of the leading scholars in that school of thought. So people should not use age as an excuse but recognize we are here to gain knowledge and strive to be among the inheritors of the prophets. The prophets did not leave behind money or material wealth; they left us knowledge, for it is truly what elevates us. Even in worldly matters knowledge raises your status, so what about knowledge that relates to Allah, which obviously should be taken seriously and given priority. So I studied using tapes from the scholars and also with small books. I started learning slowly because the knowledge out there is great, like a sea. It is impossible to drink a large volume of water at once, but slowly, one spoon at a time; you can accumulate a great deal of it. So I started with the small books that addressed the basics or Usul or fundamentals and over time I had acquired enough of the foundation to begin my intellectual encounters with the more advanced topics. These fundamentals enabled me understand and gain insights into how the scholars were able to extract knowledge from the various sources of Islamic jurisprudence. These approach or method enabled me to moderately pursue knowledge and avoid excess and approach it in the right way. So in addition to

reading the Quran and Sunnah, I studied tapes of scholars who had learnt ways to extract wisdom from these primary sources. I continued to do this throughout my medical training in Libya and slowly acquired knowledge over many years of dedicated study. It was not easy but I knew and appreciated the value and Allah guided and sustained my interest in this endeavor.

Q. How were you able to cope with the rigorous demands of medical school whilst searching for knowledge and remaining active in the community?

A. You see, Subhanallah that's the thing. If somebody, Alhamdulillah, when the light of Eeman comes to your heart, this is the truth, I have to admit that. I remember towards the end of 1986, a man came to me and told me I have some intellectual ability, which Allah has blessed me with. He said that I should use that ability to do the things that Allah SWT will be pleased with. I was moved by this advice, and since then, Subhanallah I started to seek knowledge, I barely missed any congregational prayers, which is even better. I love Fajr prayer, please if you want to be a good Muslim, don't miss Fajr. I am not saying Fajr at home, we don't know this. Praying Fajr at home is not known, its not in the dictionary of the first three generations of our pious predecessors. The best generation of Muslims according to our prophet, always prayed Fajr in congregation in the House of God. When we desert it, we lose a part of our identity as Muslims. Praying Fajr in congregation helped me keep my identity as a Muslim and made it easy for me to pass on that identity to my children by teaching them Islam, Qur'an and Deen. I am not saying that I haven't lost some parts of that heritage, but that part that I retained is very important. Generally I believe that if we stay connected with the community, it will help preserve a lot of your heritage and Islamic identity as opposed to being cut off from it. Yes, to a degree we will lose a part of it, but the basic things like Taoheed, Eeman, pure spirit will be largely intact. All these result from attachment to the House of God. I believe that this is very important to people who care about maintaining their Eeman, because you will be constantly renewing your faith as you are in hospitality with Allah. So since my encounter with that man, I started studying Fiqh, Tafseer and Sunnah along with the Sheikh and on my own. I loved learning, and started teaching members of my family. Alhamdulillah my sisters are all grown up and married but they still remember many of the Hadeeth that I taught them. Unfortunately I had to leave, this is one of my greatest regrets. They were young at that time when I left and had learnt a lot. This is something we should do, we should teach our families and share our knowledge with them. As we concern ourselves with other worldly things, we should have concern and time for Allah SWT and make time to share our knowledge of deen with our families and people we are responsible for because we will be questioned about this on the day of resurrection. Teach them about Allah and His creation in a respectful way, appealing and good way, it is very important.

Q. I could hear some regret in your voice when you talked about the time that you had to leave your family and stop those lessons. Who was able to fill that void, and what advise do you have for Muslims who encounter that situation of find ways to mitigate that loss?

A. Nobody. That is so sad. We could have found ways to do it over the phone or fax, but we didn't. Alhamdulillah, now with email and face book and other new technological applications that make it easier to transmit knowledge across great distances. We should use technology to serve and preserve our deen and do Da'wah. This is something that is important. However I continued to do that here. Basically I learnt something; I learnt that we all as human

beings make mistakes. The problem is not making mistakes or to forget, the problem is to continue making those mistakes or justify those mistakes in your mind, when it is clear that it is wrong. So Eeman or Hidayah particularly with regard to doing acts of worship or Ibaadah, Zakah, any acts of worship, you do it in the light of Allah SWT, and you hope in the reward from Allah and nothing else. If you are avoiding Mawsiyah or doing Taubah, you are doing it also in the light of Allah SWT, the light you should get by fearing the wrath of Allah. That is something we should have. So I learnt that whatever you know, you should share it. Just as if you spend your wealth in the way of God, it will never ever diminish, because it is sadaqah. So if you give knowledge, Allah will give you knowledge and then He will help you practice that knowledge.

Q. I would like your thoughts on the community and the challenges you see our community facing since the time you first arrived?

A. since my time here, I have seen many executives and presidents pass through. Maybe seven or more, different phases of our community development. I feel there are many factors responsible for the challenges facing our community and why we don't see the sort of productivity our faith demands from us as a community. It was our hope that at this point our community would have produced at least twenty scholars, well versed in the religious sciences. Some say it is too much because our community is small. However I think it is not beyond a community with 15,000 members. We could have actually done much more than that. Alhamdulillah, we were hoping for a bigger masjid, we got the land and all that and accomplished that goal. It was a great achievement with a lot of hard work and commitment from some members of our community, some have passed away, may Allah have mercy on them, and some are still alive, may Allah reward them for their effort. In spite of that, we were hoping for more achievements. I think that if we build our capacity and have the feeling and responsibility of the deen of Allah SWT, if we have the feeling and spirit, God willing, we will be able to achieve more. I advise that people who have the ability and know they have the vision and expertise to move our community forward, I believe they should step forward and do it. This is very important. Insha Allah with the help of every member of our community, we will achieve even more than what we hoped for.

Q. What are some of your hopes and aspirations for our community ten, twenty years from now?

A. I want this community to be stronger, one heart and one hand. I can't imagine how that can not be the case, when our Lord is one, our deen is one, our intention is one, our goal is one and our book is one and yet, we don't have one heart, one hand. I hope that our community can achieve more than what we have achieved. Building a masjid is fine, it is a very good achievement, however, an equally important or perhaps more important achievement will be to build people, leaders to lead our community. Building people is more important or more valuable, because when you build people, you build a community, you strengthen that community. If we are weak, we don't love each other, we don't care for and respect each other, we don't have the deen of Allah and the light of faith, we don't have the brotherhood, which is important in Islam. When the Prophet came to Medina to build a society, the first thing he built masjid, then brotherhood, then constitution and then army. But he built the masjid first and then the people who will congregate in the masjid. He built a strong bond between the members of the community, brotherhood and sisterhood, so great, never before seen in human history. We know the story of Saeed Ibn Rabbiah and Abdurrahman Ibn Auf, and how he offered him half of everything he owned in the spirit of brotherhood. This is the kind of

brotherhood that we need. We don't need brothers and sisters who have no respect for one another, we need the kind who can forgive others and work for the betterment of our community. Lets put aside our differences and work towards benefiting our community, that is very important. ***Without building people and showing our youth good examples in our gathering, our executive meetings, our elections, how can we convince them about how beautiful our religion is.*** Islam is more importantly, leading by example, not how much knowledge you have, but how much you applied so people can benefit from it. I am hoping that this community can have one hand and one heart, and to forgive each other for the betterment of our community. I am hoping we can build a bigger and better school, to expand study circles and increase knowledge. To have bigger and better camps for youth and families all year round. Finally it is my hope that we build a big library, something similar to the Millennium library in downtown, which will be devoted to knowledge and open to members of the public. This is something I will be willing to support financially and totally commit to in the future, when we reach that point.