



Dr. Ghassan Joundi, Past President of the Manitoba Islamic Association (MIA)

Interviewed by: Idris Elbakri*

The Manitoba Muslim (MM), four issues ago, introduced the feature of interviews with community leaders. The motivation was to promote a culture of openness and accountability. Previous interviews have generated their share of controversy and strong reactions. The editors of the MM welcome readers' feedback and comments on this feature in the form of letters to the editor.

When I first approached Dr. Joundi for an interview, I sensed some reluctance. In the end, he agreed and the interview was conducted over delicious fruit salad, cake and tea at his home. I was very grateful that he made the time for it. To accommodate his schedule, we had to meet at 10 PM and continued our discussion past midnight. He agreed to the interview with the same terms under which prior interviews were conducted which was that the MM maintained the freedom to publish what he said (i.e., no retractions) and he got to check for whether I accurately quoted him or not, but he could not ask for any omissions.

My discussion with Dr. Joundi was very interesting. His words in the interview were carefully chosen and very diplomatic. Off the record, however, he was more animated and shared with me ideas, frustrations and facts about the current affairs of our flagship organization, the Manitoba Islamic Association (MIA) that I promised not to publish. I hope he chooses to make them public at a time that he deems appropriate. The text of the interview follows.

MM: Many of us know you as Dr. Joundi, the President of MIA and a familiar face at Friday prayers and Eid. Can you tell us more about yourself?

GJ: My name is Mohammad Ghassan Joundi. I was born in Beirut, Lebanon in the year...mmm. Let's not mention the year! My father was a shariah court judge. I pursued my studies, including medical school, in Beirut. I then moved to the U.S. where I lived for 5 years and did a fellowship in pathology and dermatopathology. I came to Canada in 1981, first to Montreal where I did my residency in dermatology. I got married soon afterwards in the summer of 1981. My sons, Mokhtar and Raed were born in Montreal. We moved to Winnipeg in 1986 and my daughter, Talia, was born here.

MM: How did you first get involved in the Muslim community?

GJ: Before moving here, I spent 1 month in Winnipeg and people I met in the mosque helped convince me to move here. I was attracted by the fact that there was a mosque and a Muslim community in Winnipeg.

MM: How does the community compare now with what you experienced in 1986?

GJ: We have seen tremendous growth, especially in the past few years. Our diversity here is unique. It is a microcosm of the Muslim world. When I first came, I was mostly in contact with young families. Now these young families are older and their children have grown up. This has changed the face of the community. The kids who were born and grew up here provide a different perspective and outlook.

MM: So, how did you become active in MIA?

GJ: A couple of years after moving here I became the Vice President of MIA. One always tries to look for ways to contribute and help out. I served as vice president for two years and then served on various committees, such as the land committee and the fundraising committee. In 2001, I became MIA President.

MM: I know from trying to arrange this interview how busy you are, and that your role is quite demanding. How does your family handle your community involvement?

GJ: My family is always supportive, but when one is busy with work and community, the family misses one's presence. I promised on many occasions that I would limit my involvement but could not fulfill my promise due to the circumstances. I must say that my family has been very patient with me.

MM: You described earlier the tremendous growth in the community. What do you see to be MIA's role and mission today?

GJ: MIA is here to serve the community and accommodate each of its members. This is not easy because of our diversity, which however, is a blessing in and of itself. The role of MIA is to try to bring Muslims together, to have a common platform and to serve the various religious, spiritual, educational and social needs.

MM: Does MIA fulfill this role?

GJ: We try. There are shortcomings and as our community grows, we have to stop and analyze the present situation and see how we can improve and do better. MIA has to keep pace with changes in the community such as the influx of immigrants and coming of age of our youth.

MM: Can you give us examples of how MIA is dealing with the influx of immigrants and the youth?

GJ: MIA tries to be welcoming to all. The mosque is the main place for interaction. The community center and gym provide the youth with access and opportunities for various activities. We also have educational programs like Quran instruction and the weekend school and many halaqa's [learning circles].

MM: An often-repeated mantra is that MIA is an umbrella organization for the Muslim community. Is this still true?

GJ: We hope so. We need an organization that is a reference point for the community, especially now that we have a full-time Imam. Many organizations have sprung up over the past decade. Some are more specialized in their services, but MIA encompasses many aspects, if not all.

MM: You have served as President for eight years. How do you rate the performance of the current MIA executive committee?

GJ: Alhamdulillah, all people who served as MIA executives throughout the years have been committed and worked hard in their various capacities. However, sometimes their performance is limited by their affiliations and networks.

MM: To be more specific, I have heard that the executives barely meet or have quorum?

GJ: I will say one thing. Previous executives used to meet more often than the current one. We use email, but it is not a substitute for face-to-face meetings.

MM: I heard that some MIA officials get upset if they are called at home and are not generally very approachable. Is that true?

GJ: I have not heard. I don't get upset. I don't know about others. Sometimes people don't respect the privacy of the MIA officials. We are diverse and each person interacts based on his or her background and experience.

MM: The first Vice President left in February. According to the MIA constitution, an election should have been held to replace him. Why has that not happened?

GJ: A first Vice President has to be elected. When he left he was not totally certain that his move was final. He still participates by email. The thought was to call for early elections for the whole executive. There was no point in calling for elections for just the VP and then shortly thereafter call a regular election. That dragged on a bit. Circumstances were not favorable to having a general body meeting and elections, especially with Ramadan coming up. We will have elections in November.

MM: So, is he still a member of the executive and does he participate in decision making?

GJ: He voices his opinion. For example, he used to coordinate the MIA scholarships and has been in touch to try to move this along.

MM: You mentioned elections. The elections procedure is very inefficient. Last time the elections ran late into the night. Will that be changed?

GJ: The current MIA constitution has shortcomings, including the elections procedure. It was designed for a smaller, less diverse community. A committee to revamp the constitution was formed.

MM: What is the status of the constitution committee?

GJ: There is a draft constitution and bylaws, but it is at a standstill.

MM: Because?

GJ: Lots of causes.

MM: Give me two.

GJ: There was some disagreement between the constitution committee and the executives. We tried to get it going again but it has not happened.

MM: The executives do not support the draft constitution?

GJ: Everybody is entitled to his/her own opinion. The executives sent back the draft to the constitution committee with comments but communications came to a halt.

MM: What were the executives' concerns?

GJ: There were a few. I do not recall the details.

MM: Does the MIA have a conflict of interest policy for its elected officials, Imam and staff?

GJ: That is something the constitution has to address. Perhaps this is one of the shortcomings of the current constitution. We deal with it now on an individual basis.

MM: Are there examples of how you dealt with conflicts of interest?

GJ: It is not desirable for MIA executives to hold office concurrently in another organization or to take advantage of their MIA position in any shape or form. The same applies to staff.

MM: Winnipeg has an interesting history with the position of the Imam. How do you see the role of the Imam given the changes and growth in the community?

GJ: In a non-Muslim environment, the role of the Imam is multifaceted. He has to deal with community members and the non-Muslim community. He has a role in da'wah, religious affairs, youth, education, social and family counseling, etc...

MM: Is this role being fulfilled?

GJ: Sh. Hosni Azzabi is the third appointed Imam. He has done a lot of good work in bringing the community together. To his credit, most community members are pleased and comfortable with him being the Imam.

MM: Does the Imam undergo any performance review? Is a review even appropriate?

GJ: Well, who is going to do such a review? Feedback is essential. One could have an Imam committee that works with the Imam and brings improvement and change, if needed.

MM: The MIA owns and operates the community's most valuable real estate asset, the Grand Mosque on Waverley. Damage is already visible in the building. What are the current plans for its maintenance and operation?

GJ: We try to make the centre available. With this availability comes responsibility. Whenever there is an activity, someone is designated as responsible for whatever happens. We are trying now to establish a security system, possibly with the assistance of a government grant.

MM: Do you have maintenance staff?

GJ: There used to be a maintenance committee but now it's defunct. There is cleaning staff and he provides some maintenance. Volunteers also help when needed. Jazahum Allah khairan.

MM: What are the plans for the mosque on Hazelwood?

GJ: It will remain a mosque, insha Allah. It has undergone many renovations recently.

MM: Does it make sense to have two Friday prayers, at Hazelwood and Waverley, with the two mosques only 10 minutes apart?

GJ: This was an issue but it seems people who are close to the Hazelwood mosque want to keep Friday prayer there. The mosque is of course also open for the 5 daily prayers.

MM: Does MIA coordinate the Friday khutba at Hazelwood?

GJ: There is an MIA committee for the Hazelwood mosque.

MM: There are recent efforts to establish the Islamic Council of Manitoba. Where does MIA stand on this?

GJ: MIA has participated in that effort. There are a number of Islamic organizations and the council would have a coordinating role between those different organizations and their various activities.

MM: So MIA supports the establishment of the Islamic Council of Manitoba?

GJ: Yes. However, MIA is still the umbrella organization. What differentiates the MIA is that it represents the community as a whole and its officials are elected. It also has to respond to the community and its membership.

MM: What is the financial status of MIA?

GJ: Unfortunately, there is no sustainable investment to support the two mosques. There are a lot of financial obligations and we cannot keep depending on donations. Alhamdulillah the community is generous and the proof is in the construction of the Grand Mosque and community centre. The need is ongoing and other sources should be made available.

MM: Roughly, what are the monthly expenses?

GJ: On average about \$12K per month.

MM: How is the relationship between the executives and the MIA trustees?

GJ: Again that brings up the constitution. The relationship is not exemplary to say the least. When they come up with a decision without consulting with the executives, the latter have to deal with it, its consequences and operating cost.

MM: Can you give an example?

GJ: The kitchen, coat and shoe racks are the talk of the community. We were not consulted on the cost and now have to deal with community concerns. I am not quite certain that we have the license to operate the kitchen. The trustees should answer to the community and the executives are representatives of the community. We should work in close consultation.

MM: How is the MIA relationship with the Winnipeg Central Mosque?

GJ: It is good. There are no issues. We coordinate certain activities. WCM plays a constructive role in the downtown area and fulfills a big need.

MM: MIA turns 40 this year. Any plans to commemorate the occasion?

GJ: It has been talked about. There are no plans so far. Activities to commemorate the occasion could take place.

MM: Will you run for President again?

GJ: No. Alhamdulillah, it was an enriching experience. I do appreciate all the brothers and sisters I worked with, but it's time for a change.

MM: Do you have anyone in mind?

GJ: It's an election process. The community should have some knowledge and idea of whom they are voting for. The election process currently lacks that.

MM: Any last words?

GJ: I always hear from some Muslims who lived here and have moved on that this community is unique in its cohesiveness, unity and progressiveness.

The blessed month of Ramadan is upon us. We welcome the blessed month and would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the MIA executives to wish everyone a blessed Ramadan. Ramadan Mubarak and may Allah (SWT) accept our

prayers and fasting and good deeds. Let's try to maximize our benefit from the countless blessings of the month.

** Idris Elbakri is the deputy editor of the Manitoba Muslim.*