

Shaikh Ismael Mukhtar

President of the MIA



By Idris Elbakri

Editor's note: This is the second installment of a new feature introduced in the Manitoba Muslim (MM): interviews with community leaders. The purpose of the interviews is to bring forth community concerns and give the interviewees an opportunity to respond to them. Since this issue coincides with the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Manitoba Muslim, the editorial board decided that, in all fairness, its own leadership should be questioned about its decision making, policies and achievements. The same standards were applied to this interview with the chair of the editorial board, Shaikh Ismael Mukhtar, as before. He did not pre-screen the questions and he could not interfere in the editing and publishing of his responses.

Q: Can we start by having you give us a brief history of the MM and your involvement in it?

A: Since I moved to Winnipeg and even from before, the community has struggled to have a regular newsletter. There were sporadic publications. A couple of publications lasted longer. The *Prairie Crescent* lasted over a year and *Al-Ansar* over two years. The *Al-Ansar* stopped when brother Ayub Hamid, the editor, left Winnipeg. Following that there was a vacuum for a period of time during which I met brother Basil Elmayergi and learned from him that he published a newsletter for an organization. I then asked him if he would be willing to lend his expertise and assist in publishing a newsletter for the Muslim community. He readily agreed. I volunteered to be a liaison and to help in collecting material. Basil was involved in the first couple of issues and then had to pull out due to other commitments. The choice for me at that point was to either assume the chair position or to let the MM be discontinued. With a team effort, it has continued.

Q: Given that it was and is a struggle to publish, why is it important to have the MM?

A: The MM is a means of keeping the community connected and informed of the different activities that takes place. It is also a forum for exchanging ideas, voicing concerns and discussing issues.

Q: Do you think it fulfills this purpose?

A: Yes to a certain extent, but not fully. The MM is a good resource for understanding the history of the community over the last 10 years.

Q: Is the MM a newsletter or a magazine?

A: Now it is a magazine.

Q: Is the e-newsletter part of MM?

A: Yes it is an extension. Since MM is published bi-monthly, the e-newsletter was primarily created to provide timely announcements. Its main purpose is to publicize to the community upcoming events and special announcements. It is sent on average every two weeks. Right now it reaches about a thousand e-mails. We hope to increase our e-mail database to include every e-mail in the community.

Q: Let's talk about the editorial board. Does anyone on the editorial board have a background in journalism?

A: No one has a background in journalism. We are volunteers. As I mentioned, it has been a struggle to have a regular newsletter. I, for example, first just wanted to help in the establishment of MM, but ended up becoming the chair when I felt that it would otherwise stop. Currently, we have a good mix of volunteers who have experience with graphics, editing, writing, interviews, etc. Over the years, we have learned a lot and hope to have in the future people with more expertise. We are open for people with talent to contribute.

Q: Is membership in the editorial board open or by invitation?

A: Initially the board was formed from some volunteers who came together with the approval of the MIA executive committee. Subsequently, vacancies were filled by selections made by the remaining members of the board. The number of members of the editorial board has increased. When we started, we were all males. We felt we should have some sisters and some youth, so we recruited some. Now we have youth, seniors, males and females.

Q: How much does the MM cost to publish?

A: I don't have the exact figures, but approximately, it costs \$6000 to publish it. Four hundred (400) copies are published every second month except for the Eid issues, when 1000 copies are printed. Financially, the MM does not usually break even. We have slowly increased revenue through business advertising. Initially we had almost zero revenues to cover cost. Now we cover 70-80% of cost. We hope to improve that and even make it profitable in the future.

Q: So it costs MIA and the community money to publish this magazine. Do people actually read it? Is it worth it?

A: I think they do read it. Readership has increased.

Q: How do you know that?

A: From comments and feedback. People expect it. It is now a household name. Businesses often use it as their first place to advertise and announce their business. However, I don't have specific statistics.

Q: have you ever tried to get statistics?

A: No.

Q: Can you explain the relationship between the MM and the MIA Executives?

A: MM is a publication of MIA. The MM editorial board is a permanent standing committee of MIA that provides a service to the community. MM board functions independently. MIA executives have a representative on the editorial board, but the latter functions autonomously in terms of its publishing decisions.

Q: Does it make sense for an MIA committee to not take direction from the MIA leaders?

A: It does take direction from MIA. By "independent" I mean that the editorial board would publish, in principle, articles even if disapproved by the MIA executives, such as articles that are critical of them or of the decision they make. The only time we would not publish a critical article is if it used obviously false statements or inappropriate language. Take the CBC for example. It is funded by the Canadian government but can publish material critical of

the government. The MIA executives do have a say, but the editorial board follows established policies that enable it to run independently.

Q: Can you give an example of how the executives have a say?

A: Through their liaison in the editorial board.

Q: But how do they exert influence?

A: There have not been instances where the executives saw the need to intervene. Most of them have been supportive. There were occasions when there were differences of opinions regarding certain articles that were published, but to MIA executives' credit, they never tried to intervene in a forceful way.

Q: Do the MIA executives screen the MM prior to publication?

A: No, but their liaison has access to drafts and if he feels something needs to be brought to the attention of the executives, then he can do so.

Q: How do you decide what is publishable and what is not?

A: Everything can be published as long as it does not contradict established fundamental Islamic principles, does not use inappropriate language and does not violate Canadian laws. The MM is an Islamic magazine bounded by Canadian law.

Q. Are you selective in what you publish in terms of community events and the people you profile?

A: The board does its best to announce all community events it is aware of. However, the board is made up of volunteers; we can only publish what we know. The board does send a request through the e-newsletter asking community members to send to the MM their announcements, events etc. In terms of profiles, the board - in their meeting - decide whom to profile. They consider community service, accomplishments and seniority. Over the last ten years the MM profiled close to 40 members of the community, with greater emphasis to early founders. There were a few whom we approached for profile, but they declined.

Q: Can you give examples of articles that were rejected for publication?

A: Not very many. One case was an article that was cut and paste from a book. We rejected it and asked the author to either present it as a book review or use quotes from the book and reference them. Another article discussed a hot political issue and we felt it bordered on violating hate speech laws, so we rejected it.

Q: You recently published an interview with the MIA board of trustees in which they were very critical of the MIA executives. Is this proper use of the MM pages?

A: The purpose of the interview was to bring community concerns to the MIA trustees in relations to the capital projects. In the course of the interview they expressed frustrations with the MIA executives. This does not mean that we agree with these statements, but MM is an open forum, we didn't see any ground for rejecting it, so we published the comments unedited.

Q: Most criticism expressed in the MM ends up being directed at the MIA and its executives. Isn't this one-sided and unfair?

A: I do not agree with this statement. The MM is an open forum to all, including the executives. In fact, part of our agreement with the MIA executives is that the MIA President's Message gets top priority for publication. However, with all of their many commitments, the executives have not been consistent in submitting a message regularly. Further, MIA General Body meeting reports are also given higher priority. MM is an open forum. We do not solicit articles critical of the MIA. We publish what we receive. MIA Executives have publishing priority, but they have not been using it effectively because of their many other commitments.

Q: Many members of our community are recent and may not be able to write or read well in English. Shouldn't the MM have a section in Arabic or Urdu or some other language?

A: It's an idea we have not considered. If there is interest and we have resources, we can consider it. The *Prairie Crescent* was published in both Arabic and English. We are open to new ideas and suggestions. If there is a need and we have the resources, personally I am open to the idea.

Q: The MM has been published for 10 years. If it ceases to be published now, will anyone notice?

A: Yes. MM has been a fixture of the community, particularly of Eid gatherings for many years. It has become an important source of information for the community.

Q: Would anyone care?

A: Some would care.

Q: How many?

A: I couldn't tell you a number. To me it would be something of concern for the MM to stop. It is something we have built over 10 years. Being consistent is an Islamic virtue. Any human effort can come to an end. My hope is that we continue to improve it, bring new blood and new ideas and take it to a higher level to continue to serve our community in better ways.

Q: How would you like to see the MM in 5-10 years?

A: I would like to see more people involved in the MM. Right now, almost half of the editorial board is made of the 1st generation. I would like to see more. They are our future leaders. I also want the MM to generate more revenue to sustain itself and become profitable. I would like to see us have more volunteers and possibly full time staff. With few volunteers right now, we cannot cover many of the events of the community. I hope we can generate revenue to have paid field staff to better cover and represent the community.

Q: Are you going to stay on as Chair?

A: I came to the editorial board by accident. I intended to be a facilitator but ended up the Chair. I recently asked the editorial board to be relieved of my duties as Chair, but I was asked to stay. Personally, I would like to see change and new blood to take the MM to new frontiers.

Q: So are you or are you not stepping down?

A: For now I am still the Chair. The editorial board is a well-functioning team and I do not want to disrupt it. I cordially asked the editorial board to find a replacement for me, but they indicated that this is not the best time for that. Personally, I am considering my options and I think it would be healthy to have change.

Q: When can we expect an edition of the MM without spelling mistakes?

A: Hopefully when we have more volunteers or staff. Over the last couple of years, errors have significantly decreased. We are getting better. We do our best to edit once and twice but it's human nature to miss one thing here, one thing there.

Q: Any closing statements?

A: One thing that makes me proud is that the MM is a team effort. Everyone on the editorial board does something. One person is dedicated to advertising, one for graphics, one for editing, e-newsletter, community profile, etc. it's a team effort. If it were a one-person effort, it would not last for even one year. We have strong team spirit. This makes me proud to be part of it.