

ENGAGING THE *JIHAD AGAINST POVERTY*: FROM CHARITY TO SOLIDARITY

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The Claremont Main Road Mosque (CMRM) was established in 1854 and is the sixth oldest mosque in South Africa. The mosque, which is one of close to 500 mosques that dots the South African landscape, is located in the suburb of Claremont, Cape Town, and has played a prominent role in the anti-Apartheid struggle during the 1980s. This legacy continues to define the ethical framework of CMRM as socially responsive in the post-Apartheid period. The CMRM congregation is predominantly middle class; predominantly 'coloured and Indian', many of whose ancestors were from Claremont and social activists from all over South Africa who currently reside in Cape Town. In the post-Apartheid period the congregation has expanded to include an increasing number of White and African local and immigrant Muslims.

Since the onset of a non-racial and democratic South Africa in 1994 the mosque, along with many other religious and civil society organizations, have struggled to make the shift from a theology of resistance to that of reconstruction. One of the chief ways in which CMRM has sought to embrace its new role is to try to make a modest contribution to mitigating South Africa's socio-economic inequalities i.e. the stark disparities and widening gaps between the rich and the poor. This programme was presumptuously called *Jihad (struggle) Against Poverty* and in 2010 was adopted as one of five key dimensions of CMRM's mission. The other four dimensions of CMRM's mission includes:

- ★★ Gender Justice
- ★★ Interfaith Solidarity
- ★★ Youth Empowerment and
- ★★ Environmental Justice

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In defining its *Jihad Against Poverty* mission CMRM advocates the view that poverty alleviation is not the sole responsibility of economists or public officials, but that it is an integral part of what it means to be an engaged and conscientious person of faith. CMRM furthermore believes that poverty is not limited to a lack of food or drink. It defined poverty more broadly as encompassing the lack of all basic human needs, such as clean water, nutrition, sanitation, health care, education, clothing and shelter. Against this backdrop, CMRM's *Jihad Against Poverty* mission seeks to engage in and build sustainable social justice programmes through their involvement in some of the following activities:

- Literacy projects
- Sanitation campaigns in informal settlements
- Social justice campaigns for impoverished and marginalized communities
- Food and blanket distributions to needy communities
- Twinning relationships with township mosque communities
- Supporting NGO's who campaign for social justice causes

The CMRM mission aspires to move beyond sincere acts of charity to include genuine expressions of social and human solidarity. In the remainder of this paper I would like to briefly reference two projects started at the mosque to illustrate how *the Jihad Against Poverty* can take different forms and make modest but meaningful contributions towards the ongoing post-Apartheid struggle for social justice.

The Sunshine Project

In 2010 CMRM launched the Sunshine Project to support a children's home in Nyanga. The Xhosa name of the orphanage is *Emasithandane* meaning "a place where we love each other." *Emasithandane* has been around for three decades and is home to 50 children aged between 4 months and 17 years. Some of these children are HIV/AIDS orphans and include several siblings.

Members of the CMRM congregation visited the orphanage a few times in order to develop a relationship with the children and staff and also to establish their needs. During the fasting month of Ramadan 2010 and in a spirit of compassion and solidarity, CMRM

decided to do something in which the orphans could share in the warmth and affection that characterises the celebratory end of Ramadan known as *'Id al-Fitr*. They thus identified each orphan by name, gender and age, and asked the congregation to volunteer to fill up a personalised box of items, which included things such as underwear, clothing, toiletries, books, stationery and a toy or game for each of the children. Through this methodology congregants were encouraged to symbolically “adopt” a child for the celebratory day of *'Id* and, more significantly, not only make a charitable donation but to visit the orphanage and spend a few hours getting to know the child and hand over their gifts.

During the past six years the congregation has led several ‘solidarity’ visits to the orphanage, taking along some of the mosque youth and different members of its congregation each time. During one such visit the mosque was able to get a group of student doctors to donate much needed first aid equipment, and to dispense some useful medical advice to the staff on how to care for the babies, infants and children in emergency situations. These solidarity visits have been particularly useful for the CMRM congregation since they were afforded the rare opportunity of witnessing poverty at first hand, and interact with orphans and young people from disadvantaged communities. Such an approach to social responsibility programmes is consonant with the teachings of all faiths which constantly reminds the conscientious believer that acts of generosity should not only encompass monetary gifts of alms and charity but should also encompass every act of kindness and sharing of one’s time, knowledge and skills to assist and empower others.

The Sunshine Project thus provides the CMRM congregation with the opportunity of not only making one day in the life of an orphan a joyous day, but tries to nurture and sustain loving relationships that add a sense of love and care to their otherwise impoverished lives. The Sunshine Project furthermore provides the CMRM congregation with opportunities for greater social interaction that can break down stubborn racial and class barriers between our various communities.

Some young CMRM members were so inspired the first time they visited the orphanage that they have independently run a successful tutoring project for the children of Emasi every Saturday during the school term at the Zolani Community Centre in Nyanga. Approximately 25 children from the ages of 7-16 attend the classes. The aim of the programme is to provide mentorship and assistance with Mathematics and other subjects.

The Leeuwenkuil Farmworkers Solidarity Programme

The second initiative that I would like to reference in the *Jihad Against Poverty* Programme is CMRM's solidarity efforts with farmworkers. Farmworkers are among the poorest and most exploited in post-Apartheid South Africa. During 2012, farmworkers outside of Cape Town engaged in unprecedented wildcat strikes that shook the exploitative yet lucrative fruit and vegetable industry in the Western Cape Province. In order to inform its congregants about the reasons for the strike and the appalling conditions under which farmworkers were forced to live and subsist, CMRM invited Mercia Andrews, director of the Trust for Community Outreach & Education (TCOE), to address its Friday congregational service on the living and work conditions of farmworkers. Thus began a successful partnership, between CMRM, TCOE and the farmworkers trade union, CSAAWU¹, to support the farming communities of Robertson as well as the communities of three neighbouring farms in the Western Cape winelands, namely Leeuwenkuil, Karringmelkvlei and Knollefontein farms in Agter Paarl. The latter is a community of about 200 adults and 50 children who live in kraals of small houses on huge wine farms. This initiative has since become one of the mosque's flagship *Jihad Against Poverty* programmes.

CMRM's support to these communities of farmworkers started off four years ago with modest charitable contributions of food hampers and blankets. Initially, these were mainly at celebratory occasions such as `Id's and Christmas. The mosque then started to arrange for the three farming communities in Agter Paarl to get together with CMRM congregants for Family Days on Leeuwenkuil Farm, three or four times a year. The main

¹ Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural & Allied Workers Union

purpose of these Family Day events is not only to provide an opportunity for the congregation to spend some quality time in getting to know the farmworkers and their children, but also to help in strengthening their farmworkers union, CSAAWU. CMRM has encouraged farmworkers to join the union, to become organised, so that they can strengthen their collective voice. In 2013 two CMRM members sponsored two bicycles to CSAAWU for use by farmworker shop-stewards in the area who have to walk great distances to recruit and get workers organized in their union.

Over the past four years in partnership with the TCOE & CSAAWU, CMRM has significantly consolidated its support to these farming communities. The Family Days at Leeuwenkuil are organized around planned literacy activities for the children and sports and games for everyone. These have included story reading, puppet shows, arts and crafts and their favourite games of soccer & tug of war. In 2014, CMRM congregants and friends assisted farmworkers and the Mawubuye Land Rights Movement to dig the first trenches towards establishing an organic farming project in the area where farmworkers lived. Mawubuye also ran workshops with the community on agro-ecology and sustainable farming. They have since had successful yields of spinach, potatoes, pumpkins, beetroot and beans. All of these were shared with each household in the compound as well as neighbouring farmworkers.

In 2014, CMRM further developed their relationship with farmworkers by establishing the Leeuwenkuil farm's first library. CMRM collected children and adult, new and used, English and Afrikaans books from its membership and built some bookshelves, which were placed in the homes of selected families. This now serves as the community library. Every Christmas since 2013 the mosque has given each child a personalized Christmas gift sponsored by congregants. These are children who would never otherwise have received Christmas gifts.

In December 2015 CMRM also hosted a music and dance concert on the farm performed by professional artists. In 2016, ten children from the farm have started rehearsals on the farm with these professionals to prepare for this year's concert in December. All of these activities are testimony to how our support to this farming community has been transformed from simple acts of charity to genuine acts of solidarity. The acts of charity require sharing of wealth, while the acts of solidarity require sharing of time and love. Since September 2016 CMRM's collaboration with CSAAWU has also led to CMRM supporting striking workers from Robertson, with weekly food hampers to sustain workers during their strike for a living wage and better working condition.

CMRM's modest acts of charity should never be underestimated. Farmworkers are very poor, and the food parcels and blankets bring some welcome relief. However, much more significant is our expressions of genuine social and human solidarity with these impoverished communities. The mosque community spends Family Days on the Leeuwenkuil farm not only for the charity distributions, but also to spend time with the community, to share a hot meal, to share Christmas gifts, to talk, to laugh, to sing, to dance and to learn. The mosque's presence and support sends a message that their lives matter, that we see them, we hear them, we feel for them.

CMRM's Theory of Social Change

The two projects I have described are small but significant steps in CMRM's *Jihad Against Poverty* Programme. It affords CMRM congregants with many different opportunities to contribute positively to the lives of fellow South African citizens living in impoverished areas. More significantly, through humanitarian and solidarity efforts, it opens up the potential for CMRM to contribute towards breaking down the stubborn racial and class divides between communities in the fractured city of Cape Town. The difference between charity and solidarity is usefully captured in the following quote by a CMRM congregant, Gabeba Gaidien:

"The powerful ability to empathize is the difference between service delivery and serving humanity. The former is an act of charity and the latter an act of solidarity. Human solidarity is the only way to truly shape a safe and just society."

CMRM's theory of social change is rooted in an interpretation of the following Qur'anic verse from *Surah al-Ra`ad*, Chapter 13:

**God will not change the condition of a people
as long as they do not change themselves (Q13:11)**

Based on an understanding of the above verse CMRM believes that the Muslim theory of change is not deterministic i.e. not merely the outcome of objective conditions, but also the result of the moral choices and ethical responsibilities that human beings assume. In other words, human beings have critical agency in realizing transformation and social change. This theory of social change thus asserts that even though the objective conditions may be ripe for social transformation, it does not occur automatically. It requires a subjective factor, i.e. the critical role of individuals who join together in collective action to seize the opportunities for social transformation. Animated by this theory of social change CMRM has linked its charity initiatives to assisting impoverished communities in order to strengthen their organizational and skills capacities.

Conclusion

I conclude with a tradition from the Prophet Muhammad which epitomizes the theological roots of CMRM's *Jihad Against Poverty* programme:

God, the Exalted, will (question a person) on the Day of Resurrection (asking):

'O child of Adam, I asked you for food but you did not feed Me.' The person would submit: 'My Lord, how could I feed You and Thou art the Lord of the worlds?' God would say: 'Did you not know that such and such a servant of Mine asked you for food but you did not feed him? Did you not realize that if you had fed him, you would certainly have found Me at his side?'