

Faith Empowerment Symposium

NASIMCO | Centre of Islamic Learning

The buzz at the Az-Zahra Center in Vancouver was undeniably clear as participants postulated on how to enhance the mimber experience. Members of the Vancouver Community were joined by distinguished religious scholars, academics and Community leaders from across North America for the three-day faith empowerment symposium, “*Connects and Disconnects of the Mamber*”. The event ran from March 3rd to 5th, 2017 and was organized by the Centre of Islamic Learning (CIL), the faith empowerment strand of NASIMCO.

“The Mamber is a Means not an End. What needs to be Redefined is our Mindset”

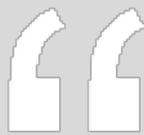
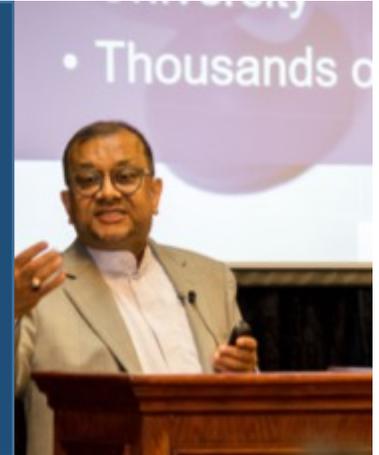


Setting the stage for the symposium The NASIMCO President, Mohamed Dewji, presented the NASIMCO platform which is to **Empower, Engage & Enhance** individuals and communities.

“ This faith **Empowerment** Symposium embraced all three, by **enhancing** the member experience through **engagement** ”



The rigors of the two days were eloquently established by CIL Chair, Dr. Hasnain Walji, as he quizzed participants with riddles that challenged them to think “outside the box.” Dr. Walji invited participants to not be afraid to challenge assumptions.



Thinking outside the box did not mean we think out of our minds. It is a question of where the boundary is within our minds – the boundary between what we know and what haven't yet thought about.



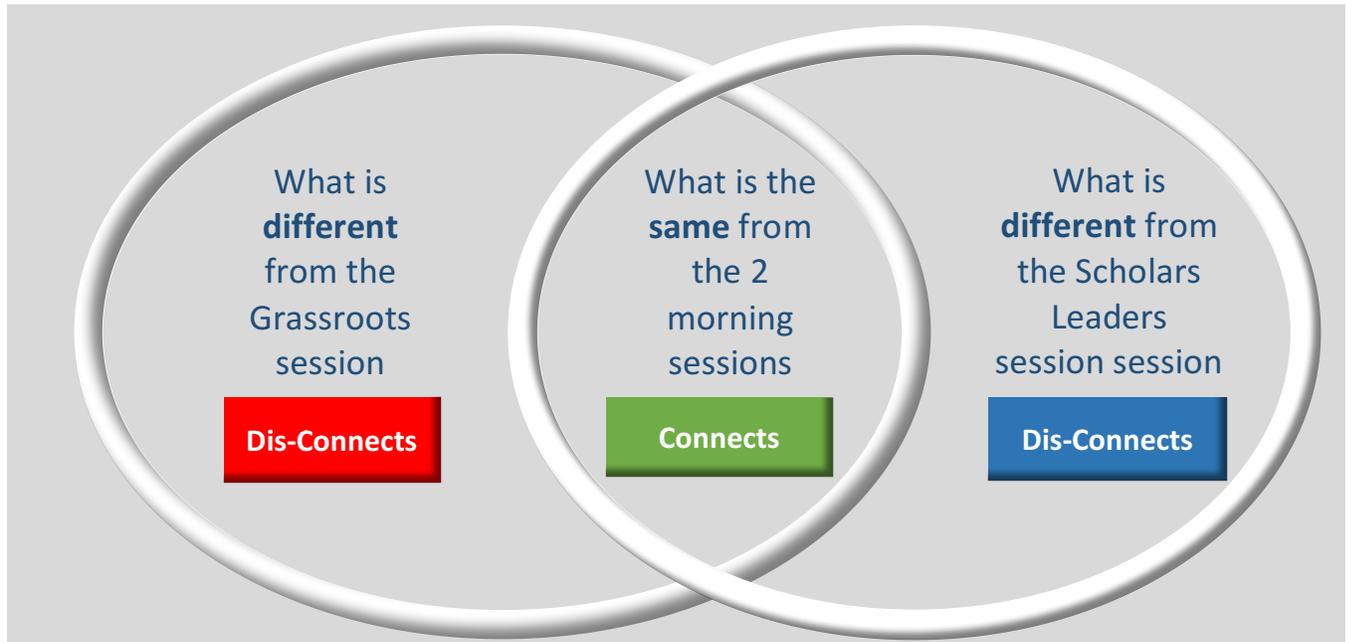
Using a metaphor of an anthill, he urged the audience to move away from their own comfortable anthills and outside their comfort zone by expressing their expectations of the mumber.

Symposium Objective & Process



Bringing her extensive expertise in facilitation, Sr. Siddika Jessa, NASIMCO Secretary General, devised a dynamic process to collect the data and distill the differences and commonalities in mumber expectations between the grassroots and the Scholars and Academics who deliver majlises and lectures.

A special thanks to Salma Jaffer and Sophia Dewji for facilitating the discussion for grassroots community member groups that yielded rich data provided in this report.

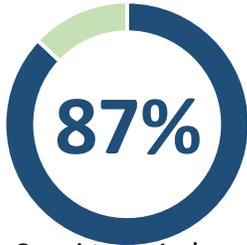


The objective was to garner grassroots input and then present this to the Scholars, Academics and Community Leaders who had travelled from all over North America to analyze the data and offer solutions to enhance the mumber experience.

Research on the Mimber through the Awakening Project



The founder of the Awakening Project, Dr. Sibtain Panjwani captivated the audience with eye opening research on expectations and attitudes with regards to the Madrasa, Mimber and family.



Consider mimber, Madrasa and family to be core foundations of our Community



Felt these core foundations are not able to overcome the challenges we face today



Felt the mimber is not meeting their spiritual needs



of global respondents said the mimber did not give them solutions to solve today's moral and social problems



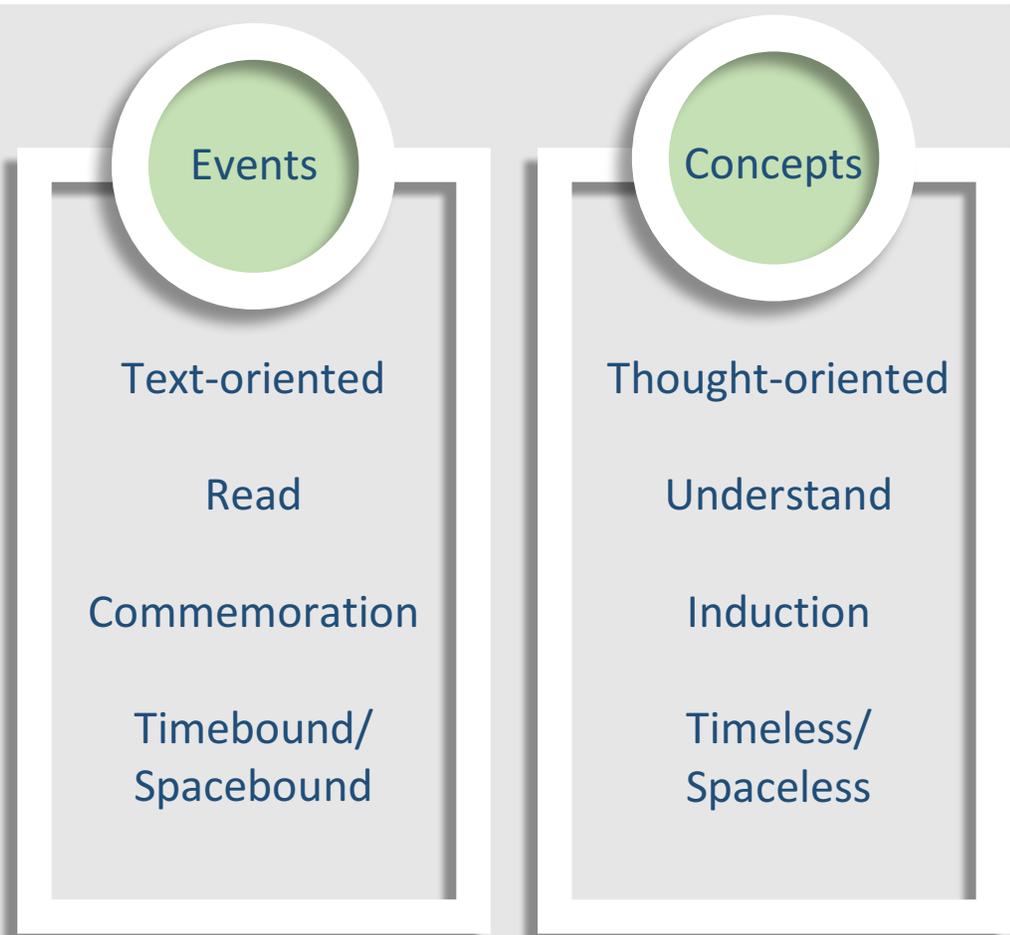
felt that the mimber requires reform in its approach to lectures, participant interactivity, topics and type of speakers

¹ <http://awakeningproject.page.tl/>

Shaykh Kumail Rajani, Head of Islamic Education, World Federation, highlighted the difference between the mumber as an event opposed to the mumber as a concept. He contrasted the origins of the mumber as a small platform made for the Prophet (SAW) so people could see him from a distance to the evolution of the cyber-mumber through YouTube streaming. He affirmed that ultimately, it was not about the medium but the message.



Is the Mumber an Event or a Concept?



Rationally challenging the audience, he argued that we should not have the utopian concept that the mumber was a source of guidance and not the source, that it is a means to an end and not an end itself. He reflected that as we deliberated on the connects and disconnects, it was more important to change our mindset rather than the form of the mumber by seeking an alignment between preachers, leaders and their audience. That was the task at hand for the next 2 days.



Workshop Questions & Feedback

The data depicted in the next few pages is presented in its raw form as it was collected at the session and represents the thoughts of the community members that were present at the session.



Workshop Questions

1

What does spirituality mean to you?

1.1

How can the Mamber help address your spiritual needs?

2

How does/doesn't the Mamber address your day to day social issues, particularly in helping you to be a good citizen in your society?

2.1

How can the Mamber help you solve your day to day social issues in the context of the society you live in?

3

How does/doesn't the Mamber help you to think critically?

3.1

What else could be done to encourage critical thinking from the Mamber?

Workshop feedback

1

What does spirituality mean to you?

- Attaining nearness to God.
 - Recognizing Allah's attributes
 - Getting close to him
 - Personal conversations with Allah
- Having faith in something better/having hope
- Our connection to the unseen world
 - Connection to the knowable + unknowable
 - Being connected to everything in the universe
 - How we reconcile the unseen world with the seen/material world
- Being at peace with one's inner self/being content
 - Living every moment
 - State of heart and mind all day long
- Spirituality comes from within
- Nurturing out fitrah
- Personal journey
 - Journey towards Allah
 - Journey to perfection
- Different for everyone
 - Not restricted to people who identify with a religion
- Caring for my community and helping humanity
- Remembering Imam-e-Zaman (AJF) in all our actions & words
- Leaving the worries of the world behind asking Allah for guidance
- Spirituality comes with guidance, knowledge, worship.

1.1 How can the Mimber help address your spiritual needs?

- Positive reinforcement (Quran, Hadith, Historical context) Help Promote thought
- More God-centric topics
- Different ways of sharing experiences on how to build spirituality
 - Appeal to different learners by using multiple intelligence
- Help me to learn to clear my mind and allowing me to re-focus
- Conduct survey to know what people want to discuss
- Ability to question /challenge (eg twitter wall)
- Feel that we have kept the “form” but are losing the essence
- Offer ways of attaining spirituality from the mimber
 - Help ways to Self-reflection
 - Have an advance agenda on what will be talked about
 - More dialogue, less monologue
 - Encourage questions/ Questions during lecture Shorten lectures
 - 20-30 minutes with Q/A for the last 10 Mins
- Learning opportunities to gain closer proximity to Allah
- Belief that God is always there for you, He will help you in your life
- Realize we are praying for our benefit.
- Help me find answers to these questions
 - Why are we here on Earth?
 - Why do we exist
 - What’s our purpose in life?
- Inspire me to think of prayers
 - different ways of connecting with Allah through actions
 - How not to just pray salaah because you feel “guilty”
- Must not lose the traditional “trunk”
 - Have regular prayers/majalis, but also offer ways of getting spirituality
- Keep core values but add
 - empathy
 - spiritual aspects
- Tell different stories for variety of people to relate to spiritual connection
- Arrange separate presentations on same topic for different needs
 - Age groups
 - Peel the layers for people at different intellectual capacities to benefit
- Encourage on-going participation especially from those coming rarely.
- Deliver continuity electronically for continuous spiritual growth.

2

How does/doesn't the Mimber address your day to day social issues, particularly in helping you to be a good citizen in your society?

- Need to have more discussions on current issues.
 - Social issues that lead to dialogue.
 - More discussions on the wider society issues
- Lack of interactivity results in limited ability to address social issues.
- Greater Focused Topics
 - General wide discussions and no clear objectives minimize learning outcomes.
 - Like to leave with something concrete out of the ½ hour/1 hour.
- Us Vs them approach – exclude ourselves from wider society
- Need different formats – catering to wider range of ages, background, education levels, etc.
- Can't learn just by listening, must have actions do it – by doing – extension exercises after majlises.
 - Add technology – enhance interactivity
- History biased/not contextual – no continuums to present.
- Help develop frameworks outside our Jamaats? Thinking out of box?
- Advertise online streams of programs. (Though some felt to Minimize live streams for more attendance at mosque.)
- Use Arabic/Quranic verse and present translation simultaneously for future reflection.
 - Use of Arabic words not understandable to everyone.
- Train speakers – new presentation styles.
- Mimber is not the place to discuss social issues.
 - Stick to Wafaat/Khushali themes.

2.1 How can the Mimber help you solve your day to day social issues in the context of the society you live in?

- Identify and focus on current social issues using surveys/audience engagement
 - islamophobia.
 - Alcohol/Drugs/Homosexuality
 - Recognize that this is a reality in our life encourage peer support/safe spaces
- Observe/engage the audience and their needs
 - Better Communication between organizers and speakers.
 - Audience roles and responsibility – and Integral part of the discussion
- More discussions of current events.
- Learn from local history and solutions successfully used (e.g. first nations local BC issues/solutions.)
- Different mode of communication: Visual, practical (different learning styles).
- Family structure/support need to be strengthened.
 - Training for families.
- Humanize/examples.
- More supportive environment – Help each other through issues.
 - Safe Spaces – no judgement.
- Choice of speakers who understand the issues
 - Speakers that are geographical relevant.
- More community involvement in the choice of topics.
 - Give 2/3 topics to them and give them a chance to choose the topics.
 - Subject Matter Experts to provide extra programs such as workshops, to help.
- TED talk format (to have members present) (topics relating to people's lives).
- Breaking down barriers between preacher/learner.
- Online engagement – Short video presentation, rest (Q/A) one-one.
- Team to support “Alim/clergy corner” (similar to “Pro-D corner” at madrasah Az-Zahraa.)
- Interfaith dialogue and current events.
 - Content.
 - Speakers – educating about greater outer society at large.
- Engage youth through multimedia.
- Showcase Living a good Islamic lifestyle in our present society.
 - How to avoid pushbacks/reframe narratives - perception of women in Islam .

3

How does/doesn't the Mamber help you to think critically?

Does

- When audience is more receptive to the message.
- When the presenter shares the information in challenging ways.
- When new topics/concepts discussed.
- Positive topics.
- Can ask us a question and motivate us to read more.
- Spiritual aspect or positivity/blessings.

Doesn't

- Different expectations/ interests in topics or conversations
- Monologue not dialogue.
- When subject treatment too traditional.
- No opportunity to challenge speaker.
- “My way or the highway” Attitude. Perception that mamber is sacred & cannot be questioned & reflected upon
 - People lack courage to ask/dialogues/seek clarification.
 - Individuals not encouraged to express themselves/their opinions.
- Speaker presents one side, not both, of a discussion.
 - Challenging questions are not raised on the mamber to encourage critical thinking
 - Few opportunities challenge the idea – must listen.
- Lack of objective approach more subjective
 - One view of history.
 - Presented in one way – but could be interpreted in many ways
 - References/sources not always provided.
- Negative topics.
- Lack of safe environment.
- Short attention span.
 - If content is not keeping you engaged.
- Each majlis – content too much to process.
 - Shorter presentation preferred. 20 mins to allow points for reflection.
 - Q/A sessions following shorter majlis.
- Fruitful answers not received for the questions.
- Gender segregation not conducive to learning.
- Sometimes content is super natural. Defies human logic.

3.1 What else could be done to encourage critical thinking from the Mamber?

- Audience has an equal responsibility
 - Be proactive
 - Take responsibility for your learning,
 - Reflect on majlis during chai
 - Extend the reflection on the way home
 - Group interaction allowing getting to know one another learn about from one another
 - Research topic on your own we must know the topic ahead of time.
 - By us taking the responsibility to do our own research, we can challenge to push the knowledge
 - Apply knowledge gained from mamber to start critical conversations forums
 - Car rides/ Chai & snacks
- Mamber responsibility to Increase engagement,
 - Create a two-way dialogue (depending upon the crowd)
 - Hold more seminars & workshops
 - Offers physical course (like maqta)
 - Different identified groups i.e. “ladies”; youth, seniors etc.
 - Offer Take away questions
 - Q/A to challenge what’s being said
 - Ask right questions to encourage thinking
- Speakers must be equally represented (Subject expertise and point of view)
 - Utilize the expertize of resources of other members (Scholars/Leaders) to support the lecturer to deliver the program.
 - Other groups are scheduled to be in a “supporting role’ so that there is help/ collaboration
- Bring in controversial topics - religious & non- religious based.



What practical steps and specific objectives can we commit to and increase effectiveness of Mamber?

I

What will the Scholars & Speakers commit to do?

1. Positive Reinforcement – Empowering individuals to act.
2. Engaging in dialogue with community at-hand (including management).
3. Flexibility + adaptable to address the needs of the Community
 - a. e.g. having shorter lectures & seminars, capitalizing on individual strengths and talents.
4. Group discussions and case relationships
 - Prepare documents
 - Small group have more success in terms of engagement and connections
 - Thought-provoking, rational-based messages that are clear.
5. Speaking of faith with reason and aligning our beliefs with thinking correctly.





What will the Scholars & Speakers commit to do?

6. Interaction with the Community
 - a. Being non-judgmental and more encouraging/inspiring.
 - b. Encouraging feedback and being receptive to it/to listen as much as we speak.
 - c. More reflection/analysis/refining the information.
7. Taking topic suggestions so addressing things people are struggling with.
 - Acquiring audience feedback.
8. Orient style through studying educational Sunnah and translating/bringing it to our era.
 - Using different strategies dependent on context.
 - Each community will be a long-term relationship.
9. Designing content that is more interactive/workshop/classroom oriented as supplementary to mumber, higher education frameworks in smaller more-focused groups.
10. Learning more + sharing with females.
11. Working with each other to develop discussions instead of reinventing the wheel each time.
 - Sharing resources and research with each other to enhance and be more fruitful, also beyond NASIMCO Communities.
 - Platforms to bounce off each other,
 - Speaker's Bureau/Forum
 - Not for public consumption, internal sensitive discussions.
 - Sharing templated/feedback surveys to be standardization from NASIMCO.



What will Leaders commit to deliver?

1. Going back to our communities to discuss what we learned.
2. Tools from NASIMCO (notes from symposium, summary, of discussion).
3. Changing format of program to be more interactive.
4. Invest in technology that will aid the audience & speakers to engage effectively
 - a. (have an open mic for those who can't access smartphones).
5. Offer regular platform for members to voice their opinions.
6. Encourage youth to engage in public speaking.
7. COMMITMENT TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITY.
 - a. Gender barriers abolished.
8. Having diverse speakers in our communities.
 - a. Alim database
 - b. Subject experts
9. Cater to visual learners, not just audio learners.
10. Share best practices at NASIMCO conferences AND materials once shared.
11. Have a "YES WE CAN" attitude in-order to be progressive.
12. Listen to what the community wants (regular surveys) & annual surveys on how they want/like the programs, issues/obstacles, etc.





Based on the output of the FE Symposium CIL – NASIMCO commits to facilitate the following

1. Cyber Forum for Scholars and Community Leaders
 - a. To facilitate continuous exchanges amongst Scholars by providing platform to share ideas and concepts to enhance member experience
 - b. To help share best practices and examples of what works well instead of reinventing the wheel.
 - c. Create easy access tools of subject matter experts and for Jamaats to invite based on their Community needs

To that end NASIMCO will create a cyber platform to allow Scholars to upload and share resources and research with each other and Community Leaders to enhance and be more impactful.





Based on the output of the FE Symposium CIL – NASIMCO commits to facilitate the following

2. Create standardized Templates for use by Jamaats as a feedback mechanism as well as conducting needs assessment surveys.
 - a. Periodic surveys of Community attitudes to be shared with Scholars and Community Leaders
3. Organize **Personal Development Programs** specially aimed at Scholars like those offered for the Leadership development as well as opportunities to nurture young speakers and scholars.
4. Expert Panels
 - a. Hold Symposia where researchers/advocacy organizations/think tanks can share their data to help the Community better understand the wider society and our engagement as Muslims in North American Society.
 - b. Promote Panel Discussions amongst Scholars on addressing contemporary challenges and providing guidance to the Community on addressing them
5. Create/leverage technology for the grassroots to expand the knowledge exchange beyond the traditional members and allow Scholars to radiate their teaching through the use of the Platform.