

A time to invest

After the riots of 2001 in Oldham and Bradford, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett urged ethnic minority communities to "develop a sense of belonging" in Britain and additionally that immigrants who settle here must do their bit to ensure that future generations grow up "feeling British". He also stated "If we are going to have social cohesion we have got to develop a sense of identity and a sense of belonging." The Muslim youth were at the forefront then of the debate and anger in Bradford was focusing on allegedly out-of-control youths in the Muslim community.

Nothing much has changed for us. It is not easy being a Muslim these days and events on the 7th of July 2005 did not help. I felt a deep sense of sadness because I realised that all the positive work that had been done for years within communities was now at risk of being lost without recognition. I felt sorry for parents who now felt that their children could not be trusted with other people such as youth workers, especially bearded ones, for they were at risk of being brainwashed. And I felt sad for the youth, for once again, the pressure came down to them to 'identify themselves' which made them feel like outsiders.

These feelings of being on the outside were and still are haunting the youth who are now constantly being questioned: are you British first or Muslim first? Is it really important that young Muslims should be asked this question? Is there such a conflict within them that they feel that they have to identify themselves to one side or another or can they be both at the same time without there being a conflict? Recent times have created a new zeal amongst the youth to really ask serious questions about themselves and who they are.

I remember a time when there was little or no Islam amongst the youth in the U.K. and for sure Islam was not as visible as it is today. But most of the youth were always willing to rise to the challenge if Islam was being challenged or threatened in any way, an emotional Islam I would call it. The 'druggie' would call me 'brother' when he saw me and treated me with respect and changed

his tone of voice. The 'anti-social' one would all of a sudden be a good citizen and greet me with salaam and ask how I was. Any negative press about Islam would make them upset and angry, defending it to the hilt.

But as time has moved on, I have seen many of these same youth change their mindset and their behaviour and some have actually started to be active Muslims, although still a minority. Allah is the One who guides and gives the taufeeq to do good and I often envy them for doing this at such a young age. The youth are, as it has always been in the past, returning to Islam as their way of life. They are finally showing signs of being the ones who will carry it forward. They are responding to that inner call of 'Laillaha Illallah', but they now, more than ever before, need our help.

There are many more youth who are on the edge, and unfortunately we as their peers are not doing quite enough to help them change themselves. We are not a pro-active community, but a reactive one. There are many issues that affect young Muslims like any other young person in Britain. We cannot live in denial and bury our heads in the sand, but accept that we have the same problems that affect the wider society and must do something to help our youth. We must start initiatives that will help those with problems such as drugs and alcohol and not play the blame game and we must take it upon ourselves as a Muslim community to give young people a sense of identity and belonging to help them be proud of their faith. The outcome would be confident Muslims who are intellectually convinced of their faith, not blind followers, but ambassadors of Islam in the West.

There is a call here for *guidance* from community leaders, youth workers, Masaajid and community centres. As a community we need to facilitate this work and have an 'open door' policy for young people, who can have access to all sorts of provision appropriate to their needs. We need to have friendly people, who understand the youth and today's prevalent culture and the difficulties they face, in order to be able to give practical solutions and not just rhetoric. These workers also need to be able to bridge the big gap that exists

between parents and their children and encourage frank dialogue that leads to an understanding of each other.

Our centres therefore need to have appropriate activities for all ages, for both male and female. Information needs to be available perhaps on a community notice-board. Information on training, courses, employment, events etc. and I believe that there should be a section highlighting current charitable work, hopefully generating in them a desire to be involved in humanitarian work, which is needed so much these days.

Those that work with youth are primarily educators. This means that we should be able to create programmes of work that: help young people discover themselves and their role as a citizen. Programmes that help build confidence, self-esteem, moral values and respect. Programmes that help inculcate pride in their faith, which in turn produces good fruits in their actions. And programmes should also be a means of identifying talent which should be nurtured through extra help.

The workers' attitude is very important. We have to start where the young person is at and not where we are. Young people face lots of different issues and challenges at different times, therefore we need to be aware that we may come across sensitive information and need to treat this with care. We may need to put in extra time occasionally to help young people in their greatest hour of need.

Man, with his faith, his honour, his ability, his values...is the greatest wealth that nations have, and the youth are the most important component of this human wealth. For this reason it is said: If you would like to know the future of a nation, then know what is the situation of the youth from that nation? It may seem at times that we are facing an uphill struggle and how could it be possible to change the current situation to a better one, by small actions. But we have to be optimistic and know that success comes from Allah and we just have to do what is in our capacity. We have to do the good wherever we can and continue to do it even if it seems that we may not achieve anything. Our

efforts will bear fruits by the will of Allah. The Prophet (*Sallallahu Alayhi Wassallam*) said to the nearest meaning: "If the last hour strikes and it finds you carrying a nursling tree to the grove for planting, go ahead and plant it." (Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal).