



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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Foster Care

by

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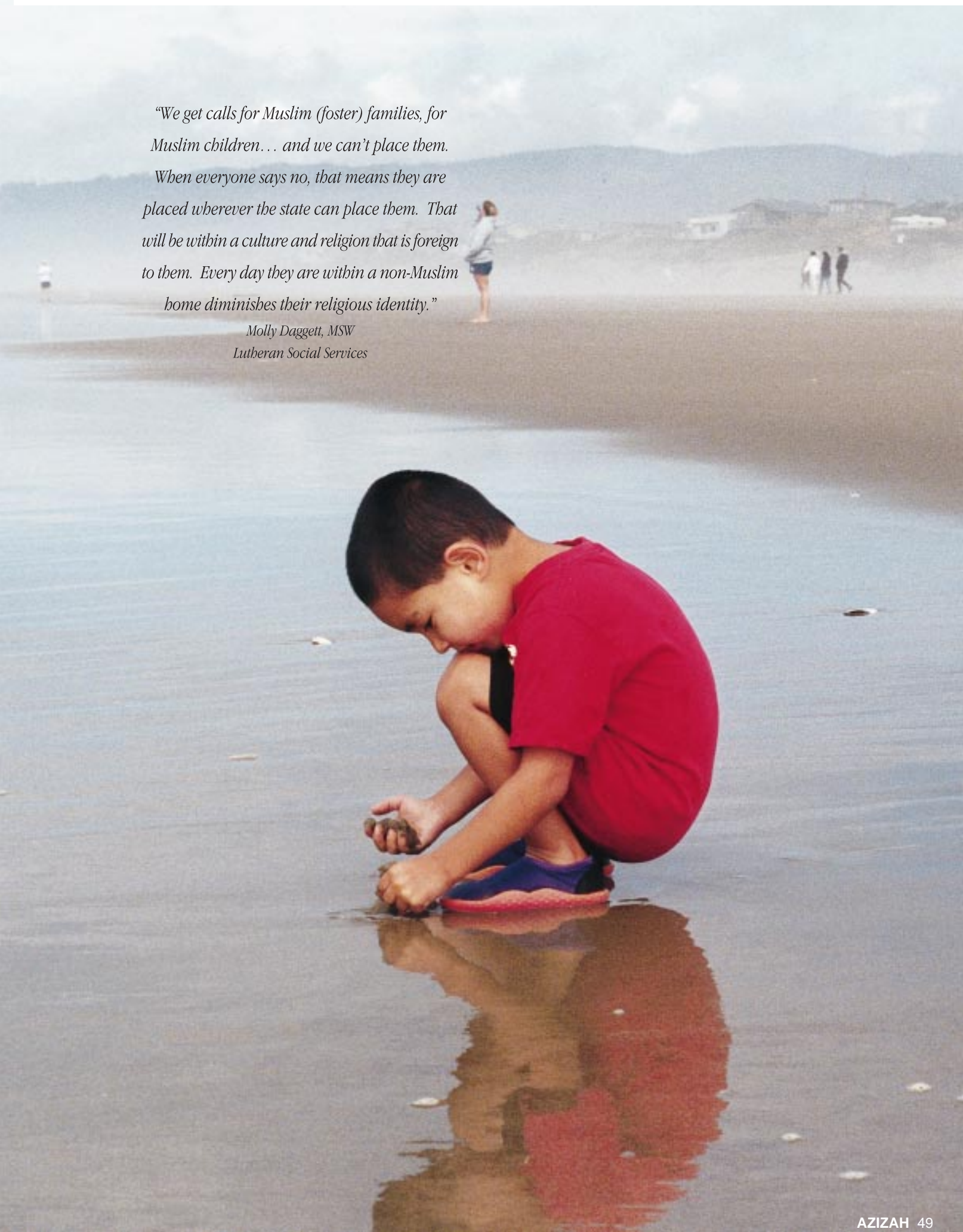
is one of those phone calls I dread. A social worker is asking if I know any Muslim families who would be interested in caring for a foster child. This one is a nine-year-old boy described as “a Muslim boy of Middle Eastern descent.” He needs long-term placement. The last call was for three siblings, Muslim children who needed temporary placement. I dread these calls. As one of the few (if not the only) current Muslim foster home in our area, I am frequently asked if I know of other families who would be interested in caring for a Muslim foster child. Sadly, the answer is most often no.

There are an estimated five hundred thousand children in the foster care system in the United States ranging in age from newborn infants to older teens. Some children are taken into state custody because of abuse or neglect by their birthparents; some enter because of an illness or the death of their parent. Some orphaned refugee children come to this country as unaccompanied minors and are placed in foster care.

Foster parents may care for a child for a short period, perhaps only overnight, or they may care for them for years. While the system varies from state to state, temporary or permanent custody of the child is held by the state or a private agency. Foster parents are responsible for the day-to-day care of the children but social workers and the courts make major decisions, sometimes with input from birthparents.

All states have some system of reimbursement to help foster parents cover costs, usually consisting of several hundred dollars (depending on the difficulties of care and the age of a particular child) per month, medical coupons, clothing vouchers and counseling. The process of becoming a foster parent may also vary from state to state, but much of it is similar. Foster parents typically need to pass background checks, have their home inspected for safety and space considerations, be interviewed and attend training programs. These requirements may seem intrusive but in reality are not terribly difficult.

Foster parenting is not adoption. Michelle Mohamed, a former foster parent, thinks it is important to remember that the first and primary goal of foster care is to protect and care for children while addressing the issues in their birth families that resulted in the child’s entering foster care. She says, “The first goal is to re-unite children with their birth families, if possible.” She notes that there are many issues faced by the Muslim community that can cause stress and depression in parents of young children or of challenging teens. “Feelings of isolation, of being overwhelmed, and depression are not uncommon



“We get calls for Muslim (foster) families, for Muslim children . . . and we can’t place them. When everyone says no, that means they are placed wherever the state can place them. That will be within a culture and religion that is foreign to them. Every day they are within a non-Muslim home diminishes their religious identity.”

*Molly Daggett, MSW
Lutheran Social Services*

Sahih Muslim: “Hazrat Abu Hurairah relates that the Holy Prophet said: ‘I and the one who takes care of an orphan, whether related to him or a stranger, will be like these two in Paradise’ and he raised his forefinger and middle finger jointly leaving space between them by way of illustration.”

for any of us. Unfortunately, many traditional support systems may not be available for Muslim parents here. Extended families, stable, long-term friendships and supportive older relatives may be far away. Foster care can provide a respite when parents feel like they just can’t cope anymore, and services are available to relieve some of the pressures traditional supports would have done at one time. If Muslims don’t fill the role of foster parents, Muslim foster children will not only be separated from their birth parents but also from their religious

Muslim foster families are a lack of familiarity and fear of the system, a feeling that it is somehow “un-Islamic,” a fear of appearing to take sides against other Muslims, and a fear of the commitment involved.

Most of us hate to think that there are Muslim children in foster care. After all, Muslims can’t be “those” kinds of parents. We can’t believe there are problems with drugs, alcohol or physical abuse and neglect in *our* community. If Muslim kids are taken into foster care, it is often believed that Child Protective Services must be unjustly accusing the parents.

According to Dr. Basheer Ahmed of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services in Arlington, Texas, “Muslims tend to blame CPS, but sometimes there is a reason for removal.” If so, he says, CPS workers have no option but to remove a child in order to protect them. The sad reality is that Muslim parents are human beings and are not perfect.

At this point there are no statistics as to the number of Muslim foster children. It would be natural to assume, however, that as the number of Muslims in North America has grown, so has the number of Muslim kids in the foster care system. Anwar Khanam of the Hamdard Center for Health and Human Services in Wooddale, Illinois, has found

that there is “a lot of need” for foster parents, but to the Muslim immigrant community it is “a new idea, they don’t fully understand.” She observes, “We need to be more open-minded. There is a dire need for Muslims to open their homes to foster children. It is a service to humanity.”

There is no doubt that becoming a foster parent is a tremendous responsibility and a 24-hour a day job. Foster care is not for the faint-hearted. One way or the other, foster children come with issues that the foster parent will have to cope with. While most foster children are normal, healthy children, some may bring with them emotional or physical challenges. On top of that, there are regulations to meet, social workers and court appointed guardians to satisfy, judge’s rulings to abide by, and birth families to deal with. Acknowledging this, Molly Daggett, a social worker with Lutheran Community Services says, “There is no way around the inconveniences, they may be intrusive, but the rewards surpass the inconveniences. The chance to give a child a home, to stay within their own culture and religion—how can you measure that?”

Fatimah Yousof and her husband, Ali, changed their life dramatically when they became foster parents to four Muslim children, brothers and sisters. The children had lived in as many as five other homes, in some foster homes they were placed together, and in some they were separated. Most of the homes were not Muslim. Fatimah Yousof learned quickly that emotional problems sometimes are the root of behavioral problems. She advises, “Become familiar with the difference between normal development and problem behavior. Get as much training as possible and prepare yourself. If you are not of the same culture as your children, learn as much as possible about their culture in order to help that child.” She further notes foster parents “must be willing to be proactive and involved in counseling and therapy with the children.” She also advises those interested in foster care to



and cultural supports.”

While recruitment of foster parents is difficult in general (there are more foster children than licensed foster home beds for them), it is especially difficult in the Muslim Community. According to Muslim social workers, the barriers they face in recruiting

consider the advantage of working with private agencies since they have more resources and, she feels, a greater stake in success.

Michelle Mohamed's husband, Ibrahim, acknowledges that being a foster parent can be difficult. It is "absolutely not an easy commitment. But it is not about you. It is about the child—providing love and compassion for a child." Mohamed and his wife were foster parents for a little boy whom they eventually adopted, adding to the four biological children they already had. Mohamed also understands the concerns of the immigrant Muslim community. He acknowledges that for many immigrant Muslims foster care is a concept that is foreign to their upbringing. "We can adapt to many things in our life that we didn't grow up with. Muslim foster parents have to have an understanding of how this society works, want to be involved and feel that they can make a difference." Ultimately, he says, "these children are in the category of orphans, they are the beloved of Allah."

Some Muslims are concerned about maintaining an Islamic environment in their home. How do foster parents meet the requirements of hijab and modesty between non-related sexes and still care for these beloved orphans? Fatimah and Ali Yousof struggled with this issue. They ultimately, and very happily, adopted their four foster children (see sidebar on right). Their solution is that the mother and girls wear hijab at home and have curtains hung for privacy. "If we didn't do it, we would feel like hypocrites, but it is a part of daily life now, like praying. This is a matter of compromise and being flexible. Not to say that I don't have moments. But

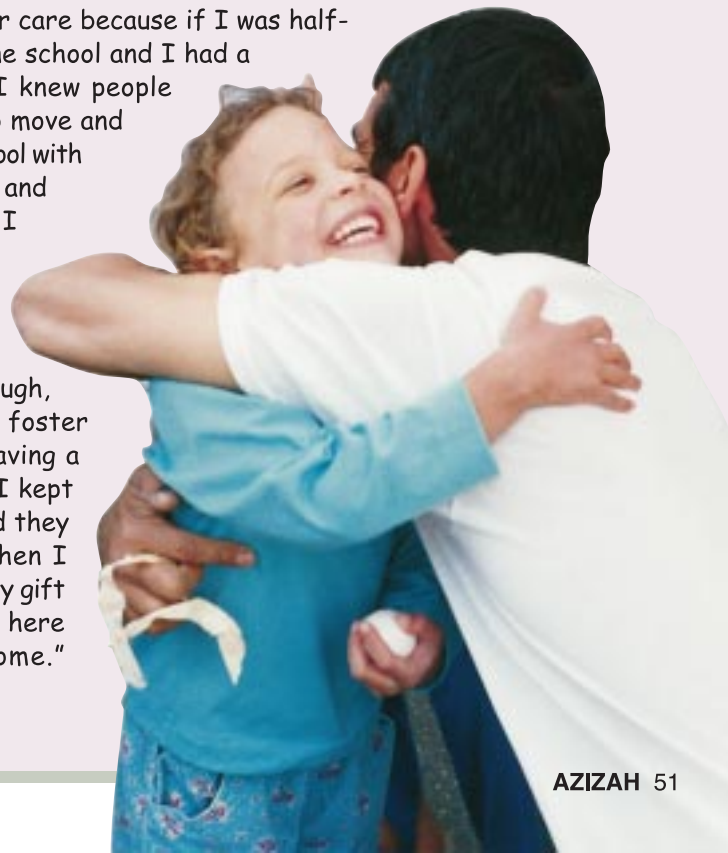
"As salaamu alaikum. My name is Rabab. I am eleven years old. Today I live with my adoptive mom and dad, but seven or eight years ago it was different. When I first got in foster care, I was three or four years old. To think of it now that I'm older, the night I got taken away was scary. Because when I was younger I couldn't comprehend what was happening to me when the police took me. Since I was only three or four, I went willingly.

The first house I went to was Jim and Ruth's house. It was okay. I just accepted a house I came to because it wasn't like I could say I didn't want to go to that house. Also I was only four. So anyways what I didn't like was this one time, when I first got there I was sitting on the couch watching TV. Without telling me they opened the garage door and let their two huge black and brown dogs out. I was scared of dogs, so I didn't really appreciate it when they did that. There were four foster homes that I went to. Each had different rules. I felt like a prisoner moving to different jails. Like one that I called the grandma lady. Well, I went out in the snow one day and accidentally got my clothes wet and I got in trouble. I didn't think it was a very good rule because I could have just changed my clothes after I was done playing.

I also had a caseworker. The first time I met her was at Mina's house. I thought she was fun to play with. Her name was Mary. She visited me a lot while I was in foster care. I had a counselor. I think her name was Anne. Well, I talked about my problems with her. Like if there was something I needed to tell her about the foster home I lived in.

I didn't like foster care because if I was half-way finished with one school and I had a lot of friends and I knew people there, then I had to move and go to a whole new school with people I didn't know and I had no friends. I don't really know why I got in foster care in the first place.

After all that though, I came here. In the foster homes it was like having a birthday party and I kept opening presents and they were all ugly. But then I came to a really pretty gift and that was coming here to my adoptive home."



Refugee Foster Care

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are an estimated 10 million refugee minors. Some of these are orphans. The goal of the UNHCR is to trace these children's background in the hopes of reuniting them with birthparents or other relatives. The reality is that they are not always able to do this. When an orphaned refugee child has been in a refugee camp for an extended period of time and all tracing efforts have been exhausted, the UN might refer them to the United States Resettlement Program for Unaccompanied Minors. Because of the on-going and long-term crises in Eastern Europe, Africa and Central Asia, some of these refugee orphans are Muslims.

The Resettlement Program sends unaccompanied minor refugee children to the US under the auspices of two voluntary agencies—Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and the US Catholic Conference/Migrations and Refugee Services. The children are then placed into foster care under the supervision of these agencies.

The goal of this program is to place refugee children with families of the same ethnic and religious background but if no family from their ethnic or religious group is available they are placed in another foster care home. There are thirteen cities in the United States with refugee foster care programs. Muslim foster families for refugee children are needed in all of these cities. If you are interested, please contact:

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
US Catholic Conference
700 Light Street, 3211 4th Street, NE
Baltimore, MD 21230, Washington, DC 20017
410-230-2725, 202-541-5412

Dawood

Sumaya, a member of the Somali Community, met a counselor with LCS at a party who told her of a Somali boy who had no family in the United States and no one to care for him. Sumaya told the counselor "bring the boy to my house." Dawood had recently immigrated under the US Resettlement Program for Unaccompanied Minors. When he arrived at Sumaya's house, she realized she had known his late mother in Somalia. At first, Sumaya related that Dawood was very sad. Now he is happy and doing well—going to high school and working part-time on the weekends. Sumaya says "He is my son now, tomorrow he will take care of me."



it is not a reason not to have any one of my kids. The amount of blessings far outweighs any inconvenience." She wants people to remember that "your intentions are all for Allah. He will help you."

Muslim communities must develop systems to help families at risk for

disruption, but also provide Muslim homes for children when needed. To help overcome the hesitancy Muslims may feel over religious issues, Islamic scholars need to study the foster care system in relation to Islamic teachings and inform the Muslim community in how they can accept the responsibilities

of caring for Muslim foster children within the guidelines of Islam. The leaders of Muslim Communities in North America must familiarize themselves with this issue and become advocates for Muslim children in the foster care system. Dr. Bashir Ahmed feels community leaders must be proactive. "The Qur'an says, 'take care of orphans.' It is our responsibility to care for them. We must keep raising the issue."

A number of years ago, I met a Muslim family who had adopted a beautiful little girl of Iranian descent. A non-Muslim American family had originally adopted her, but when the Iranian Revolution occurred the family returned that beautiful little toddler to the State. Because of her religious and ethnic heritage, they no longer wanted her in their home. Will it become even harder in the light of recent events to find good foster homes for Muslim children?

Each potential foster parent must look into their own hearts and decide if they can make this commitment. Difficult and important issues revolve around foster care. But as I watch my two year-old foster son proudly move up and down next to my husband in *salah*, or listen to my four year old daughter trying to verbalize her struggle to understand who she is as a Muslim and what it means in relation to the rest of the world, I know that this is the right thing to do. There are good and loving non-Muslim foster families working for all children in their care. However, loving and capable, they cannot help our children be Muslims. 🌱