

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CANBERRA MOSQUE



*Prepared by the  
Islamic Society of the ACT  
for the Canberra Mosque Open Day  
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130 Empire Circuit, Yarralumla, ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA*

The Arabic word Masjid (mosque) literally means a place of prostration. A mosque is a place of worship for followers of Islam and serves as a place where Muslims come together for prayers as well as a centre for information and religious education. Mosques originated on the Arabian Peninsula, but are now found in all inhabited continents as Muslims moved to other parts of the world.



*Map of the world of Muslim majority countries*

As of 2009, over 1.6 billion or about 23% of the world population are Muslims, making Islam the world's second largest religion. Of these, around 62% live in Asia-Pacific, 20% in the Middle East – North Africa and 15% in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Islam is one of the three monotheistic religions, along with Christianity and Judaism. Islam in Arabic means “submission” and is derived from the Arabic root salima, meaning “peace, purity, submission, and obedience”. Islam is the submission to the will of God, or Allah.

Islam is a whole way of life based upon the will of Allah revealed in the Holy Book (Qur'an), and in the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Every aspect of life is seen as part of an indivisible whole, literally inseparable from all other aspects. For Muslims, the Qur'an is immediate to Allah. Everything necessary for salvation and the understanding of Allah's covenant with humankind is contained between its covers. The Qur'an, moreover, is composed not of Muhammad's words, but of Allah's words.

Long before white settlement of Australia, Muslims had contact with Australia and her peoples. The Macassans from Eastern Indonesia, fishing for sea slugs, began visiting the northern shores of Australia in the 17th century. Afghan cameleers settled in Australia from the 1860s onwards.

In the early twentieth century Muslims found it difficult to come to Australia because of the government's White Australia policy. This changed from the 1970s onwards as the government adopted a policy of 'multiculturalism'. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Muslims from more than sixty different countries had settled in Australia. While the vast majority come from Lebanon and Turkey, there are Muslims from Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia Herzegovina, Egypt, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Mauritius, Pakistan, Palestine and Sudan, among others.

The idea of establishing a mosque in Canberra was initiated in the late 1950s by the then Indonesian Ambassador to Australia, Dr A Y Helmi, who discussed the potential project with Sir Gordon Freeth, the then Australian Federal Minister for the Interior and Minister for Works. Dr Helmi also sought support for the idea and financial contribution towards the project from three Muslim governments which had representations in Canberra.

Canberra Mosque, designed in Melbourne, was built in 1960 for £18,000 provided jointly by the three governments through their diplomatic missions in Canberra – the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, the High Commission of Malaya (before the formation of Malaysia) and the High Commission of Pakistan - on a block of land located at Block I, Section 22, Yarralumla, ACT. The land was a perpetual grant by the Commonwealth Government at one shilling per annum rental. These three Missions, later became the founding members of the Canberra Mosque Incorporated (CMI).

The ceremony for the official laying down of the foundation stone for the Canberra Mosque on 26 January 1960 was conducted by Dr A Y Helmi, witnessed by Canberra Muslims and guests. Malaya was represented by the Acting High Commissioner, Mr Harun bin Ibrahim, and Pakistan by the Acting High Commissioner, Mr Ihsanullah Khan.

The three pioneer diplomats representing their respective Governments at the official laying down of the foundation stone for the Canberra Mosque



*Dr A Y Helmi,  
the Indonesian  
Ambassador, laying down  
the Foundation Stone*



*Malaya's  
Acting High  
Commissioner,  
Mr Harun, and  
architect Mr G Block*



*Pakistan's  
Acting High Commissioner,  
Mr Ihsanullah Khan, and  
Architect Mr G Block*

When the Canberra Mosque opened its doors, Haji Soetan Masjhoerdin, a staff member at the Indonesian Embassy, was appointed the first Imam and care-taker of the Canberra Mosque. He led congregational prayers, including Friday prayers, and officiated all Muslim ceremonies. He was also appointed by the Australian Government as an authorised Muslim marriage celebrant for the ACT. The current Imam is Mohammed Swaiti. He has been performing this function since the mid 1990s with the support of CMI and the local Muslim community.

The Canberra Mosque is the second oldest continuously used mosque in Australia. The first mosque in Australia was built in 1861 at Marree in South Australia by the descendants of the Afghan cameleers.

Currently, the Canberra Mosque is still the only mosque in Canberra. It is a place for worship but also serves as an Islamic centre for the religious education, social and cultural activities of the local Muslims in the ACT and the surrounding region.





*Muslims taking their ablution before congregational prayer (in this case, Friday Prayer) at the Canberra Mosque.*

CMI remains the custodian of the Canberra Mosque to this day. The Muslim community at the time of the Canberra Mosque opening comprised mainly diplomatic staff from Muslim countries represented in Canberra. Initially the Mosque was run by the founding Missions. As the Muslim community grew in numbers in Canberra and its surrounding region, the Islamic Society of the ACT (ISACT) was formed in 1972, among other things, to also run and manage the day to day affairs of the Mosque, support and represent the Muslims using the Mosque.

Apart from taking responsibility over the day-to-day maintenance of the mosque, ISACT also, in consultation with the Imam, has been organising activities for the benefit of ACT Muslims, including the establishment of a Sunday School for Muslim children and regular lectures in the Mosque by local and visiting Muslim scholars.



ISACT, along with other Islamic Organisations, have over the years been able to make halal arrangements readily available to all Australian Muslims and which also enabled the export of halal meat to Muslim countries. Burial grounds specifically for Muslims are also now available in major centres throughout Australia.

*Photo on the left shows a Muslim funeral leaving Canberra Mosque after prayer for the cemetery at Mitchell.*

Generally, the developments/renovations of the Canberra Mosque have been initiated since 1982 by the CMI and ISACT. The minor works continued for many years until the early 1990s when major construction occurred with the construction of a mezzanine level for ladies, additional prayer facilities, classrooms, a kitchen and separate ablution blocks for males and females, paving and shade for the front courtyard. Around \$150,000 had been spent for these construction works which were financed through individual donations and contributions from Muslim Diplomatic Missions located in Canberra.

From around 30 or so Muslim families residing in Canberra in the early 1970s, the Muslim population in Canberra and its surrounding region has now grown to around 8,000 persons. In the past Eids (major annual Muslim celebrations) the Eid congregational prayers were held at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) where around 3,000 to 4,000 persons from all over Canberra region participated.



*Photo above shows the entrance to the Mosque taken some 20 years ago. Worshippers are required to take off their shoes before entering the prayer hall.*



Friday prayer attracts over-capacity worshippers to the Mosque forcing late-comers to pray on the grass outside and around the Mosque. This option becomes impractical during wet days or even during really hot summer days. The block of land on which the Canberra Mosque is currently located is quite restricted in its size to allow major extensions to take place

*. The photo on the left shows the outside paved courtyard being erected with shades to protect worshippers from the sun and rain.*

In the past couple of years ISACT had to hold major activities and religious commemorations in areas away from the mosque. For example, the past few Eid celebrations were held at the Lennox Garden where some 3,000 to 4,000 Muslims and other Australian guests attended. It has been mentioned earlier that the past Eid prayers were conducted at the AIS.

*The photo on the right shows the 1996 Eid Celebration being held outside of the mosque*



To-date, several discussions and meetings have been held between the CMI, ISACT and the National Capital Authority (NCA) to address capacity issues with the mosque.

**The CMI and ISACT, in consultation with other Muslim Missions, are working closely for the redevelopment of the Canberra Mosque with required provision of onsite parking.**

*The photos below illustrate the overflow of worshippers from the main prayer hall on a Friday prayer, forcing late-comers to pray in the courtyard and on the grass area on the sides of the Mosque.*







*1996 CIS Fete*

The Canberra Islamic School (CIS) forms an integral part of the Canberra Mosque. It has been operating since the mid 1970s.

The objectives of the school are to cater for the religious and linguistic needs of the Muslim children in the Canberra region so as to provide:

- a social setting to meet other Muslim children of their age group
- understanding that humanity is One, Allah is One and the same God for all mankind, Muslim and non-Muslim
- a means to learn a little about Islam and develop the urge to learn more (independently).

The number of students who have enrolled at the CIS since inception has increased from 20 students in 1981 to around 120 students in 2012. Currently the school has students from a large number of ethnic groups originating from African, Asian and European countries, comprising an even mix of boys and girls, which reflects the multicultural diversity of the ACT and Australian society.

*This document has been especially prepared by ISACT for distribution to the general public attending the Canberra Mosque Open Day on Sunday, 25 March 2012.*