

Visiting a mosque

I sat on the wall opposite the mosque watching the men hurrying in for prayers. I used this time to pray for each of them. Each one of them representing a family and a community, both here in the UK and back in their home country. It was an opportunity to ask God to work in their lives and that His activity would spill over and impact the vast complex network of relationships represented by their lives.

I was waiting to go in and be present during their time of prayer. Five minutes before prayer time, I get up and walk across to the entrance, asking God for protection and guidance. I enter taking off my shoes and putting them on the rack. Arriving early gives me time to find a quiet spot at the back; I kneel or sit and start to pray for the gathering men. Also asking God that a person would come and talk with me after the prayers.



I write this as a man going into a men's space. Some of what I write will be appropriate for ladies but for a woman the experience of visiting a mosque has many challenges and needs to be navigated differently. I will try to give some hints for ladies at the end, so please bear with me!

After the 'Call to Prayer' the men start their ritual of *salat* going through a series of movements – standing, bowing, kneeling and prostration. As the men repeat their actions, I continue to pray – “O God, may those who are sincerely seeking you find you. Break into the lives of these people, reveal yourself to them. May your Spirit sweep through this community.”

At the end of the prayers, most men leave without noticing me, some greet me as they pass by holding their right hand to their left side of their chest over their heart, I respond similarly. One or two speak as they pass and finally one man comes and suggests we sit together.



I find there are many ways into a meaningful conversation. Asking about prayer in Islam is an obvious one, or talking about community and how often he comes to the mosque and why. As I talk, I am aware that this is a privilege to be in someone else's worship space. so I treat the conversation with respect and come with an attitude of learning. In

this space I'm not here to argue, but use the opportunity to share my testimony, ask questions or tell stories.

I leave with a sense of working with God. Believing God has been at work as I prayed and through my words and presence.

Over many years of visiting mosques, I have learnt some lessons and have developed some ideas. When I first visited to mosques, I went with apprehension wondering if it was appropriate for a Follower of Jesus to enter a Muslim worship space. I also went with confidence knowing that I had the amour of God and trusting in the Lord who is with me wherever I go and that each place the sole of my foot treads is in some way holy ground.



I normally avoid visiting on a Friday – the mosque is too crowded, and the people are fervent, seeing the visitor as fair game for confrontation. Midweek at lunch time (Zuhur) is often less busy though people want to rush away to get back to work. The evening can be a good time because some people often choose to remain in the building during the interval between the two sets of evening prayers and they are more relaxed. The best two prayer times depend on the time of year. Maghrib and Isha are often a good choice.

It is helpful to look up the mosque on the internet beforehand and find the prayer times. The prescribed time changes each day with the movement of the sun so, in the west, to make gathering more convenient for people with various responsibilities, mosques often have a 'community prayer time' which is slightly different from the set time. This community prayer time may continue at the same time for a few weeks. Look for the time marked as 'Jamaah'.

Another good and convenient time to go is to join in the *iftar* meal during Ramadan. This meal, when people break their fast at sunset is open to everyone, so don't feel worried about going. Mosques will have different ways of celebrating the meal. Some eat a date and have a glass of water, perform the prayer then eat. Other places may eat and then do the evening prayer after the meal. And some pray immediately and then eat. In some cultures, people don't talk and eat at the same time so be prepared for a quiet meal! But there is often time to talk afterwards.

I always want to be clear in my mind why I am visiting. What answer will I give to a fellow church member who sees me go in? What answer will I give to the Muslim person in the mosque who stops to ask me why I've come? What answer do I give myself if my conscience feels uneasy?

To the Muslim community, it will look like you are going because you wish to become a Muslim. It's important to be prepared for this invitation with an appropriate friendly reply that will still encourage discussion and conversation.

One of the most common reasons I have for visiting is to arrange a mosque visit for a group of Christian friends taking part in a [Friendship First Course](#) (Click to learn more). This gives me a reason to ask for the imam or a member of the mosque committee. When talking with a mosque leader, we should always make it clear that we are not looking for joint worship, but for an opportunity to learn firsthand about Islam and its beliefs and practice.

After a number of visits and having built up a friendship with the imam, he may begin to feel safe with you. It may then, be appropriate to suggesting Meetings for Better Understanding ([MBUs](#)) or [Scriptural Reasoning](#) gatherings.

I also see visiting a mosque as a gesture of friendship and community bridge building. I make it clear that I'm a member of a local church and see that friendship between faith communities can help to reduce potential hostility and fear. For that kind of visit, it is good to go with a friend so together you are representing your church family.

A one-off visit has advantages, but visiting frequently can create opportunities to be recognised and build up friendships particularly if the mosque is small or you go at lunch time when there are fewer people. It also helps you to build a relationship with the imam which could develop into wider opportunities for church-mosque engagement. Follow [this link](#) to find out more about befriending imams.

A friendship with the imam which has developed trust and respect may result in an invitation to speak to the congregation and bring greetings from the Christian community. Take these opportunities with humility, recognising the trust the imam has in you and don't usurp the privilege. I have been asked to share greetings after an *iftar* meal and also to a small group who stayed after prayer.

The women's space in a mosque is very different from the men's area. It is less accessible and maybe less obvious, if it exists at all. It may be best for a Christian woman who wants to visit a mosque to ask a Muslim woman friend to take her along. This means you will go at an appropriate time and be able to find the entrance and have an introduction into the community. Be ready to explain to your friend why you want to visit. Then when you go, your friend will be able to introduce you to the community explaining why you are there.

Being in a prayerful attitude and showing love, respect and understanding of the unique challenges faced by women in Islam will give you openings for deep meaningful conversations.

You may find that your female friend doesn't often go to the mosque and in response to your request will invite you to the home of a female teacher for a Qur'an reading or a women's tea and teaching session. Because these situations are more intimate than a mosque, it can feel a bit oppressive but at the same time you may have a greater chance to contribute to the conversation. The Mahabba website has more on the subject of [women visiting mosques](#).

Seeing the mosque in your community as a door to friendship and understanding rather than something to fear or as a threat can open many doors to deeper and long-term friendships. Be imaginative about your contacts with the mosque and the imam. Look at their website and discover what sort of community it is. But most of all pray for those who go and the community it represents. Expect God to act and engage with expectancy.