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One Nation Under Allah

Nation of Islam Minister
Preston Muhammad wants to
redeem Des Moines. But does the
Nation's past rhetoric make his
dream impossible?

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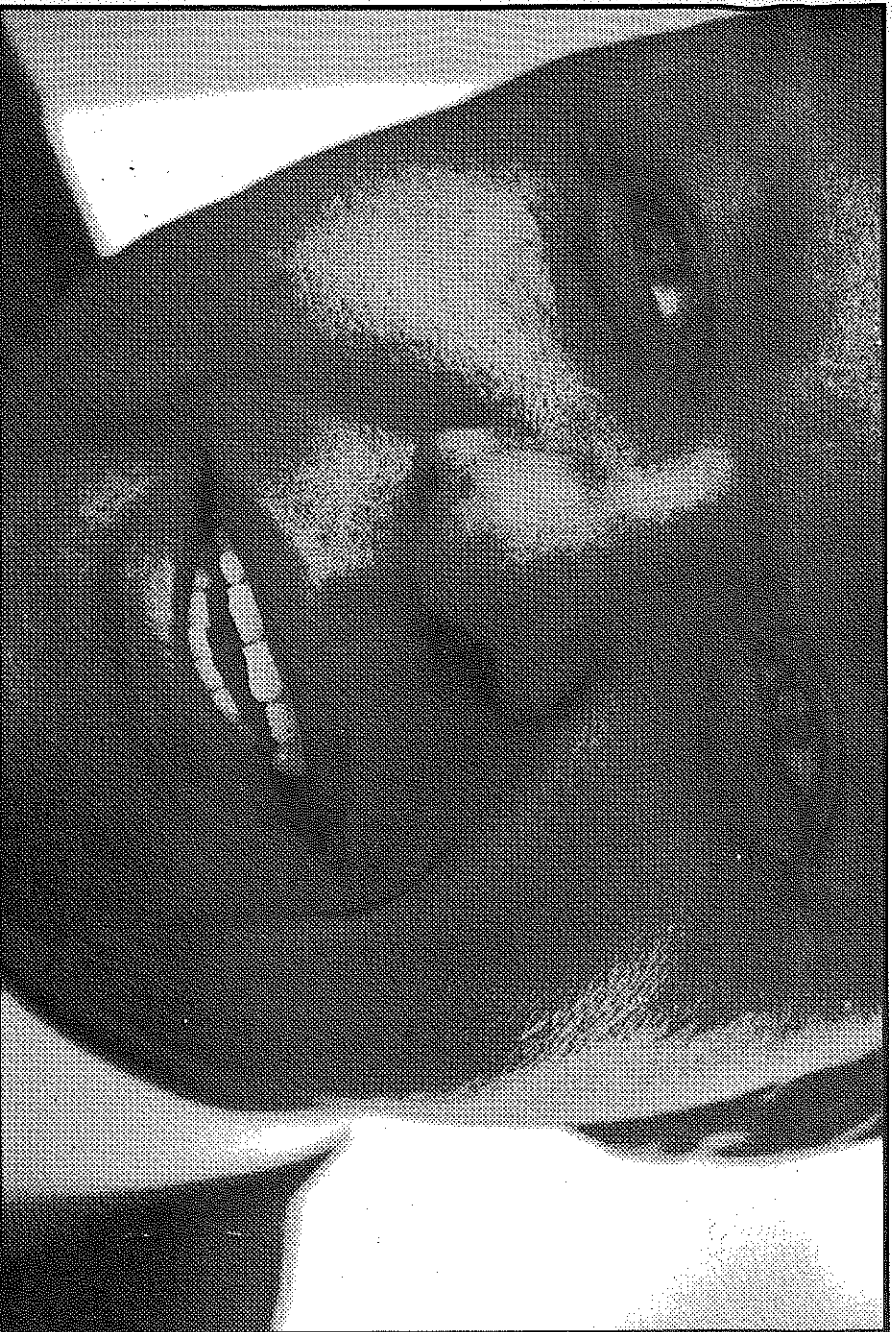
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One Nation Under Allah

Small in number, large in spirit,
the Nation of Islam preaches a message of
righteousness unfamiliar in Des Moines

BY GEOFF S. FEIN



*"It's necessary to not only redeem black people,
in particular, but everybody."*
MINISTER PRESTON MUHAMMAD

It's hard not to find someone familiar with the Nation of Islam. On the national level, people are aware of the work the Nation does in getting black men to accept responsibility for their lives and for the controversial stands it takes. But few Central Iowans realize the Nation has a chapter — the group owns a mosque, several buildings and a restaurant on Forest Avenue — in Des Moines.

The Nation of Islam is a paradox. While it's not hard to agree with the ideas of black empowerment, self-discipline and abstinence from drugs and alcohol, it's also difficult to overlook the accusations of anti-Semitism and racism.

Through its own literature, the Nation claims the allegations of an anti-black agenda by Jews are warranted. Jewish leaders denounce the rhetoric as Nazi propaganda. They say the Nation of Islam is just looking for someone to blame its problems on.

Add to the equation the remarks Minister Louis Farrakhan has made, charging white America with blocking opportunities for blacks and calling the U.S. the "great Satan," and pundits say they have enough ammunition to prove the Nation is a hate group.

Just how many members the Des Moines organization has is unknown. Minister Preston Muhammad won't divulge membership. But he's hoping this will be the beginning of a long-term presence.

Muhammad, 50, is the local representative to the Nation. He moved here from Joliet in 1992 with his wife, Constance, and their children to develop a Nation of Islam study group. He's one of Minister Louis Farrakhan's most trusted associates.

"Our duty first and foremost is to express the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad to not only the black community, but the community at-large," Muhammad says. "It's necessary to not only redeem black people, in particular, but everybody."

The group has taken its message to the streets of Des Moines through sales of its paper, "The Final Call," at intersections along Forest Avenue. Muhammad says he visits jails and prisons to counsel inmates. The goal, he says, is to let blacks know that the sense of inferiority they may feel stems from the poor education and living conditions they have been subjected to.

"In elementary school, what happens when a child doesn't learn anything about himself? The educational system is rife with instructors unprepared to teach black children."

He says white America bears responsibility for a history of racial injustice.

"Some economists say every dollar you touch in America is rooted in the slave experience. We were brought here to do work but never received compensation. As America got richer, blacks got poorer and poorer."

Muhammad has been outspoken on reparations for blacks. He says blacks are probably owed about \$600

billion since the 1930s alone. But he knows the government would never agree to pay.

"The government doesn't want to give us this kind of money. I don't believe it wants to

see black people independent. They don't want us with that kind of power."

What America fears, he adds, is blacks gaining economic, political and military strength that could eventually lead to insurrection.

SELF-HELP

"There are four times as many black men incarcerated now as at the peak of apartheid. This tells us there is a system to mass incarcerate black people as a means to control and destroy us."

Muhammad blames much of this on the overwhelming influence of drugs. "I believe crack cocaine is a weapon of mass destruction. Thousands of lives have been lost to it. There's not one black household unaffected by drugs, deaths, mayhem and loss of

morals. It's wrecked havoc on us."

Ako Abdul Samad, head of Creative Visions, says the Nation and local organizations are all interested in helping people. He adds he has known Muhammad for almost 20 years.

"We both have the same interest in dealing with the community. We'd be foolish not to support trying to give youths and adults an alternative."

His only contact with the Nation, however, has been when he sees members selling their newspaper down the street from Creative Visions.

Paulette Wiley, executive director of the Wilkie House, is one of the few people in Des Moines to have ongoing contact with the group. Nation members have chaperoned youth events at the facility. Before they started coming to help out, the police were called on a regular basis.

"Without the Nation of Islam we couldn't have done it. They taught respect, worked with kids to diffuse anger and dialogue over issues of violence," she says. "I have a lot of respect for their community policing."

The Nation's success in New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles became so well known the group was offered a government contract to police housing projects

in Chicago. But accusations that it's a hate group forced city officials to backtrack.

"Everywhere we worked, crime was reduced up to 80 percent," Muhammad says. "People were able to go out without any fear and we did it without firing a shot and without violence. But the government snatched those contracts away."

In Des Moines, it's been a different story. Community organizers and business owners near the mosque say they have little contact with Nation members. Part of the problem maybe the size of the congregation. Muhammad says their numbers limit what they can do.

Connie Cook, president of the Carpenter Neighbors Association, says during the summer months the Nation chases drug dealers away from the mosque by blaring religious messages over a loud speaker atop the building. But other neighborhood associations say they have little if any contact with the Nation.

Mayor Preston Daniels says he is unaware of the group's activities in the area. Muhammad hasn't spoken with the either the mayor or council members. He says city officials don't serve the interest of black people.

"They're not leaders. They're accomplices to keeping black people in their place. I believe that in my heart."

THE NATION'S ROOTS

In many ways, the Nation of Islam is misunderstood, says Professor S.M.B. Miller of Drake University. "If people would familiarize themselves with the history of this organization, it is very much about a change of state-of-mind for black men and women."

The modern Nation dates back to the 1930s when Elijah Muhammad preached that the aspirations of blacks lay in the Muslim faith. By the 1950s, Malcolm X had become Elijah Muhammad's principal spokesperson. When Malcolm X moved from Boston to Harlem, a former calypso singer, born Louis Eugene Walcott (later known as Louis X), took over the ministry in Boston. Louis X eventually changed his name to Louis Farrakhan.

After several years of changes in direction and leadership, Farrakhan resurrected the Nation. Members see Farrakhan as the true successor to Elijah Muhammad.

Under the leadership of Farrakhan, the Nation began to lay the foundation for economic self-reliance. Farms, factories, grocery stores, restaurants and book stores have sprung up across the country. Muhammad hopes to expand the Nation's economic goals and its membership in Des Moines.

DISPELLING MYTHS

Any plans for the Nation of Islam to grow, even on a local level, will no doubt run up against the accusations of anti-Semitism. It is the one issue that could prevent it from gaining mainstream acceptance.

"That's the No. 1 party line: Farrakhan is

not anti-Semitic," Muhammad says. "That's reinforced because of the great power of the Jewish community. They have the power to get their ideas across."

Rabbi Steven Fink of Temple B'Nai Jeshurun in Des Moines says there is no doubt the organization is anti-Semitic. "They are, absolutely. There's no question of that. The rhetoric is very similar to Nazi Germany. The idea of a [Jewish] conspiracy causes us pain."

While the Nation has been seen as being anti-white, Muhammad says he wants to dispel that claim. He tries to meet with community organizers, and several area residents have eaten at his wife's restaurant.

Some religious leaders say that even with the talk of anti-Semitism, it's hard to overlook the good the Nation has achieved.

"I lift out the positive things they stand for. This is an organization that stresses discipline, responsibility, self-help and self-esteem," says Pastor Michael Hurst of the St. Paul AME Church in Des Moines. "If Farrakhan is doing something positive, I'm an advocate for it."

The St. Paul AME Church was one of the few churches involved in the Million Man March. Hurst says he was the only Christian pastor to sit on the podium with Farrakhan.

"Who can dispute the reasons for the Million Man March? But throw Minister Farrakhan in, and people say 'Don't go,'" Hurst says.

On the anniversary of the march, Muhammad invites all worshippers to partake in atoning for their mistakes. He says a lot of good things have come out of the Million Man March.

"Here in Des Moines, U.S. Attorney Don Nickerson adopted several children as a result of the Million Man March," Muhammad says.

ARE THEY MUSLIMS?

Whether the Nation is even considered a religious movement is debatable. To be considered truly a Muslim, one has to make the Haj, retracing the Prophet Mohammad's triumphant stand in Mecca, Miller says.

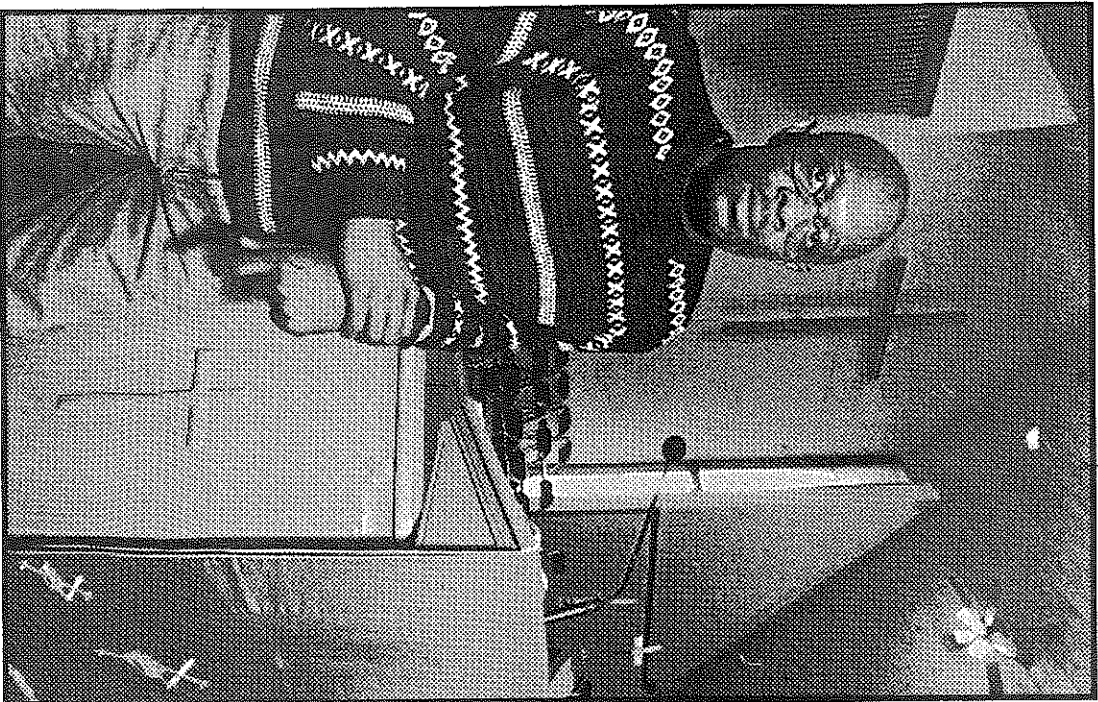
"Elijah Muhammad made the Haj and Farrakhan made the Haj."

But some Muslims don't recognize the Nation as a religion. "It is a social movement," says Imam Taha Tawil, chairman of the Islamic Council of Iowa. "Farrakhan is a revivalist of the black community, but that has nothing to do with Islam. They use the same terms, but there are differences in faith."

The Nation is not a participating member of any of the Des Moines religious councils; however, they are recognized as a faith.

"We are aware of their presence but we have almost no relationship with the Nation of Islam," says Dr. James R. Ryan, executive director of the Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa. Whether a religion or social movement, one thing is clear: Muhammad firmly believes that the Nation of Islam and God have a message not only for blacks, but for all Americans.

"We have to try to practice righteousness. If we are speaking the truth, people will respect that." ■



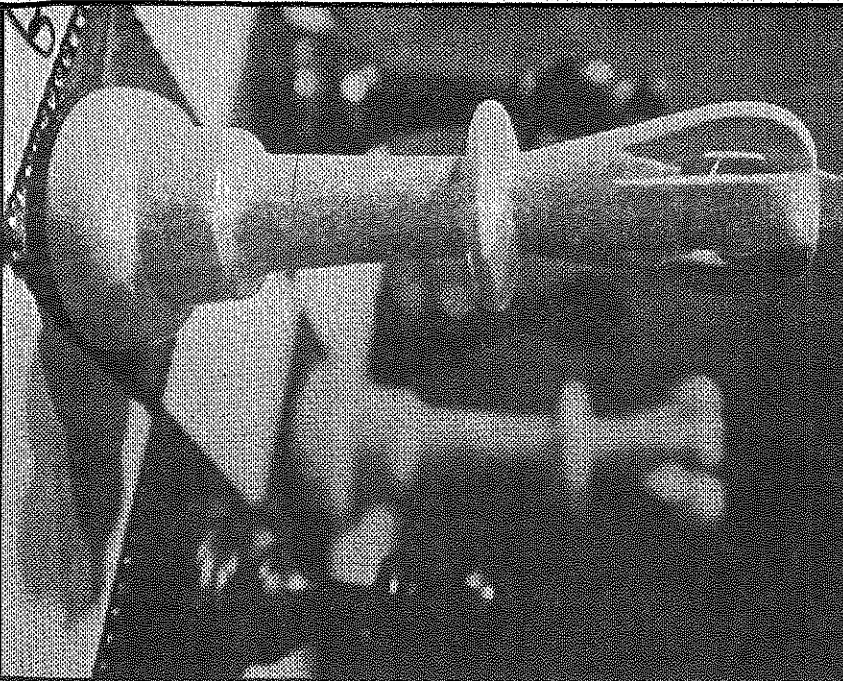
"I lift out the positive things they stand for. This is an organization that stresses discipline, responsibility, self-help and self-esteem."

PASTOR MICHAEL HURST OF THE ST. PAUL AME CHURCH

Mating ritual

Since the days of Voltaire, chess has remained the intelligentia's field of battle

BY WILLIAM DEAN HINTON



Thomas Jefferson played it. So did Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, Richard Strauss and a bunch of guys known by one name — Voltaire, Rousseau, Napoleon, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Nabokov.

Benjamin Franklin so loved the game of chess he often played in the bathroom while his female opponents bathed.

Fortunately for the rest of us, chess has a great many enthusiasts — a growing number, in fact, among people much less famous than Franklin. In 1989 there were 2,500 U.S. Chess Federation members under the age of 19. Today there are more than 36,000.

Ben Munson is one of the game's aficionados. He's organized chess events in Central Iowa for three decades despite the fact he hasn't played much since 1981. Munson even works the night shift at the phone company so he can plan chess events during the day. His day job, by the way, pays him nothing.

"Ben Munson is the premier chess person in town, as far as I'm concerned," says Judy Lanning, a fifth-grade teacher at Moore Elementary. Lanning herself should know a little about promoting the game. She thinks chess is so important she teaches it to her students for up to an hour a day during December. In spring she organizes a tournament played during recess.

"If you would come into my room while my students are playing chess,

you'd be amazed," Lanning says. "It's just an intense atmosphere. The concentration level is so high. I've taken photographs while they are playing and you can see they are just so focused."

Lanning sees the game helping students bored by traditional teaching methods.

Research also shows that chess

"If you would come into my room while my students are playing chess, you'd be amazed."

The concentration level is so high."

FIFTH-GRADE TEACHER
JUDY LANNING

develops spatial and reasoning skills, promotes creativity, self-esteem and, some believe, even heals emotional wounds.

Chess is also the great equalizer, especially between young and older players. Take Spencer Harsch, who last March beat two high school players during a team tournament. If they'd been playing football, Spencer wouldn't have survived. He was only

in the first grade.

"The one thing my children had a really hard time with was losing," says Joni Harsch, whose son Ben also plays.

After several years of playing, Joni says, her children have learned diplomacy. Win or lose, they shake hands after a game.

Valley High School's chess team, the defending state champion, has been revitalized by a couple of Russian immigrants, Dmitry Khots and Ilya Karasik. Karasik is ranked 18th in the country for 17- and 18-year-olds, according to the U.S. Chess Federation. Khots, however, is a slightly better player.

Khots, Mosher and a player from Ames, Jeff Croyle, wound up in a three-way tie Saturday in a tournament at Grinnell College for the top six high school players in the state. Those three will have a playoff March 21 at Mosher's house.

To prepare themselves, players like Khots and Mosher use books and play computer, correspondence and Internet chess.

That's a far cry from the Bobby Fischer era, when people assumed the game was easily mastered.

"Back in the '70s, people were more naive," Munson says. "You'd see loads of people drive up talking among themselves, 'My uncle showed me how to mate in four moves.' When of course they ran into the good players, they discovered there's more to this thing than winning in four moves." ■

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