

Islamic Society of Greater Portland  
Islam  
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The Islamic Society of Greater Portland (ISGP) is the oldest official Muslim organization in Oregon. It aims to provide an environment for social engagement and friendship between Muslims.

### **History**

In the early 1970s the Portland immigrant Muslim community was relatively new to the area. It was small, dispersed, and without a mosque. Muslims tended to socialize primarily within their individual ethnic groups. In 1975, five young Pakistani families with small children began meeting bi-weekly to study the Qur'an and talk about practicing Islam within an American context. They also got together for tennis and shared many meals. Through these gatherings they sought to deepen their own religious commitments and to instill Islamic values in their American-born children. This was also a way for them to bring the comforts of their cultural traditions to their American homes and children. The adults had grown up Muslim, but had not formally studied Islam. For them, coming to the United States necessitated an examination of their identities; many of them felt a strong connection to the Muslim aspect of their identity and wanted a way to incorporate it into their lives beyond the observance of the five pillars of Islam. They also wanted Islam to be a primary component of their children's identities. In addition to their bi-weekly gatherings, they had Eid dinners together and often broke fast together during Ramadan. They took turns hosting gatherings at one another's homes, and, as the number of families involved grew, they began holding events in churches and community centers. In the mid-1980s they proposed and adopted the name Islamic Society of Greater Portland (ISGP).

In May of 1985 they registered as a non-profit religious organization and obtained 501.c-(3) status. In that same year they began a Sunday Islamic school program for their children as a way of formalizing and manifesting their initial goal. In 1986 they founded the Muslim School of ISGP at Masjed as-Sabr (**Note:** please link to the profile for Masjed as-Sabr), which at the time was located in a house that was converted into a mosque in Southwest Portland. Two representatives from ISGP and two representatives from Masjed as-Sabr collaboratively managed the school. The books and curriculum they followed were obtained from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). The children were divided into three groups: boys five to nine years of age, boys nine years of age and older, and girls. Arabic language and courses on Islam and Qur'an recitation were taught to the children by seven teachers, men and women, for two and a half hours each week. To this day the Sunday school at Masjed as-Sabr operates under the auspices of ISGP and has thirty or more students and numerous graduates.

In 1992 they crafted and adopted a constitution, which stated the following aims and objectives:  
"1. To promote closer understanding among all Muslims in the Greater Portland area and to

strengthen bonds of friendship and brotherhood among them. <br>"2. To carry out activities and projects related to religious, social, charitable, and educational aspects of the life of the community. <br>"3. To foster cordial relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims and to promote the understanding of Islam among non-Muslims." Their constitution also established an Executive Committee with the positions of President, Vice President, General Secretary, Education Secretary, and Treasurer. It stipulated that these positions must be filled by election every two years by ISGP members, defined as those who pay an annual fee and regularly attend ISGP events. Past presidents serve on the Board of Directors, which serves to give the current Executive Committee advice and support. As of 2004, ISGP has had seven different Executive Committees. Three of the four presidents have been women. ISGP's wide reach within the Sunni Muslim community in the greater Portland area and their attempt to bring the local community into contact with national Muslim organizations is noted in the composition of their Board of Advisors, which includes the presidents of the Bilal Mosque, the Muslim Community Center, the Islamic Center of Southwest Washington, Salman al-Farsi Islamic Center in Corvallis, OR, the Executive Director of the Muslim Educational Trust, the Director of the Foundation of Islamic Knowledge in California, two <em>da'wa</em> instructors from the Institute of Islamic Information and Education in Virginia, two local Muslim attorneys, three professors at local universities, and a local physician.

In 1993 members of ISGP who were focused primarily on the education and outreach aspects of the Society decided to address the need felt by the community to create an organization devoted solely to these two issues. They founded the Muslim Educational Trust (MET) (NOTE: Link to MET research report). MET held weekend Islamic schools for adults and children of the community in the Campus Ministerial building at Portland State University. ISGP continued the "Muslim School of ISGP" held at Masjed as-Sabr.

In January 1996 ISGP invited and hosted Oregon's Governor John Kitzhaber to an Eid dinner during Ramadan in order for him to become acquainted with the Portland Muslim community and to learn more about them and their political and social concerns and needs. A professor within the community gave a speech entitled "How We Live and Feel in Greater Portland." Following the dinner event Kitzhaber scheduled a "brown bag lunch" discussion with representatives from the Muslim community in March of 1996. Four issues were discussed: chaplain services in the state prisons, Children Services Department sensitivity toward Muslim children in their care, planning workshops on Islam for state employees and statewide recognition of Islamic holidays.

In 1997 the membership of ISGP had grown to nearly three hundred families and was comprised of a diverse group of people. As a result of the great variation in cultural backgrounds, culturally specific events, such as musical programs and poetry contests, were discontinued as official ISGP events.

In 2000 and 2001, previous to the events of 11 September 2001, the Executive Committee began an effort to engage the media in order to build good working relationships. ISGP invited members to participate in a diversity panel meeting with reporters from various local news organizations. Additionally they invited and encouraged the media to attend events and cover them in news stories.

After 9/11, ISGP members, particularly those serving on the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee, were extensively involved in interfaith events. Many of them spoke about Islam and being Muslim in the US at numerous churches, synagogues, and schools. They also responded to numerous inquiries from the media. ISGP coordinated an interfaith Eid dinner in 2001 and again in 2002 in conjunction with Neighborhood House, a non-profit community center that provides a variety of services to low-income members of the community including about 1,500 Muslims. Congregations from various churches and two synagogues attended.

Currently ISGP is focused primarily on social gatherings and is beginning to work towards building a Muslim community center. Their vision for a community center includes having a variety of Muslim-owned businesses such as a *halal* meat market, Islamic-style clothing stores, restaurants with food from the different countries of origin represented in the community, as well as an area for community gatherings and a gymnasium. Their hope is to create a physical center for the community, as well as provide a way for non-Muslims to engage with and learn more about the Muslims.

#### Activities

ISGP organizes numerous social events, such as weekly dinners during Ramadan, and an Eid al-Fitr gathering for all local Muslims at the end of Ramadan in the Portland Convention Center. The current Executive Committee has established a relationship with the World Affairs Council of Oregon. ISGP hosts guests of the World Affairs Council from Muslim countries and holds dinners for them to meet and interact with members of the local Muslim community.

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