

AMSS 37th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Crossing Boundaries: Mobilizing Faith, Diversity and Dialogue”

Hosted By:
The Harvard Divinity School
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
October 24 – 25. 2008

ABSTRACT ONLY – WORK IN PROGRESS

“Institutionalizing Islam in America:
The Case of Community-Based Health Clinics”

By: Wendy Cadge, Ph.D (Brandeis University, Waltham, MA) &
Lance D. Laird, Ph. D (Boston University, MA)

This paper describes the history and development of the complete population of Muslim health care organizations in four US cities with large Muslim populations (Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston and Detroit). Based on interviews with more than 40 of the founders, current staff and volunteers of these clinics, the majority of clinics were established because founders wanted to emphasize their group identities as Muslims in America and give back to their local communities. As physicians, they had medical skills and decided to start community-based health clinics as places where they could donate these skills. Many emphasized their charitable acts as part of what Islam teaches, making clear that their clinics have always been places where all people can seek healthcare regardless of their personal religious backgrounds. Despite the historical importance of group religious identity, it was surprising to find that most clinics display these identities more implicitly than explicitly. Rather than seeing quotes from the Prophet or information about Islam in many waiting rooms, interviewees described their actions as what makes the clinics Muslim. These clinics illustrate an intriguing paradox: people with strong religious identities start organizations that are not explicitly religious on the surface. This paper explores this paradox by examining the extent to which it illustrates one approach to Muslim integration in the West, and the extent to which it may be uniquely American.