



GENESIS OF THE INNER CIRCLE

Before 2006

The Inner Circle started as a social group in 1996 when some Sufi¹ Muslims realised the need to create support for queer Muslims. Imam Muhsin Hendricks, ex-scholar of the University of Karachi, Jamia Dirasaat (1990 – 1994) pioneered the venture with a vision to reconcile homosexuality with Islam. It brought together 25 gay men to talk about their issues and to provide interdependent support for each other. This was co-incidentally at the same time as the adoption of *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, where The Bill of Rights (Chapter 2: Section 9) clearly states that: “*The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.*”

Some of the challenges facing queer Muslims were:

- How can I be punished for feelings I did not choose? Queer Muslims suffer in silence.
- Fear of loneliness, rejection by family & punishment from God.
- Leaving Islam – not an option for most queer Muslims
- In context of patriarchal and ultra orthodox interpretation of the Quran homosexuals are “out of the fold of Islam”. Hence resolve lies in personalising Islam – belief in a loving God and an all-inclusive, non-patriarchal interpretation of the Quran.

A year later the group became more inclusive and dynamic by inviting similarly challenged lesbians to join the group and the membership rose to 36 members. During this period the focus was predominantly on the trauma and suffering of members. Members were not equipped with sufficient professional support to contain the emotions and personal challenges that emerged. This coupled with the fact that the group was not sufficiently focused on the personal and social needs of its members, led to a shift in focus and people exiting the organization in 1997.

In 1998, the group was re-energized and it was transformed into an organisation to support Muslims who are queer. The organisation was called Al-Fitrah Foundation with Fitrah meaning “*your natural state as God created you*”. It provided social and spiritual support for queer Muslims and at the same time strategically fought homophobia in the Muslim community. Al-Fitrah was invited to the first International Queer Muslim Conference in Boston where it was instrumental in forming the Al-Fatiha gay movement in the USA.

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In 2000 Al-Fitrah moved to Johannesburg to help form the Gay Muslim Outreach (GMO). GMO was more socially orientated and did not adequately serve the challenges facing many queer Muslims and hence the group dissipated.

¹ One who does not separate himself from others by opinion or dogma; and who realises the heart as the Shrine of God.

In 2001, Carte Blanche provided the organization with coverage of the story of Muhsin Hendricks. By featuring the story it highlighted the struggles of queer Muslims in dealing with faith and sexuality.

Amidst threats from militant Muslim individuals and groups, Imam Muhsin Hendricks publicly announced that he was gay. The publicity in the Weekend Argus, the Insig Magazine and the first audio-interview on the Voice of the Cape (a prominent Islamic Radio station) provided mixed public reactions. He was subsequently asked to leave his post at the Claremont Main Road Mosque and was also refused visitation rights to see his children. The organisation set up a helpline and received approximately 150 calls. About 80% of the calls from the Muslim community were positive and supportive.

Some responses from the interviews:

*Queer individuals thanked Muhsin for starting this initiative
Parents requested advice on their gay children
Wives called in because they suspected their husbands to be queer
Muslims called in to threaten Muhsin and some even wanted to kill him.*

Thereafter there was an exodus of members due to the fear of PAGAD and for many years there was a lull. During the following years the membership grew considerably with insights on Islam and Homosexuality. Progressive Muslim individuals and organizations such as Positive Muslims and Islamic Social Welfare Association approached TIC to conduct similar workshops.

In 2004, Al-Fitrah merged with the GMO to form The Inner Circle (TIC). TIC was concerned about the large number of youth who were being drawn into a gay sub-culture of unsafe sex, drugs and alcohol abuse, which unfortunately was the only source of comfort in their subconscious striving to combat homophobia coming within their own religious communities. There was also a need to educate the Muslim community on queer issues and to eradicate homophobia from within the Muslim community. To this end, TIC hosted its first successful Annual Retreat. Various organisations became members at a fee of R20 per month (on a sliding scale) and were offered free workshops, an annual retreat and social event. A strong link was formed with Triangle, an organisation.

In 2005, the second Annual Retreat was hosted as an international event and it was the start of the Western Cape Chapter, which included anti-bias workshops with Muslim organisations, the start of filming of the movie ***In the name of Allah*** (eventually called ***Jihad of Love***) shot in places like Egypt, Iran, India, France, Canada, Iraq, Pakistan, and the United States of America. This year saw another radio programme with Imam Muhsin Hendricks who had a talk with Mufti AK. The programme led to verbal threats.

During 2006

In 2006, The Inner Circle received worldwide recognition as the biggest and most consistent Queer Muslim Organization. TIC's international presence affected Hindu-Muslim relationships in Guyana. It gave courage to queer Muslims in the US, UK, Bosnia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. It also had the UN in Geneva (Switzerland) talking about assisting queer Muslims in their struggles.

TIC registered as a Non-Profit Organization with the Department of Social Development in January 2006. There was a shift from being a membership organisation to one that focussed on changing mindsets through education, raising awareness and consciousness about reconciling sexual diversity and Islam. TIC ran a number of workshops dealing with issues of faith, men's and women's sexual health.

On October 16th 2006 TIC made a submission to parliament in support of same-sex marriages by proving theologically that the Quran was not against same-sex marriages as the terminology regarding marriage is not gender specific; it also argued that marriage is not an institution solely for procreation according to patriarchy; otherwise a marriage between an impotent man and barren woman would have been futile.

TIC opposed the Civil Union Bill instead of equal marriages as this is only perpetuating a discriminatory attitude toward the already alienated marginalized queer community and that anything less is not equal. It was instrumental in the granting of legal marital status to the queer community under the Civil Union Act passed by parliament in December 2006.

TIC was involved with the Pride Interfaith in order to network with queers from other religious persuasions and a podium from which to encourage a sense of oneness and unity amongst the plethora of Faiths. It also became a member of the Joint Working Group, which is an assemblage of various queer organizations answering the call of their needs-specific constituency.

During 2007

TIC offered workshops in and around South Africa, Indonesia, Sweden, Norway and the USA. Themes such as Life Skills, Basic Islam and Sexual Diversity were discussed. It also specifically empowered queers from faith-based communities with historical, scientific and scriptural facts as tools to bridge the rift between their sexuality and their faith.

In June 2007, TIC started Basic Arabic classes for beginners on a weekly basis with an attendance of 14 people. These classes were primarily set up to help our members understand and interpret Quranic text for themselves.

On July 28th 2007, TIC started its Leadership Training course for staff and volunteers of the organization. These training sessions were aimed at building confidence, raising self-esteem and training participants in skills such as public speaking, workshop facilitation and media training.

TIC hosted several Halaqaat (study circles) for members of the organization to engage with the scripture about issues pertaining to homosexuality, such as misinterpretations about Sodom & Gomorrah which is a story used as a blanket condemnation by Jews, Christians and Muslims against homosexuality. The Halaqaat afforded queer Muslims the opportunity to discuss current social, political and global issues from a Quranic point of view. Issues of human rights and freedoms are often explored.

TIC's director Muhsin Hendricks participated in a controversial documentary, "A Jihad for Love". Six years in the making and exploring the lives of several queer Muslims, the documentary caused uproar amongst orthodox Muslims not only in South Africa but in many parts of the world where it was released. This film by Parvez Sharma was the first documentary on the co-existence of Islam and homosexuality. The Muslim Judicial Council bought out half the seats at the cinema so that people could not go to see the movie.

TIC participated in an International Lesbian and Gay Association conference bringing the concern of sexual discrimination amongst religious communities to the fore and stated that a choice of religion and sexuality or both, is a basic human right. In September 2007, TIC was invited to participate in the Muslim Cultures Seminar organized by the Anthropology Department of Wits University. The director, Muhsin Hendricks delivered a paper on "Islam and sexuality in post-Apartheid South Africa" to an audience of academics. The paper was well received and a network of academics was established which supports the work of TIC and the research done on Islam and sexual diversity.

Sweden 20-25th November: TIC was invited by RFSL (an organization giving support to the gay & lesbian community of Sweden) to conduct a workshop on Islam & Sexual Diversity for human rights workers from Muslim context around the world. The workshop was attended by 24 participants from Pakistan, India, China, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Bangladesh.

December 2007: TIC built relations with Norwegian queer Muslims, organizations and supporters who have now formed part of the organizations international network. TIC was invited to Oslo by Skeiv Verden, a Norwegian organization, to aid in creating awareness around the issue of Islam and sexual diversity because the Islamic governing body in Norway issued certain statements denouncing queer Muslims. TIC provided various interventions to Muslim refugees, human rights and government organizations.

TIC was part of the national 07-07-07 Campaign that splintered off into the provincial End Hate Campaign.

During 2008

End Hate Campaign

Pride Interfaith

Pride March

Fortnightly Halqaat (study circles)

Research:

Interactive Website developed

The last quarter of the year focussed on Organisational development and capacity building. Intervention conducted by independent organisation appointed by one of our funders, Atlantic Philanthropy. It was part of a broader plan to transform TIC into an organisation that caters for its beneficiaries.

