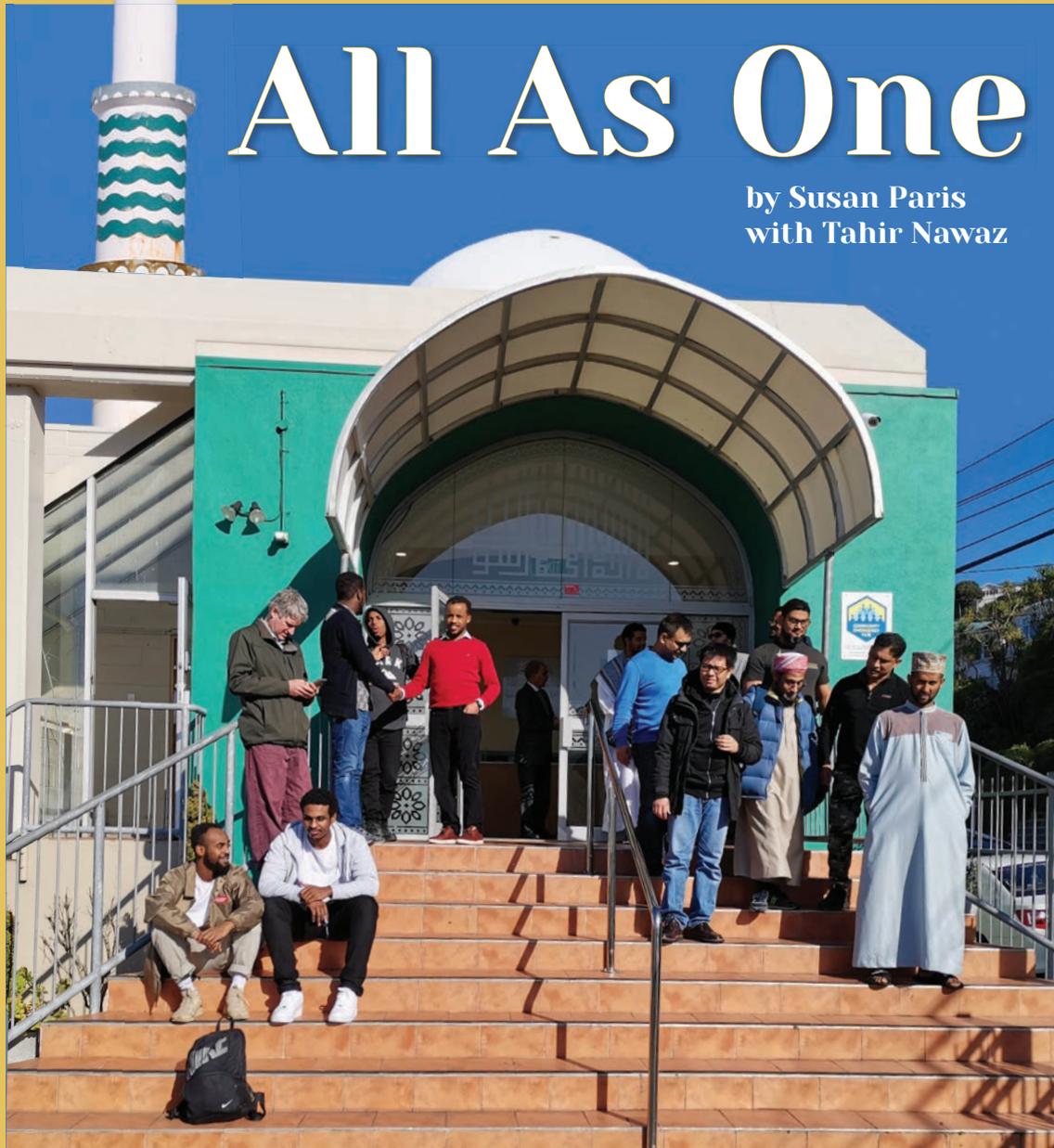


# All As One

by Susan Paris  
with Tahir Nawaz



Wellington's Kilbirnie mosque has lots of different rooms. It has a library, a kitchen, several classrooms, a hall, two prayer rooms – all spaces that bring people together. For many, the mosque is like a second home.

## Family

Most days, at least a dozen languages can be heard at the mosque. A lot of the people in this community once lived somewhere else: Somalia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Japan, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Syria. “We come from at least fifty different countries,” says Tahir Nawaz. He grew up in Pakistan.

Everyone here has a different story. Some people came to New Zealand as refugees. They wanted to feel safe and have a better life. Others came as migrants, hoping to find work.

Some Muslim families have lived here for several generations; others became New Zealanders only recently.

Because of this diversity, having a sense of unity is important. All prayers and sermons are spoken in Arabic, a language that many Muslims learn. “Sharing a language unites us,” Tahir explains, “and when we pray, we stand shoulder to shoulder. This removes our differences. Poor, rich, black, or white – these details fall away. Physical closeness gives us brotherhood and sisterhood. We become family.”



## Always Open

Tahir made the move to New Zealand in 2000. He had his own business but now works for the Muslim community. Tahir helps to run the mosque and is the community's spokesperson. He also looks after his people's well-being, including helping new arrivals adjust to their new lives and settle in.

Serving others is an important part of being Muslim. This is a teaching in the **Qur'an**. "We're taught that if one person is suffering, everyone suffers," Tahir explains, "and when people are hurting, we stand together by their side.

We show solidarity, and we stay strong." To help people connect, the mosque is always open during the day. "People come to learn and pray," Tahir says, "but they also come to socialise. We enjoy spending time together, talking to one another and listening. We like to stay connected." Weddings, funerals, celebrating new babies, shared dinners, language lessons, and monthly lectures about **Islam** – these things all happen at the mosque. "This place is our community centre," says Tahir.

**Qur'an (or Koran):** the Muslim holy book  
**Islam:** the religion of Muslims



## Maria

Tahir's daughter Maria has been coming to the mosque her whole life. She says that some of her happiest memories are of spending time here during **Ramadan**. "We wait till the sun goes down. After that, we have a big shared meal. All the kids are running around, excited. People are getting the food ready. It feels like a party."

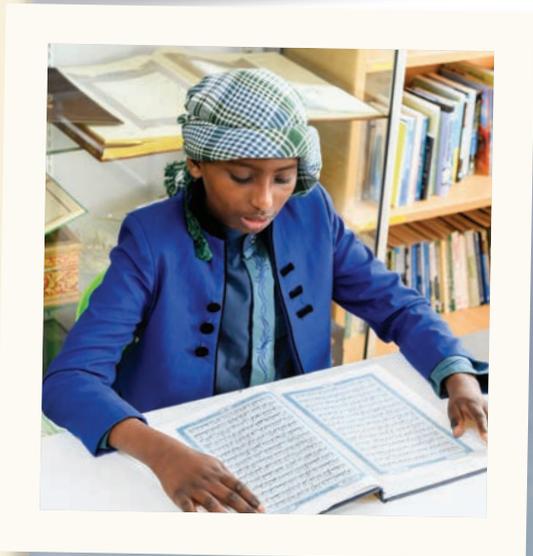
Maria took part in her first Ramadan when she was seven. Now that she's ten, she finds fasting a lot easier, although lunchtime can be a challenge, especially at school. "Some days, I have to go and read a book. Other kids' lunches can make you feel really hungry!" Maria says that when she fasts, she likes to think about other people who go hungry, like homeless people. This helps her to feel a part of something bigger, a community that stretches beyond her own.

**Ramadan:** the Muslim holy month



## Muslim New Zealanders

Muslims are a small minority in New Zealand. They make up around 1 percent of the population – not quite 60,000 people. Up until the 1950s, our Muslim population was less than a few hundred people, mostly from Asia and Europe. In more recent decades, larger groups have come from Somalia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Many settled in Auckland, which still has our biggest Muslim community. New Zealand's first Islamic Centre was established in Auckland in 1959. New Zealand's newest mosque is in Queenstown. It opened in 2019.



## Sharmake

Like Maria, Sharmake Ahmad has always spent time at the mosque. He enjoys being there with his friends and taking Arabic classes. (He also speaks English and Somali.) Sharmake’s a star student, both at school and the mosque. He likes playing football and reading novels by Anthony Horowitz, and he enjoys visiting family in other parts of New Zealand and seeing the different towns and cities. “I love all of it!”

Sharmake knows the entire Qur’an by heart. He’s referred to as a **hafiz**, a term of great respect that few children (or even adults) earn. It takes around thirteen hours to recite the Muslim holy book from beginning to end. Sharmake doesn’t do this very often. He says that whenever he recites, he likes to close his eyes. “It makes it easier to concentrate.” Sharmake hopes to be an imam one day.

**hafiz:** a person who knows the Qur’an by heart

## A Straight Path

Friday is the most important day of the week for Muslims. Sometimes as many as four hundred people will come to the Kilbirnie mosque to pray. When it’s an important festival such as Eid, that number doubles. “During the week, we can’t always come together,” says Tahir. “People are busy and have responsibilities. But on Friday, we make the extra effort.”

Muslims pray five times a day and the women and men pray separately. These prayers happen in all kinds of places, including home, school, and work, as well as the mosque. Tahir says that praying is a bit like meditation. “We go to our own space and have a short rest from the world. It’s time to reflect.” Every Friday, there’s also a sermon, given by the **imam**. He shares a message to motivate people for the week. “The imam helps to keep us on

a straight path,” Tahir explains, “and he reminds us to do good.” A sermon will often be about a current event, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement. “We learn about issues that affect the wider community,” says Tahir, “not just Muslims.”

Children often pray at the mosque, but during the week, Maria’s busy with things like homework and netball and karate, so she usually says her prayers at home. On Sundays, she goes to the mosque for Arabic lessons and to learn the Qur’an. Maria recites **surah** with her dad on the way to school and says that her Arabic is coming along. She has her own way of learning. “I listen to the words over and over till they get stuck in my head. I also look for patterns and try to find the rhythm.”

**imam:** the person who leads Muslim prayers  
**surah:** a chapter in the Qur’an



## Who We Are

Every year, the Kilbirnie mosque holds an open day. Everyone is welcome. Visitors are invited to look around and ask questions, which the imam is on hand to answer. “People are always curious and want to learn,” says Tahir.

As well as touring the mosque, visitors are encouraged to spend time in the many different “cultural corners”, where they can learn about Muslim countries and cultures. There’s always lots of good food to eat and interesting people to talk to. Visitors can learn how to write their name in Arabic or how to put on a **hijab**. They can also get their hands painted in the traditional way using henna.

Most of the mosque’s children take part in the open day, including Maria

and Sharmake. They deliver flyers to promote the event, and Maria helps her sister on the baking stand. She also takes her turn watching over the little kids on the bouncy castle, and she enjoys talking to visitors. “It’s a really fun day,” she says. “People get to be a part of our community and learn who we are.”



**hijab:** the head scarf worn by some Muslim women



## The Hāwera Mosque

From the outside, the mosque in Hāwera looks like a regular house. It even has a garden and fruit trees. For a long time, it was just a regular house. Then, in 2004, four families from the local Muslim community bought the building and turned it into a mosque. Even though Muslims had lived in Hāwera since 1983, they had no place they could call their own.

Although Muslims live all around New Zealand, most live in the bigger cities, many of which have had mosques for decades. Now, Hāwera’s mosque is used by twenty families, including Hanaa Davids’. When Hanaa is there, she spends most of her time helping her mum teach Arabic to the younger children. Her main job is writing Arabic letters on the whiteboard.

There are only five students in the mosque’s Arabic class – much smaller than Hanaa’s used to. Her family moved to New Zealand from Cape Town, a South African city of five million. Hāwera’s population is only ten thousand. When Hanaa first saw the town, she thought, “This place is too tiny to live in.” She quickly changed her mind. Now she can see the good things that come from living in a small community. People are friendly. They have time. Hanaa enjoys horse-riding lessons and the sound of mooing cows. She says she wouldn’t move for anything.



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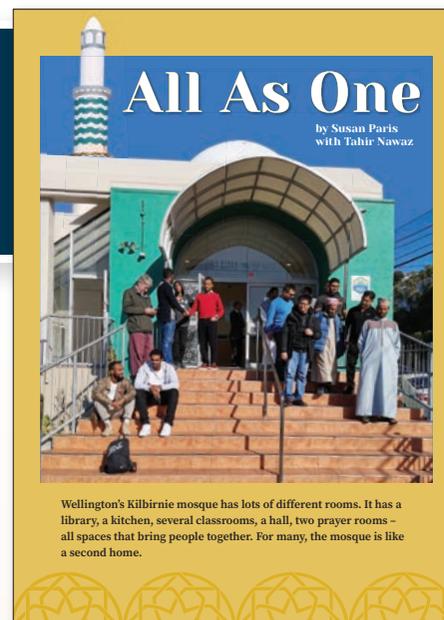
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