White Paper:
Effective Shia Youth Programmes in Singapore

Preface:

This white paper is a reflection of the concerns voiced by The Arkians with respect to the youth (15-30-year old) and their lack of obvious involvement in the community.

It was deemed necessary to take immediate steps to address this issue as well as work on a long-term plan of action that was both sustainable and effective. A survey was sent out to the community and 83 responses were received, the results and analysis of which can be found at the end of this white paper.

On the 2nd March 2019, nineteen volunteers gathered for a meeting at the AECC. The focus of the meeting was to identify a set of priority activities/events that would benefit the whole community and particularly attract the youth. The following points were noted:
- It would not be possible to cater for any specific or indeed all audiences
- Events and activities need not be bound to the AECC
- Community events needed to be expanded beyond the traditional majlis
- Irrespective of the number of attendees, programmes should continue
- Existing external activities such as cricket/football should be expanded to include all members of the community.

This paper seeks to summarise the challenges that the youth face that hinder their involvement in the Shia community in Singapore. The paper suggests steps to take in order to begin reversing the obvious decline in participation of the youth post madrasah and the need for greater connectivity between the various jamaats who profess the love for the Ahlul Bayt ('a) and the building of bonds with the wider community.

The Need for Effective Programmes:

The Disenfranchised Youth:

Erik Erickson (1968)[1] stated that youth who are members of minority groups which have been either oppressed or exploited are likely to develop a negative identity and even self-hatred by internalising the negative views of the dominant society. As a result of negative criticisms from society, development of negative identities in minority group youths has been seen throughout the history of many nations.

Compounding the minority status and its effects, is globalisation. Muslim Youths have been facing an identity crisis across the globe, whether they live in their ancestral home, or whether they be first, second or even third generation migrants. Individuals are surrounded by a 'dizzying array of signs and symbolic resources dislodged from traditional moorings', and are the main targets of global consumer cultures and messages about global social problems. (Dolby & Rizvi, 2008)[2]

Travel is within reach of most people and communication technologies has enabled people to be immersed in cultures thousands of miles away. The combined result has been the cultivation of multiple identities, with a question of belonging becoming more complex and more central to the debate on how we live together. Global is now local as a direct result of super diversity (migrants coming from all over the world); multiple identities (drawn from across, races, class, gender and generation); and transnationalism (being far more plugged in to events around the world).

There is a tendency to consider the effects of globalisation as unstoppable and that it is a process that the youth react to rather than actively negotiate. There is thus an assumption that young people are merely the passive recipients or vulnerable victims of global change. However, studies have shown that the youth quite often are the most active globally and on occasion are also at the forefront of global change. Having said that, their economic position is such that they are more vulnerable than many other social groups. Being active is therefore not necessary the same as being powerful and this is particularly true in the face of globalisation.

Globalisation is forcing the youth to constantly re think and revise their sense of identity and place within society. Their lives are constantly being influenced by new trends, be they cultural, technological or social. Therefore, efforts must be made to counter the creation of identities that run counter to the teachings of the Ahlul Bayt ('a) and the Qur'an.

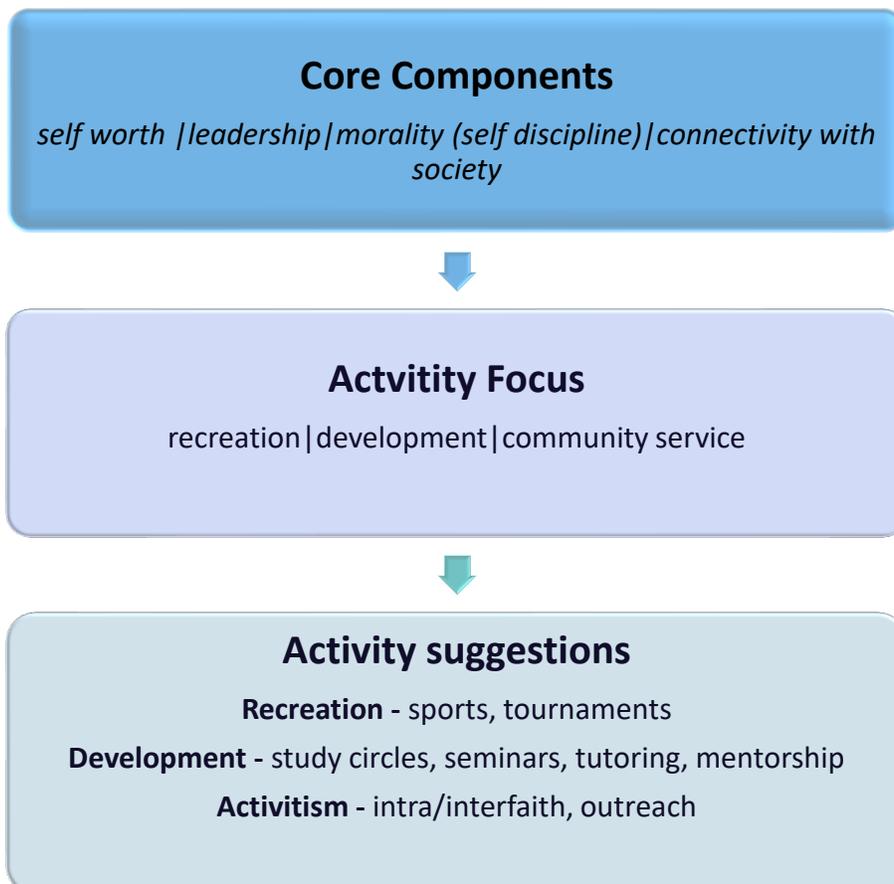[1] Erikson, EH (1968). *Identity: youth and crisis*. Oxford, England: Norton & Co.
[2] Dolby, N and Rizvi, F (2008) *Youth Moves – Identities and education in global perspectives,* New York: Routledge.

Worth considering: Participation "Paradox"

The lack of involvement of the youth in AECC events is often seen as a reflection of disenfranchisement or the absence of "religiousness". However, research indicates that young people are far from apathetic, but rather they are actors who participate in the mostly non-conventional ways. Therefore, amongst the wider and/or older generation there may be an oversimplification of the concept of what is "religiousness" and what constitutes participation. That is focusing exclusively on attendance at AECC events as a measure of "religiousness" or religious activism, maybe a floored measure.

Youth Involvement Model

The key is for the youth to understand their identity and feel a sense of belonging, where they feel engaged and part of a wider multiethnic society.

Core Components

self worth |leadership|morality (self discipline)|connectivity with society

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Actvitity Focus

recreation|development|community service

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Activity suggestions

Recreation - sports, tournaments

Development - study circles, seminars, tutoring, mentorship

Activitism - intra/interfaith, outreach

There are four core components that should be central to any activity endorsed by JMAS/HBI. These are:

1) Increasing self-worth
2) Developing morality
3) Developing leadership skills
4) Connecting with society

Increasing self-worth is significant because the self plays a critical role in conduct and performance. Increasing self-awareness, self-realisation, and self-esteem can enhance self-worth. This is the most important component of youth development as the question: "Who I am" will eventually lead to "Who I could become" and so offers hope, direction, and a sense of determination in life.

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their own ability to control their own motivation, behaviour and social environment. It allows the youth to see that the self is an active, independent agent. A positive and strong self-efficacy allows individuals to adjust and so prosper when facing challenging goals, sustained efforts, and recover in the face of failure.

Leadership skills have been emphasised through prophetic traditions. Youth make multiple daily decisions that affect their current and future well-being, including their social relationships, academic performance, and future opportunities. The capacity to make effective decisions also increases during this time with the development of more sophisticated abstract reasoning skills and a growing capacity for probabilistic reasoning.

A moral system of belief is primarily related to Islamic principles. The child constructs morality over time through social experiences shaped by cognitive and developmental abilities that increase with age. Examples include responsibility, restriction, care, social justice, honesty, and integrity. The youth need to learn right from wrong with the emphasis of doing good and restraining from evil. Connected to this is s**elf-discipline** or **self-control** – the ability to make yourself do things you know are needed to be done e.g. establishing of Salah without being told. Self-control has been shown as a greater indication of academic success than students IQ.

Connection with society occurs through investment, engagement, attachment, bonding and a sense of belonging. All of these abilities describe youth affiliations across a range of socialisation domains, including families, schools, and communities. A powerful youth program must have a principal focus

on a psychological state of belonging where individual youth perceive that they and others are cared for, acknowledged, trusted, and empowered within a given context. This connection involves both an inward feeling of cared for and an outward feeling of caring about the social environment. Currently, teenage lives are intertwined with multiple peer groups, including friends, siblings, neighbourhood children, classmates and online social world. They are involved with adults other than parents and relatives as they navigate different institutions and settings, including youth groups, religious organisations and schools. This type of connectedness requires both opportunities and skills.

STRUCTURE OF PROGRAMMING

Based on the core components, activities should be focused on three different areas:
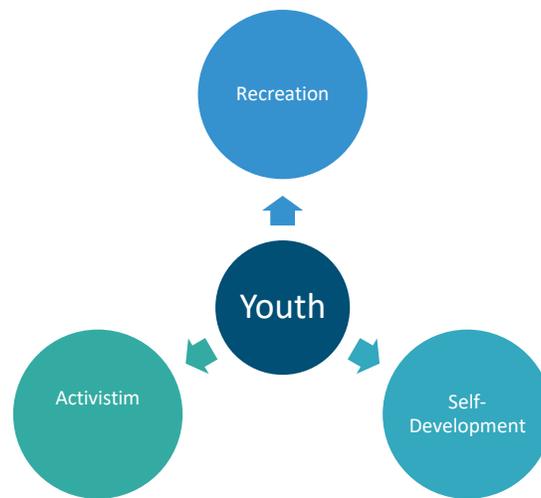
1. **Recreation:**

<div dir="rtl">إِنَّـا مَعْاشِرَ الأَنْبِيَاءِ أُمِرْنَا أَنْ نُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ عَلى قَدَرِ عُقُولِهِمْ</div>

"We, the assembly of Prophets have been commanded to speak to the people according to their level of intelligence."[3]

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[3] Al Kafi, Vol 1 page 23

This is the primary source of attraction for the youth in any setting. The activities have to be appealing and creative at the same time promoting healthy bodies, strong character and sound minds. Sports are important part of lives of many youths growing up. It not only helps build confidence, teamwork and companionship but it is also a great way to relate to youth of other faiths in a positive way. Some examples of recreational activities are: sports club, camps, field trips, tournaments, and other social activities such as family picnic/BBQ or fun day.

Camps or retreats are a great way to provide tarbiyah to the youth. The change in the environment allows for a level of dedication and seriousness. It can build character and tarbiyah.

With respect to sports there is currently a cricket 'club' with participants from the Shia community and in the past football has also been organised by HBI youths. Perhaps it is time to bring both sports together under one banner and open their appeal to all within and, perhaps outside, the community.

2. **Self-Development:**

قال رسول اللّه صلى اللّه عليه وآله و سلَم: من تعلّم في شبابه كان بـمنـزلة الرسم في الحجر، ومن تعلّم وهو كبير كان بـمنـزلة الكتاب على وجه الـماء.

The Messenger of Allah (S) has said: "The person who seeks knowledge while in his youth is similar to the act of inscribing something upon a rock; while the person who seeks knowledge while he is old is similar to the act of writing something upon the water."[4]

Personal Development must focus in areas of creativity, relationships, money and career, fitness and health, community engagement. Spiritual Development on the hand, must focus in areas of growth in religious knowledge and actions through study circles, formal religious training or weekend seminars.

Alhmadulillah with a functioning madrasah, Madrasah Jaafariyah (MJ), those aged 4-19 years are well catered for. MJ has been building on its predecessors work and this year created its first student council, a step towards training the youngster of today to be leaders of

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[4] Biharul Anwar, Volume 1, Page 222, Hadith 6 & Page 224, Hadith 13

tomorrow. There is also a more concerted effort to train individuals as reciters. The last two Annual Days and the last Camp saw youth classes take an active role in the event/activities from inception to completion.

For the post madrasah youths there is a need for providing quality lectures, seminars and workshops to promote intellectual thought and education growth. The monthly Fajr Salah Programme is an excellent example of a congregational activity aimed at reviving youth spirituality. Such events provide opportunity to strengthen one's relationship with Allah SWT through prayers, inspirational talks and bonding. They help create a sense of belonging.

What is perhaps needed further, is a mentoring programme as it helps develop young youth workers by providing them role models from whom they can learn. Such projects bridge the gap between the older and younger generations; help nurture their relationship for one another; teach the mentors patience and understanding and teach the youth love and respect.

In all of this the older generation should not be overlooked. There is a need for parental workshops to help parents to understand youth issues and how they can create the environment at home to help the youth to develop a strong sense of self, that is proud of its Islamic identity.

3. **Activism**:

أُدْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَ الْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُم بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

"Call others to the path of your Lord through wisdom and good exhortation and argue with them in the best possible manner."[5]

There are a number of Shia organisations within Singapore such as Jaafari Muslim Association, Himpunan Belia Islam or Muslim Youth Assembly, Al Hikmah, Anjuman e Burhani Singapore (Dawoodi Bohra) and the Far East Ismaili Jamaat. Besides JMAS and HBI, there seems to be little or no connectivity between any of these Jamaats who are united in their love of the Ahlul Kisa ('a).

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[5] Surah Nahl 16:125

The act of giving helps display the relationship between faith and activism. Activities in this area must focus on community involvement such as the Blessings of Ramadhan and the more recent Food drive.

Individuals, such as Br Fateh Ali, Br Nadim Kapadia, Br Nabil Kapadia and Sr Nafisa Kapadia are all involved in inter and intra faith and/or nationwide social welfare activities. Individuals such as these are best placed to help our community and youth in particular, to have their presence felt. Projects in this area should seek to engage the youth with their neighbourhood building meaningful relationship with people of other faiths, as well as helping give the society a real understanding of Islam.

There need to be activities that promote creative talent and encourages youth to utilise their skills and talents in their expression of Islam. Such projects will help build confidence and creativity in areas that are critical for the future generations of Muslims in Singapore. Establishing of a tutoring school or skills sharing workshops would be a step in the right direction.

The question needs to be posed every day: what has been done today that has raised the profile of the Ahlul Bayt in Singapore? What has been done today that the youth would feel proud to be connected to them?

MANAGEMENT

Islam in the AECC must be represented in the best way. Management should be aware of the need to provide good customer service. In this respect, sometimes the smallest of gestures add value to the experience in the AECC. Cleanliness; quality of equipment; friendly handshake and smile; the selling of hope by not dismissing suggestions and so on should remain a cornerstone.

Youth Program should be run entirely by a Youth Advisory Board. This advisory board should function under the leadership and supervision of MANCOM but should have autonomy and freedom to make independent democratic decisions for the youth.

The youth program must be financed independently with its own budget and funding options. This allows for the Programme to develop and prosper accordingly.