

HUZOOR'S TOUR OF THE UNITED STATES AND GUATEMALA

OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 2018

Part 1

A Personal Account

By Abid Khan

Introduction

On 15 October 2018, Hazrat Khalifatul Masih V (aba) embarked on a three week tour of the United States and Guatemala.

More than likely, people reading this series of diaries will have observed some of the unforgettable moments and remarkable scenes that took place. Many fortunate Ahmadis witnessed them first hand, whilst countless others viewed them on MTA or social media.

It is my hope and prayer that I am also able to share some aspects and incidents from those unforgettable days in October and November 2018 that will serve to highlight the blessings of Khilafat-e-Ahmadiyya.

Nevertheless, without a shadow of doubt, there is no text or camera that will ever do true justice to those extraordinary days travelling with Khalifa-Waqt.

Huzoor's visit came five and half years after his last visit to the United States, whilst his visit to Guatemala was not only his first visit to the country but also his first ever visit to Central America.

Apart from Khala Saboohi (*Huzoor's respected wife*), there were 9 members of Qafila who travelled as part of Huzoor's entourage.

There were five security staff – Muhammad Ahmad, Nasir Saeed, Sakhawat Bajwa, Mahmood Khan and Mirza Laeeq Ahmad.

The office staff comprised Munir Ahmad Javed (*Private Secretary*), Abdul Majid Tahir (*Additional Wakil-ul-Tabshir*) and me travelling on behalf of the *Press & Media Office*.

Huzoor also graciously included Dr Hamidullah Khan from the UK as part of his Qafila.

Additionally, present throughout was Dr Tanvir Ahmed from the United States who served as the on-duty doctor throughout the tour.

In addition to those who travelled with Huzoor, there were other central workers who travelled in advance. These included representatives of *MTA International*, *Makhzan-e-Tasaweer* and *Review of Religions* amongst others.

A revised itinerary

It was in early May 2018 that I first heard that Huzoor (aba) was planning to visit the United States and that it was also possible Huzoor would travel to Guatemala to inaugurate a hospital being built by Humanity First.

However, sometimes rumours spread which are not accurate. For as many tours as I have travelled with Huzoor, there have been at least as many rumours of tours that proved without foundation.

On other occasions, Huzoor planned to travel for a foreign tour but for certain reasons Huzoor later cancelled or delayed his plans to travel abroad. Thus, whilst I hoped the reports were accurate, it was not until a few days

later that I realised the possibility of Huzoor travelling to the United States and Guatemala was not mere speculation but a firm plan.

It was late May or early June when I reported for Mulaqat with Huzoor. After presenting my daily media briefing, I continued to sit in Huzoor's office for a few minutes, as Huzoor went through his work files.

Perhaps, Huzoor had read a report pertaining to the United States because after a moment, Huzoor looked up from his work and mentioned his upcoming visit.

Huzoor said:

"A few days ago, the USA Jamaat sent a proposed outline travel itinerary for my visit to USA and Guatemala in October but there were many changes that were required, which I have now sent back to them. For example, they had proposed that I travel on a Friday morning to Philadelphia and inaugurate the Mosque and lead the Jumma prayers on the same day as travel. However, I do not like to travel a long distance on Jumma and there are practical issues, as well, such as if we get stuck in traffic I could be late for Jumma."

Huzoor further said:

"Another change I made was that in the proposed programme, there was no Jumma scheduled at Baitur Rahman but there should be at least one in the national headquarters of the Jamaat. Thus, the final Friday of the tour, I have instructed should be held there."

With the knowledge that Huzoor's visit to the United States was a firm plan, I asked Huzoor if it was also true that he would be travelling to Guatemala.

In reply, Huzoor smiled and said:

"Yes, but I changed that part of the trip as well! The USA Jamaat had proposed that I spend three or four days in Guatemala so that I could do some sightseeing. They wanted to take me to a famous lake (Lake Atitlan) but that part of the programme would have taken at least two days and those days can be better spent meeting more Ahmadi families in the USA."

Though at that point, I had no idea if I was going to have the honour to travel with Huzoor, I still remember feeling a tinge of regret in my heart that we would not be seeing the famous lake! Thankfully, that moment where my thoughts were clouded by personal interest and personal desire lasted only a few seconds. Thereafter, I remember thinking how selfless was the character and nature of beloved Huzoor.

Rather than take the opportunity to visit a famous lake, considered to be amongst the most stunning and breathtaking in the world, Huzoor preferred to give his time to the Jamaat so that more Ahmadi had the opportunity to meet him.

A series of Ijtemas

There was still several months until Huzoor's visit but, as we passed through the blessed days of the Jalsa Salana in the United Kingdom, Germany and

Belgium, the prospect of Huzoor's tour to the United States and Guatemala remained at the back of my mind.

I was sure it would mark another great and significant chapter in the history of Ahmadiyyat.

Over the summer period and into Autumn, Huzoor's schedule was extremely busy. After travelling to Germany and Belgium in September, Huzoor returned to London and on consecutive weekends, Huzoor attended the National Ijtemas of *Majlis Khuddamul Ahmadiyya UK*, *Lajna Imaillah UK* and *Majlis Ansarullah UK*.

The three Ijtemas were held at the outdoor site of *Country Market* in Hampshire, near *Hadeeqatul Mahdi*.

On both weekends, Huzoor stayed at Hadeeqatul Mahdi and travelled to Country Market to lead all five daily prayers. Huzoor also inspected the sites, gave time to the participants and addressed each of the Ijtemas.

On 23 September 2018, Huzoor delivered the concluding address at the *Majlis Khuddamul Ahmadiyya UK National Ijtema* during which Huzoor spoke about the fundamental importance of Salat.

Very beautifully, Huzoor said that Namaz ought to be the '*constant companion*' of a true Muslim. Further, Huzoor urged the Khuddam to '*work day and night*' to refute the false allegations made against Islam and to bring mankind towards Islam. Only when all Ahmadis fulfilled their duties to their

faith would *'the dark clouds of today begin to part and be replaced by an emergent blue sky'*.

The following weekend, Huzoor separately addressed both the *Lajna Imaillah UK National Ijtema* and the *Majlis Ansarullah UK National Ijtema* on 30 September 2018.

During his address to Lajna and Nasirat, Huzoor emphasised the importance of staying firm in faith under all circumstances. Huzoor mentioned that many Ahmadi women had borne great cruelties and suffered immense hardships yet had never wavered in their faith. Huzoor said that today's Lajna and Nasirat should follow in such noble footsteps.

Very emotionally, Huzoor urged Ahmadi women and girls to *'light up the world through their sincerity and morality'* and to *'walk upon those golden walkways that lead to Allah'*.

In his address to Majlis Ansarullah, Huzoor spoke about the importance of *Salat* and forming a close bond with Allah the Almighty.

Huzoor said that it was important that we recognised the finite nature of this life on earth, whereby each day that passed meant one day less left of our lives. Hence, it was imperative that we did not waste any opportunity in seeking the nearness of God Almighty.

Furthermore, Huzoor said that Allah did not require our prayers or worship and that the worship of Allah was actually a great favour and mercy of God upon mankind.

Preparing for his tour

As Huzoor returned to *Masjid Fazl* after the conclusion of the Majlis Ansarullah Ijtema, he continued his daily activities and meetings in London, but also started preparing for his forthcoming tour.

In early October 2018, during the days prior to Huzoor's departure, I had the opportunity to serve Huzoor, as he prepared the text for the four public English language addresses he was due to deliver in the United States.

With the *Grace of Allah*, on four separate days, I was able to take dictation from Huzoor as he prepared for three Mosque openings in the United States, as well as the inauguration of a hospital in Guatemala.

On 3 October 2018, Huzoor prepared his notes for a speech he was to deliver in Philadelphia and before starting, Huzoor asked me whether the Mosque in Philadelphia was located in the inner city.

I was not entirely sure but vaguely recalled hearing it was located either on the outskirts of Philadelphia or outside the city itself.

As I was not sure, I should have made it clear I did not know but in that moment I presented the information as I vaguely recalled it.

Huzoor then dictated an address about the purpose of Mosques and I noticed that the length of Huzoor's speech was a little shorter than some similar events he had graced in other countries.

After completing the dictation, Huzoor said:

“I have purposely kept the length of the address shorter because in the United States people are more accustomed to shorter speeches and addresses compared to Europe.”

With Huzoor’s permission, I had recorded the audio for Huzoor’s address on an *iPad* that Huzoor had given to me some time ago and, after the dictation was complete, Huzoor instructed that I check if it had recorded properly.

As I checked it, Huzoor noticed the ‘Voice Memo’ app on the *iPad* and he said it was not on his iPad.

Upon, this I replied:

“Huzoor graciously gave me a newer version than he had himself and the newer version has the ‘Voice Memo’ app pre-installed.”

I said to Huzoor that I hoped he would get a new model of iPad for his own work.

Thereafter, Huzoor smiled and said:

“I prefer to distribute such devices to those Waqf-e-Zindighis (life devotees) who will use them for Jamaat work.”

After I left Huzoor’s office, I did further research and I realised that the Philadelphia Mosque which Huzoor was to inaugurate was actually in an

inner city area and so I sent Huzoor a message of apology and clarified that the Mosque was not on the outskirts of the city, as I had mentioned before.

Later that evening, after *Isha* prayers, I visited Huzoor and Khala Saboohi (*Huzoor's respected wife*) in their home, along with my wife Mala and two children Mahid and Moshahid.

After a few minutes, I took our younger son Moshahid outside the lounge where Huzoor and others were seated as he was a little irritable. Moments later, Huzoor came out of his lounge and walked down to his office.

As Huzoor was about to enter his office, he stopped and talked to me for a few seconds.

Huzoor said:

"Today, after I had given you dictation, I did my own research and realised that the Philadelphia Mosque has not only been built in the city but Philadelphia itself is a historic city! It is one of the biggest cities in the United States, whereas you gave me the impression it was a village!"

As he said this, Huzoor smiled but I felt very embarrassed and ashamed that I had given Huzoor the wrong impression.

Huzoor told me to come back to his office the next morning so that he could revise his speech.

When I returned home, I did further research on Philadelphia and the other cities Huzoor was to visit during his tour. I also sought the help of the USA Jamaat in this regard. Thereafter, the next morning, I went to Huzoor's office and as Huzoor continued to work through some files on his desk, I mentioned some of the notable things I had learned about Philadelphia.

After a few minutes, Huzoor said:

“The speech I dictated yesterday can be used at the second Mosque opening in Baltimore. For Philadelphia, I will dictate a new speech now.”

Over the next hour, Huzoor dictated a very emotional speech and I was sure Huzoor's words would touch the hearts of the local people.

Subsequently, Huzoor gave further dictation to revise the concluding part of the original speech, which was now to be used in Baltimore.

As the dictation concluded, Huzoor graciously permitted me to sit with him for a few more minutes.

I mentioned I had received a message from someone suggesting that during the final ten years of his life, Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) was completely bedridden and mostly in a coma-like state. From my own limited knowledge, I knew this was not the case.

After mentioning it to Huzoor, I immediately noted Huzoor's great love, loyalty and total respect for Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) rise to the surface.

Huzoor said:

“This rumour or claim is completely wrong. I personally met Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) in the early 1960s and he used to joke and talk with us. One thing I saw and noted was how much Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) missed Qadian, as he mentioned his longing to return to Qadian in front of me. Also, Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) would occasionally go to Ahmad Nagar in his later years.”

Huzoor continued:

“Until a few years before his demise, Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) would attend the Jalsa Salanas and thereafter he would continue to send messages to the Jalsa each year.”

As Huzoor said this, he told me to hand him a particular volume of the compilation of Hazrat Musleh Maud’s (ra) books and addresses known as *Anwar-ul-Uloom* from his shelf.

Huzoor then read out loud a series of writings of Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) from the final years of his life.

As he read through some of the passages, Huzoor said:

“See how even though the messages were short they were filled with great knowledge, wisdom and were very emotional. For example, Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) has written that just as people made false allegations

against the Holy Prophet (sa) and the Promised Messiah (as) they made false allegations and claims about him.”

Huzoor continued:

“Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) has written that he challenged such people to produce similar work to what he had done in his life for the service of Islam and out of his love for it. Thus, it is clear even in his final years, Hazrat Musleh Maud (ra) was mentally fully alert. He continued to lead and guide the Jamaat and fulfil his duties until his final breath and our Jamaat literature and history proves this.”

An unplanned address

A day later I returned to Huzoor’s office with the draft text printed for his addresses. I also mentioned that Ghana Jamaat were holding their first ever ‘National Peace Symposium’ in a few days and had requested a written message from Huzoor to be read out at the symposium.

At first, Huzoor continued with his work and indicated he did not have the time to send a message on this particular occasion.

However, a minute or two later, Huzoor suddenly told me to start taking down dictation for a message.

I was not prepared and did not have my laptop with me and so I used the old-fashioned method of a pen and a paper to note down Huzoor’s words as he dictated.

After a few minutes, I realised I was fast running out of paper, as I only had a few sheets in my file. Huzoor noticed and took some paper from his desk and handed it to me.

Over the course of ten or eleven minutes, Huzoor dictated a very powerful, emotional and inspiring address. He spoke about why the *Jamaat* holds Peace Symposiums and similar events.

Huzoor said:

“At all our symposiums, we seek to break down the barriers that divide mankind and to provide solutions to the ills of the world. We use such opportunities to prove the fact that Islam is a religion of peace and a religion that motivates true Muslims to engage in dialogue with others, to exhibit tolerance and to serve humanity. We present our ideas of how to develop peace and listen to the respective ideas and views of representatives of other communities.”

Huzoor continued:

“From an Islamic perspective, we urge governments and world leaders to act with justice and argue that instead of developing opposing blocs and profiteering through the arms trade, nations should show regard for one another and fulfil each other’s rights. We appeal to them to look at the long-term future of the world, rather than to be blinded by short-termism and narrow self-interests.”

Very emotionally, Huzoor said the weapons available in the world today were lethal enough to kill millions of innocent people and to leave a *‘trail of destruction for generations to come’*.

Huzoor said:

“Is this the legacy we wish to leave behind for our children and future generations? Do we desire that they weep at the horrors we have left behind for them? Is it our hope that, instead of remembering us with love and respect, they look back at us with hate and contempt? Do we want the coming generations to curse and scorn us?”

I was captivated by the awe and wisdom of Huzoor’s words and so, as Huzoor concluded his dictation, I said:

“Huzoor, even when you have little or no intention to write or dictate anything, you still end up writing very historic and memorable texts!”

Huzoor smiled and said:

“Yes, initially I did not plan to send a long message but once I started to speak the words flowed easily and without needing to pause for thought.”

Departure from London

After much preparation and months of anticipation, on 15 October 2018, we had reached the day of departure for beloved Huzoor’s visit to the United States and Guatemala.

It was an evening flight and so I dropped my son Mahid at school as normal in the morning. I came home, finalised my packing and ran a few errands before heading to the Fazl Mosque at midday.

Most of the Qafila members, including me, left the Fazl Mosque after a silent prayer at 1.20pm, whilst Huzoor and Khala Saboohi (*Huzoor's respected wife*) departed at 2.55pm.

The queue at Heathrow airport was extremely long and it took us over 90 minutes to check in our luggage and pass through security. By the time we were clear from security it was time to proceed to the airport gate for boarding.

As I walked on the plane, I wondered if Huzoor had arrived, as I had not seen Huzoor at all since leaving the Fazl Mosque. Just as I was wondering this, I received a message from Huzoor asking if we were safely on board.

I replied that we were and upon this, Huzoor responded:

“We are too, Alhamdolillah.”

I felt relieved to know that Huzoor was safely on board. Huzoor's tour had finally begun. *Alhamdolillah.*

Huzoor travelled on a *British Airways Flight 293* from London Heathrow to Washington Dulles airport. The flight was scheduled to leave at 5.15pm but was delayed and so by the time it took off it was 6.15pm.

Arrival in the United States

With the *Grace of Allah*, after a journey lasting around seven and a half hours, the flight safely arrived at Dulles airport.

I was slightly nervous about Huzoor's arrival. Ever since the 9/11 attacks, travelling to the United States has been a source of anxiety for countless Muslims around the world. Many have told stories of how they were held up for a long period of time by US immigration authorities or stopped for 'random' checks.

The risk of something going wrong this time seemed far greater, as the United States was passing through a Presidency that had sought to implement a so-called '*Muslim travel ban*' as one of its early flagship policies.

In fact, some Ahmadi Muslims I knew were surprised that Huzoor had chosen to travel to the United States during such a period and were of the opinion it would be better to wait.

However, I have always seen that Allah the Almighty protects the honour and dignity of *Khilafat-e-Ahmadiyya* and certainly, Huzoor's arrival in the United States was a manifestation of the Grace of Allah.

It was the third time I had travelled to the United States as a member of Huzoor's *Qafila* and, by a distance, the way in which Huzoor and Khala Saboohi were received was far more respectful than on the previous visits.

The *US State Department* had approved full state diplomatic courtesies and protocol to be given to Huzoor throughout his visit to the United States.

Thus, immediately after stepping off the plane, Huzoor was greeted by *Sahibzada Mirza Maghfoor Ahmad sahib, National Ameer Jamaat USA* and a representative of the *State Department*, who escorted Huzoor and Khala Saboohi to a private immigration lounge via a short journey on a 'mobile lounge'.

In the immigration lounge, the Qafila members, except for Huzoor and Khala Saboohi, were called one by one to have their passports checked by an immigration officer.

During this period, the State Department official and an airport official remained with Huzoor. It was their official duty to remain with the Qafila until everything was clear.

At the same time, Huzoor made it clear that he did not personally desire or require such protocol.

Speaking to the State Department official, Huzoor said:

"It is quite late already and I do not wish for you to be delayed and so if you need to leave please feel free. I do not wish to burden you."

The State Department official seemed surprised by Huzoor's offer. Perhaps, it was the first time that an official guest had offered her the chance to leave early!

In reply, she said:

“Your Holiness, we are here for you until the very end and it is our pleasure to be here.”

As the immigration process continued, Huzoor noticed that Ameer Sahib USA remained standing respectfully to one side.

Very affectionately, Huzoor said to Ameer Sahib that he should take a seat with them and it was only then that Ameer Sahib did sit down.

It was the first of many instances I saw during the tour where I observed the very high levels of respect towards Khilafat displayed by Ameer Sahib USA.

Some people may have presumed that, as Huzoor’s elder brother, Ameer Sahib USA would be more relaxed or informal with Huzoor. Yet, if anything, the levels of respect and deference he displayed towards Khilafat were higher than many other senior office bearers of the Jamaat I had seen.

Huzoor continued his discussion with the State Department official and enquired about the weather in the United States. Upon this, Ameer Sahib USA mentioned that it was expected to be 72 degrees *Fahrenheit* in Houston where Huzoor was to travel in a few days.

In reply, Huzoor said:

“I don’t know Fahrenheit as I am used to Celsius!”

As quick as I could, I converted the figure from Fahrenheit to Celsius on my phone but before I had obtained the correct figure, Huzoor said:

“I have checked, 72 Fahrenheit is about 22 degrees Celsius.”

The State Department official asked Huzoor if he planned to take any time for sightseeing or tourism.

Huzoor smiled and said:

“The schedule with my community is such that there will probably not be any free time for sightseeing on this trip.”

Upon this, Ameer Sahib USA said:

“At least 4,000 people have submitted requests to meet Huzoor personally during this tour.”

Visibly surprised, the official present on behalf of Dulles airport said:

“Wow! That is a huge number. In the USA, if you shake the hands of 4,000 people you can get elected as President of the United States!”

Huzoor laughed and said:

“Actually, in the past in one tour I met 6,000 people personally.”

The State Department official suggested Huzoor visit *Shenandoah National Park* in Virginia.

She described the park in detail and mentioned the different colours of nature on display and mentioned that she had been to the park the day before.

Hearing this, Huzoor said:

“I was thinking that you were describing the park very vividly and now I understand that it is because your memories are very fresh as you only went yesterday!”

Welcome at Baitur Rahman

By the time the immigration was complete and the luggage was collected it was 9.45pm US time.

Huzoor departed from the airport and proceeded directly to the Baitur Rahman Mosque in Maryland where he arrived at 10.35pm and was welcomed by over 3,500 Ahmadi Muslims in an extremely emotional and memorable scene.

Huzoor’s car stopped near the entrance of the Baitur Rahman Mosque and as Huzoor stepped out of his car, the local Ahmadi Muslims got their first chance to see Huzoor.

Occasionally, certain moments or a particular atmosphere is described as ‘*electric*’ and that is exactly how it felt as the US Jamaat members welcomed their Khalifa. Huzoor waved and smiled as he walked through the Mosque complex.



Huzoor went to his residence for a few minutes to do *Wudhu* before walking to the Mosque to lead the Maghreb and Isha prayers at 11.05pm local time.

By the time Namaz was complete it was 11.30pm and as Huzoor returned to his residence for the night, he saw his nephew, Mirza Ehsan Ahmad.

Upon seeing him, Huzoor smiled and said:

“For us, it is now Fajr time.”

According to the UK time, it was now 4.30am and Huzoor's comment reflected the very long and draining day of travel. Yet, there was no look of irritation or fatigue apparent on Huzoor's face.



"Allah Taala ka apna inteizam hota hai."

Alhamdolillah, Huzoor's arrival in the United States had been smooth. Nonetheless, a close friend, *Amjad Mahmood Khan*, who serves as the *USA Jamaat National Umoor-e-Kharija Secretary* told me that he and other members of the USA Jamaat had been very nervous and worried about Huzoor's arrival.

Just as I had feared, they too were worried that Huzoor would not be treated in an appropriate fashion upon entering the United States by the immigration authorities.

Describing the unique political atmosphere in the United States preceding Huzoor's visit, Amjad said:

“A critical task of the USA Jamaat is to facilitate the travel entry, exit, and port courtesies for Huzoor and his staff. This requires a careful appraisal of diplomatic protocols offered by the U.S. Government through the U.S. State Department. Needless to say, the political environment and context within which Huzoor was traveling to America in 2018 was the most tense and volatile in recent memory. America was intensely polarised and divided, and some recent policies have led to intensified scrutiny over travel and port arrival for the sake of national security.”

Amjad continued:

“Against this backdrop, in the months prior to Huzoor's arrival, the usual courses of action the USA Jamaat employed for prior trips of Huzoor hit significant roadblocks and caused us severe anxiety. In fact, our efforts had yielded no approvals or progress whatsoever, and just one week prior to Huzoor's arrival, we were officially informed that the courtesies extended to Huzoor in prior trips would not be available in any manner. At this juncture, we wrote to Huzoor for prayers and informed him of the extremely dismal situation, and Huzoor informed us not to worry and to keep sharply focused on prayers.”

I remember clearly the particular day Amjad mentioned where he and his team were extremely worried and anxious. During a Mulaqat, Huzoor mentioned to me that the USA Jamaat had written for prayers but Huzoor

himself was not concerned or worried. Rather, Huzoor's calm demeanour and countenance reflected his complete trust in Allah the Almighty.

Understandably, the Jamaat members in the USA remained worried. Yet as Huzoor's arrival drew ever closer they saw how Allah the Almighty forever protects the honour of Khilafat-e-Ahmadiyya.

Describing those final days and hours before Huzoor's arrival, Amjad said:

“With only two business days left before Huzoor's arrival, we began planning as if Huzoor would receive no courtesies - a position none of us had ever been in before. But just as we were at our lowest point, we began to receive a wave of unexpected support from our allies in U.S. Congress, who began calling the U.S. State Department to demand that full courtesies be extended to Huzoor. The ferocity and weight of rapid Congressional pressure - from both Republicans and Democrats - was like nothing I have witnessed in the almost 10 years that I have been serving in the Umoor e Kharija Department. At the same time, the U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, elevated the matter to the highest officers at the U.S. State Department. Even the Office of the Vice President of the United States of America intervened to support the request.”

Amjad continued:

“Remarkably, owing to Allah's immense grace, within 24 hours, the U.S. State Department's Chief of Protocol personally informed us that the U.S. Government had officially granted Huzoor full port courtesies in

response to the overwhelming pressure. Extraordinarily, the U.S. Government made an official "exception" to the policy used by the Customs and Border Patrol, noting that it did so 'to demonstrate goodwill on behalf of the State Department and Administration towards a heavily persecuted religious community and [their] deep appreciation for their partnership in promoting international religious freedom.'"

One thing I have learned is that nothing will ever stop Huzoor or deter him from propagating the message of Islam and guiding the members of the Jamaat.

Thus, whether the US authorities afforded courtesies or not, it would not stop Huzoor from travelling to America but, as Ahmadi Muslims, we ardently desire that *Khalifa-Waqt* is treated with respect.

Certainly, given the current US administration, it felt as though Allah the Almighty was Himself arranging everything for *Khalifa-Waqt*.

Reflecting on Huzoor's arrival, Amjad said:

"In its 100-year history, the USA Jamaat had never previously been conferred an official grant of full diplomatic courtesies for Khalifatul Masih by the U.S. State Department Office of Chief of Protocol in this manner. In the face of turbulent political times, no one in the USA Jamaat could ever have expected the level of respect and goodwill the U.S. Government showed to Huzoor. In a matter of only a few days, we went from being at our lowest point to having received an unparalleled bounty. None of our paltry efforts achieved this. This was purely due to

the special favours Allah bestows on the institution of Khilafat and the office of Khalifatul Masih, and how Huzoor's fervent and sincere prayers miraculously alter political and worldly outcomes. How blessed were we to witness this miracle before our very eyes!"

The next day, in the evening, Huzoor met some of his relatives who lived in the United States after *Maghreb* and *Isha*.

One of the first questions Huzoor was asked by a relative was how the immigration process and entry into the United States had been.

Upon this, Huzoor smiled and answered with one word.

Huzoor said:

"Kamaal!" meaning "Excellent".

Then, very emotionally and beautifully, Huzoor added:

"Allah Taala ka apna intezam hota hai."

That:

"Allah the Almighty makes His own arrangements".

Surely, we had witnessed Allah's own arrangements during the arrival and would continue to do so throughout the tour.

Inspection of Baitur Rahman

The morning after arriving in America, Huzoor came out of his residence where Ameer Sahib USA and other office bearers of the USA Jamaat were waiting to escort Huzoor on a tour of the entire Mosque premises.

Over the next hour, Huzoor inspected the various office blocks within the complex and the *langhar khana (kitchen)*, dining hall and library. Huzoor also visited *Masroor Teleport (MTA's North American earth station)*, which had been renovated and redesigned.

Whilst visiting the *langhar*, Huzoor advised that the size of the kitchen ought to be increased.



During an inspection of a medical clinic at the Mosque, Huzoor advised that, apart from the allopathic services it provided, it should provide homeopathy treatment. Huzoor said the over-dependence on antibiotics in the modern world meant that the risk of resistance to antibiotics were increasing.



As he continued to inspect the Mosque premises, Huzoor asked Faheem Younis sahib, *Naib Amir* of the USA Jamaat, about a housing project initiated by Majlis Ansarullah USA.

Faheem sahib gave an update and indicated that there had been certain issues that had caused a delay to the project.

In reply, Huzoor said:

“The Promised Messiah (as) has said that when things get delayed it is an opportunity to pray more. So, continue to pray and there is no need to worry.”

Huzoor also visited the homes of two *Waqf-e-Zindighis* (life devotees) who resided in the Mosque complex; Mukhtar Malhi sahib, who served as the USA Jamaat's *General Secretary* and Tariq Malik sahib, serving in the *Review of Religions* team. Huzoor spent a few moments in each of their homes and met their family members.



As the inspection came to an end, Huzoor noticed he had not visited one of the marquees erected at the complex. Huzoor asked what it was being used for and was told it was a base for Majlis Khuddamul Ahmadiyya.

The *Sadr Majlis Khuddamul Ahmadiyya USA*, Dr Bilal Rana informed that the ground was uneven and muddy and this was why they had not taken Huzoor to the Khuddam tent.

However, as soon as Huzoor realised there were some Khuddam on duty, he proceeded to the marquee and met with them, much to their delight and joy.

As Huzoor walked through another marquee he noticed a very large spider moving along a table, quite near where food was being prepared. Given the risk of contamination of the food, quick as a flash, Huzoor took out a tissue and grabbed the spider with his hand before handing the tissue to Ahmad bhai to dispose of!

As Huzoor inspected the Mosque, a non-Muslim called *Ilir Adili (48)* was present. He was an Albanian immigrant to the United States and was working as a builder. He had done some renovation work at Baitur Rahman recently and had come back because he wished to see Huzoor.

After seeing Huzoor conduct the inspection of the Mosque, Ilir Adili said:

“My father is a Muslim but I was brought up in Albania under a Communist regime where religion was banned and so I never had any interest in religion. But after working at the Mosque for a few weeks, I was extremely interested to see who the Khalifa was and what he was like. As I said, I am not at all religious, but when I saw the Khalifa I felt something very special. I felt that he is a beautiful and hugely influential person. I don’t know the Khalifa personally but just seeing him was enough for me to understand why he is a role model for millions of people. There are no words to describe how it felt to see him.”

‘In a time of darkness, a beacon of light’

Following Namaz and lunch, the first session of *family Mulaqats* was held on Tuesday, 16 October. Throughout the next three weeks, the vast majority of

people who met Huzoor in Mulaqat were those who had never met him before.

One person to meet Huzoor was *Dr Nuru-din Akindele (65)*, an Ahmadi from Nigeria, who was visiting the United States on holiday.

Telling me about the Mulaqat, Dr Nuru-din Akindele sahib said:

“Huzoor is the father of all of us. His natural warmth warms our hearts and he treats us like his own children. Huzoor is only two or three years older than me but Allah has made him my father by bestowing upon him the spiritual status of Khilafat. In a time of darkness, he is a beacon of light. No matter where we are from, Huzoor understands us, he knows who we are and what we are. Meeting him makes me want to be a better person, to do more for the cause of Allah, to be always truthful and to increase my devotion to the Jamaat of the Promised Messiah (as).”

Another person to meet Huzoor was *Humayun Sami (36)* who came to the United States from Pakistan in 2016.

After meeting Huzoor, Humayun Sami sahib said:

“My first impression is that in one minute, Huzoor gave me and my family more love than I ever thought was possible. In one minute, he gave us all that we will ever need. Huzoor is the Head of the Jamaat, and as such is so busy and has a great status, yet he carefully listened to whatever we had to say even though we are worthless people.”

Humayun sahib's wife, *Mansoorah Humayun* told me that her brother and her uncle had both been martyred in Pakistan and that she had mentioned this to Huzoor.

Mansoorah Humayun sahiba said:

"As soon as I told Huzoor that my brother had been martyred, Huzoor took out an 'Alais'Allah' ring and said 'I am giving this to you because you are the sister of a martyr'. I was so emotional and I will never forget the message that Huzoor wished to remind me of that Allah is always sufficient for us no matter what trials we face.'"

Mansoorah sahiba told me that the loss of her brother had been very hard for their family. Her elder sister had been extremely grief-stricken and during that period she contracted meningitis. Yet, despite the pain they felt, Mansoorah sahiba felt only pride at the sacrifices made by her relatives.

Mansoorah sahiba said:

"During their lives, my brother and uncle both said that they were ready to give their lives for the sake of the Jamaat and they proved it and now those of us left behind must live our lives with the same spirit of devotion."

Another person who met Huzoor was *Ramsey Koojo (41)*, a Ugandan man who had converted to Ahmadiyyat in 2016. His wife was not an Ahmadi but he was raising his two sons, *Issa (15)* and *Ibra (9)* as Ahmadis.

After meeting Huzoor for the first time, they each shared their experiences with me.

Ramsey Koojo sahib said:

“The thing that impressed me the most was how humble Huzoor is. He is the worldwide leader of the Jamaat and has such a high status, yet he spoke casually and lovingly even with my children. He showed them love and by showing them love, he showed me love. Today, I met with an exemplary religious leader who has increased my faith in Islam.”

After meeting Huzoor, his elder son, Issa told me about the Mulaqat and his own personal aspirations for the future. He said:

“Today was a very inspirational day for me to meet Huzoor and I felt so welcome in his presence. Huzoor is like a pure light and when you are near him that light infuses you and makes you a stronger Ahmadi. It is my desire to serve Islam and to make the world a little bit better by spreading the real message of Islam.”

I also met an Ahmadi lady, Jariatu Haja Sankoh from Sierra Leone, who had met Huzoor along with her elderly mother Haja Kadiatu Kargbo and her young daughter.

Jariatu sahiba told me that her parents had been amongst the pioneers of the Sierra Leone Jamaat, as her father, Al-Haji Amadu Sankoh, had accepted Ahmadiyyat in the 1940s. Sadly, her father had passed away in 2017 but seeing Huzoor had provided a great deal of solace and comfort.

Jariatu sahiba said:

“I have been in the United States for 15 years but today was the first time I ever had the chance to meet Huzoor. I do not wish to cry in front of you but I cannot help but be emotional after seeing Huzoor. Last year, I lost my father but today I met my other father, the one who loves me and cares for me more than anyone else. Huzoor is my dad and my everything.”

Jariatu sahiba continued:

“It had always been a dream of my father that I meet Huzoor and so I am sure that his soul will be happy today. He was a very passionate Ahmadi and used to go from village to village in Sierra Leone to preach the message of Islam. Due to his devotion to Ahmadiyyat he faced a lot of opposition and was rejected and shunned by many people. However, he lived his life according to the motto ‘Love for all, Hatred for None’.”

I spoke with Jariatu sahiba’s mother, *Haja Kadiatu* sahiba. She spoke in her local African language, whilst her daughter translated into English. She told me about the persecution she and her husband had faced due to their belief in the Promised Messiah (as).

Haja Kadiatu sahiba said:

“We faced a great deal of opposition when we did Tabligh in different villages in Sierra Leone and people would stay away from us. However,

no matter what we always said 'Alhamdolillah' that we had been able to accept the Promised Messiah (as)."

Haja Kadiatu sahiba continued:

"Today, I also met Khalifatul Masih for the first time and I feel so blessed. I feel as though I have been healed and cleansed. It is, without any doubt, the happiest day of my life. I am an old woman and I thought that I will never get to meet him. I look forward to going back to Sierra Leone so that I can proudly tell people that I met Huzoor and had a photo taken with him."

Another person to meet Huzoor was an African American convert, *Davina Anisha*. She was born in New York but her family originated from the small central American country of Belize. She was now working as a teacher in Maryland.

Telling me about accepting Ahmadiyyat, Davina Anisha sahiba said:

"I accepted Ahmadiyyat earlier this year on my 38th birthday. I love our message of 'Love for All, Hatred for None' and I love the Promised Messiah (as) and I love his Fifth Khalifa very dearly. I feel like I have found my tribe!"

Davina Anisha sahiba continued:

"It was amazing to see Huzoor today. He is so pleasant and soft and he met my young kids with so much affection. I felt blessed to be in Huzoor's

presence and he gifted me a pen, which has his name on it. I will treasure it for the rest of my life."

A beautiful Mosque

Huzoor had only been in the United States for around 36 hours but his itinerary was such that the following morning, on 17 October 2018, Huzoor departed from Baitur Rahman and travelled to Philadelphia.

The Qafila departed at 11.20am and we drove straight to Philadelphia, through Maryland, then Delaware and finally into Pennsylvania.

I had been to Philadelphia earlier in the year, just for a few hours, when I had visited the United States with my son Mahid. At the time, I had seen only the city centre and some of the historical sites and my impression had been that Philadelphia was a very well maintained and affluent city.

It is hard to judge a city just from seeing the tourist areas and, as we approached the Mosque, I saw a completely different side to Philadelphia.

The Mosque was located in the inner city and whilst approaching it the signs of destitution, crime and poverty were all too apparent. It seemed like a completely different city to the one I had visited a few months earlier.

Amongst the signs of deprivation, suddenly, like a luminous bright light appearing in the dead of the night, was our beautiful new Mosque.

After many years of struggle, a glorious and stunning Mosque was finally ready for opening.



For several years, I had heard that the United States Jamaat was building a Mosque in Philadelphia but along the way several roadblocks had delayed the process.

Alhamdulillah, many Ahmadis had made significant sacrifices in the cause of Allah and now the Mosque was finally ready.

As he arrived, Huzoor was greeted by hundreds of Ahmadis, including many from amongst the African American community and, upon request of the local Jamaat, Huzoor immediately unveiled a plaque to commemorate the opening of the Mosque and led a silent prayer.

I was confused as to whether that constituted the ‘official opening’ of the Mosque, as I was under the impression that the official opening would be on Friday with Jumma.



As my department had to prepare an official *Press Release* and report for MTA, I was unsure how we should report the plaque unveiling.

To ensure we did not misreport anything, I sought Huzoor’s guidance later in the day.

Clarifying how it should be reported, Huzoor said:

“Today was not the official opening. The Mosque will be opened with the Friday Sermon, Insha’Allah.”

It was thus clear that Huzoor did not consider the unveiling of the plaque as part of the Mosque opening. If Huzoor offers the Friday Prayers at a new mosque, it is that event which constitutes the inauguration.

A little confusion!

Our first few hours in Philadelphia were somewhat confusing and there was a degree of disorganisation.

For example, before Namaz, Huzoor conducted a brief inspection of the Mosque but it was not very well managed. None of the areas where Huzoor was to inspect were kept clear and so Huzoor had to walk through crowds of people.

There seemed to be no planned 'route' for Huzoor to inspect the Mosque and so he was taken around in a rather haphazard way.

The confusion continued after Namaz, as lunch was delayed for quite some time and then those of us Qafila members not staying at the Mosque were told that our hotel was just 10 minutes away and we should go and drop our luggage off and freshen up.

Munir Javed sahib, Majid Tahir sahib and I decided to go to the hotel but just as we were about to leave, I checked on *Google maps* and it said our hotel was actually 45 minutes away! If we had gone to the hotel it would have meant we were back late for Huzoor's family Mulaqats scheduled later in the day. So we stayed at the Mosque until the evening.

As Huzoor stayed at the Mosque it was not ideal to be accommodated in a hotel so far away. Thankfully, the US Jamaat was then able to find some rooms in a hotel that was 25 minutes away. It was still quite far but ensured that we were able to come for *Fajr* and return each morning in good time before Huzoor's engagements began.

With the *Grace of Allah*, the small issues were soon ironed out and the rest of our stay in Philadelphia was extremely enjoyable and memorable.

'A father, a friend, a brother and an uncle'

Later that day, and again the following day, Huzoor met Ahmadiis in family Mulaqat sessions.

One of the fortunate people to meet Huzoor was *Abdul Majid Yanfal (54)*, an Ahmadi who was originally from Ghana but had lived in the United States for the past twenty five years.

After meeting Huzoor in Philadelphia, Abdul Majid Yanfal sahib said:

"All I can say is Alhamdulillah! Huzoor is calm and comfortable with all the members of the Jamaat. Huzoor talks to you like your father, your friend, your brother and your uncle. He provides you with everything you need and his love encompasses all members of the Jamaat. My mother is disabled and, even though his every second is precious, Huzoor made sure that she was comfortable and ensured that she was able to have her photo with him."

Abdul Majid Yanfal sahib said:

“In 2008, I met Huzoor and told him that my immigration green card application had been stuck in the system for over nine years. I was extremely worried and frustrated but with a smile on his face, Huzoor said: ‘Don’t worry, it will be done’ and literally less than a week later I got called for the immigration interview I had been waiting over nine years for. Most people warned me the interview is extremely challenging and intimidating but my interview was so easy. They even handed me my approval letter there and then, which I was later told never normally happened. Without difficulty I could write a book about the blessings of Khilafat that I have personally seen or experienced!”

‘Meeting my friend’

Another person to meet Huzoor for the first time was *Jennifer Chaudhry*, an American convert to Islam. She met Huzoor along with her husband *Tarik Chaudhry* and their young children.

I asked Jennifer sahiba, who had accepted Islam in 2005, about her life as an Ahmadi.

In reply, Jennifer sahiba said:

“Ahmadiyyat has given me a purpose and it has given me peace in my life. I was brought up as a Catholic but neither God nor religion were ever really a part of my life. Religion used to seem like a fairy tale. When I discovered the Quran, everything started to make sense. If I had any

questions they were all answered to my heart's contentment. Alhamdulillah, my life is so much better now that I have Islam."

As we spoke, Jennifer sahiba began to cry, unable to control her emotions, especially as she told me about meeting Huzoor.

Jennifer sahiba said:

"I saw Huzoor on TV many times and so just the thought of meeting him in person was extremely emotional. Though I had never met him, I felt sincere love for my Khalifa and always tried to follow what he said. Now, I have met him, I am completely lost for words. As expected, Huzoor was very calm but I have to say I did not expect that Huzoor would have such a good sense of humour or that he would be so loving and informal with our children. Huzoor's smile is so kind and warm and he is so easy to talk to that I felt I was meeting my friend."

Jennifer sahiba's husband, Tarik sahib told me how he had greatly appreciated the way Huzoor had shown love to his family. As he said this, Jennifer sahiba once again became very emotional.

As she wiped away her tears, Jennifer sahiba said:

"In today's world it is very difficult to raise your children in a good way but I keep telling my children that they are very lucky to be Ahmadi Muslims and if they stay strong in their faith their lives will be of substance and they will not be like me when I was younger, as I wasted the early years of my life. My elder son is in middle school and I can see

that some of his friends are starting to influence him and so I am very grateful he had the chance to meet Huzoor to reinforce the fact that our faith is the most important thing in our lives.”

‘A religion of humility and simplicity’

Another family to meet Huzoor were *Jibraeel Adu Farid* (62) and his wife *Bridget Adu Farid*, originally from Ghana but now living in New York.

I laughed as Jibraeel sahib told me he preferred to be in America because there were ‘*too many Ahmadis in Ghana*’ which meant that when Huzoor visited it was difficult to get a Mulaqat, whereas in America it was still possible.

With a beaming smile etched on his face, Jibraeel sahib said:

“I am in dreamland today! Huzoor’s personality is wonderful! He even makes jokes and puts you at ease and speaks with us at our level. When I held Huzoor’s hand I kept thinking that I am directly holding the rope that leads to Allah the Almighty. Those few seconds were incredibly emotional.”

Jibraeel sahib’s wife Bridgette told me how she had grown up as a Christian before accepting Islam. She said:

“Ahmadiyyat has given me spirituality and I love it because it teaches humility and simplicity. When I used to go to Church, we had to dress up beautiful and there was competition between all the women. If I wore the

same dress for two Sunday's in a row, other people would be shocked and exclaim 'Why have you done this?' But here in the Mosque everything is so simple and the focus is on what is in your heart, not what is on the outside. When we worship in a Mosque we actually worship and our focus is God."

Sister Bridgette continued:

"I have complete faith Huzoor's prayers can bring about great miracles. I was nervous to see him but he was so approachable, loving and kind. I will be a better Ahmadi, Insha'Allah now that I have met my spiritual father."

Following their Khalifa

Throughout Huzoor's visit to the United States, I saw several young students from Jamia Ahmadiyya Canada who followed Huzoor wherever he was.

The fourth year students would often wait for very long periods standing outside to ensure they were in a prime position to see Huzoor when he walked to the Mosque or his office.

Invariably, they always had a smile on their faces knowing they were observing historic moments and especially on those days when Huzoor saw them and smiled or waved in their direction.

One of the students was *Haasher Ahmed* with whom I spent a few minutes talking in Philadelphia. He told me why and how, he and his class fellows had come to America.

Haasher said that most of his class had travelled to the UK in their summer holidays to attend the *Jalsa* and to do *Waqf-e-Arzi*. They were hoping to have a 'class Mulaqat' with Huzoor and to be given duties at the Fazl Mosque so that they could see Huzoor daily and pray behind him, but were instructed to serve at *Jamia Ahmadiyya UK*, which is an hour's drive from the Fazl Mosque.

Haasher said they were initially disheartened and in their personal Mulaqats with Huzoor expressed their desire to be physically closer to him. However, Huzoor instructed that they continue with the duties allocated to them but also reassured them that they would have many opportunities to be near him in the future, *Insha'Allah*.

During Huzoor's visit to the United States, *Jamia Ahmadiyya Canada* scheduled a holiday period and so Haasher and his class fellows rented a van and drove to Maryland prior to Huzoor's arrival.

Explaining how their efforts had been blessed, Haasher said:

"The day after Huzoor arrived we saw the fulfilment of all those prayers that we had made in the summer in the UK. Huzoor was doing an inspection of the Baitur Rahman complex and at one point Huzoor saw us standing near the langhar khana tent. Upon seeing our eager faces, Huzoor specially stopped and spoke to us affectionately. Huzoor

recognised us from our recent visit to the UK and those moments felt like the 'class Mulaqat' that we had hoped for in the UK!"

Haasher continued:

"Later, when we reflected on those moments we realised that Huzoor's words had come true when he said in London that we would have more opportunities to be near him in the future! It was a lesson for us that physical proximity does not necessarily equate to a stronger relationship with Khilafat but, rather sincerity, obedience and prayer are what create a lasting relationship with Khilafat."

After telling me about their time in America, Haasher told me about a personal tragedy he and his family had recently faced.

Given the smile and happy demeanour that Haasher normally exhibited, I would never have guessed the pain and grief they had experienced.

Haasher's elder sister *Manahil Ahmed* had been diagnosed with leukaemia in 2016 and fought the illness with courage and patience.

In the summer when Haasher met Huzoor in London he had mentioned his sister's illness and sought Huzoor's prayers. Haasher told me that Huzoor asked in detail about her condition and prayed for her and lovingly reassured Haasher.

Narrating what transpired, Haasher said:

“A few weeks ago, my sister, Manahil Ahmed passed away at the age of 23 on 15 September 2018, Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi rajeoon. However, during her final days and since then I have seen how those reassuring words of Huzoor were fulfilled. My sister was at peace and constantly told us she was happy with whatever God had decreed for her and had no regret or anguish with her illness.”

Haasher continued:

“My sister loved Huzoor and she encouraged us to all maintain a strong connection with Khilafat. Before she passed away, she left three messages for us to convey to Huzoor. The first message was to convey her greeting of ‘Assalamo Alaikum’ to Huzoor. The second message was that she wanted to apologise to Huzoor that she was unable to meet him and her third and final message was that Huzoor would pray that may Allah grant her forgiveness and elevate her station in Heaven.”

Hearing her three messages for Huzoor and the incredible levels of patience and gratitude shown by his sister was extremely emotional. I thought of how often we do not know the pain and problems faced by other people.

Yet, the one person who knows our problems, who shoulders our burdens, who knows our pain and is the source of comfort for Ahmadis across the world is *Khalifa-Waqt*.

Reflecting on the comfort Huzoor's words had provided his family, Haasher said:

"In the summer Huzoor reassured me that everything will be ok and every time I recall those words I remember that it truly was God's blessings and Huzoor's prayers that helped us to get through this difficult time with patience and steadfastness. It showed me how vast the acceptance of prayers can be."

Haasher continued:

"I left that Mulaqat in the summer thinking something else but now it is evident that those words of comfort were for this time, after my sister's passing. Huzoor's words and prayers granted us comfort beyond words. Whenever Huzoor speaks there is great wisdom behind it, sometimes which we may not understand right away, but through Allah's blessings, the meaning is opened to us over time."

'A beautiful spirit and a beautiful soul'

Another person to meet Huzoor in Philadelphia was an African-American convert to Islam, *Mahershala Ali*.

Along with his wife and infant daughter, Mahershala had travelled across the country from their home in Los Angeles to meet Huzoor.

I was interested to learn what had attracted him to Islam and the experience of meeting Huzoor.

Telling me why he had accepted Islam, Mahershala said:

“What attracted me to Islam was that it made a clear differentiation between man and God. In Christianity, there is an emphasis on Jesus (as) over God and I personally was very attracted to the concept that God is All-Powerful and all people, including the Prophet of Islam (sa) were human beings. Over time, I learned more about the Holy Prophet (sa) and also the signs of the latter days. I was also very taken by the good character shown by the Ahmadiis I met. It seemed as though they did not just preach the message but lived their lives according to Islam. I have now been an Ahmadi for 17 years and I never had a single doubt or regret. If anything, my gratitude increases each day at how my faith guides me.”

Speaking about his meeting with Huzoor, Mahershala said:

“I have met Huzoor on four occasions including today and it is always extremely humbling. It is an opportunity to be in the presence of that person who has been called by Allah the Almighty to guide the world. There is a light in Huzoor’s personality and great depth. I feel as though he can see through us and knows who we are and what we are. Huzoor is a beautiful spirit and a beautiful soul As Ahmadiyyat grows and spreads, there might come a time when it is not possible to meet the Khalifa personally and so I feel very fortunate to live in this time where I can converse with Huzoor directly and not just through MTA.”

It was very interesting to meet Mahershala and to learn about his life.

Through his personal career, Mahershala has become well known and famous and so, as he left the Mosque, a few young Khuddam approached him and sought to meet him and have their photo taken with him. After a few seconds, Mahershala stopped them and said, *"It is not about me"*.

In this way, very subtly, he reminded the Khuddam that their focus should remain on the blessed presence of *Khalifa-Waqt*.

A diner experience

It was the morning of 19 October 2019 and the day when the Baitul Aafiyat Mosque was to be inaugurated by Huzoor.

In Philadelphia, the person given the duty to drive Qafila members to and from our hotel was a *Khadim* from Virginia called *Harris Raja*. That morning, as we returned to the hotel after Fajr, Harris suggested I join him for breakfast at a nearby diner.

As soon as we entered the diner, I felt as though I had been taken back in time to my childhood watching American television programmes. The diner was quintessentially American with booths on each side and waitresses who walked around the diner with a coffee pot ever ready to pour and re-fill, just as I had seen on American programmes.

I ordered a 'small' order of pancakes and a few minutes later, the waitress came back with a plate stacked high with pancakes the size of small tyres! Before, I even started to eat, I asked the waitress to bring me a box so I could pack most of it up!

The breakfast was delicious and over the next hour I had a very interesting conversation with Harris. He asked many questions about Huzoor and serving near Khilafat.

One question he asked was one I had not been asked before. He said:

“When you are travelling with Huzoor people automatically respect you and you are looked after. How do you ensure that you stay humble and do not reach a stage where you expect such protocol?”

After a moment’s pause and reflection, I said:

“Under normal circumstances, it might be difficult to stay on an even keel but in our case Huzoor keeps a very close watchful eye on those who are near him or travel with him. He constantly guides us with his own humble and selfless example. Our greatest fear is we act in a way that is displeasing to Huzoor or which could reflect badly upon him.”

Inauguration of Baitul Aafiyat Mosque

With the *Grace of Allah*, later that day, Huzoor inaugurated the *Baitul Aafiyat Mosque* in Philadelphia with his *Friday Sermon*.

Alhamdolillah, after many years of prayer and struggle, the members of the Philadelphia Jamaat had been blessed with a beautiful and spacious Mosque.

In his sermon, Huzoor spoke of how Mosques were a means of ensuring that future generations of Ahmadiyyat remained firm in their faith.

Huzoor said:

“When we strive to fulfil the true purposes of building a Mosque, we will see the blessings and benefits of the Mosque in this very life. Our children and future generations will remain attached to their faith and we will be those who enlighten the locals of the true peaceful message of Islam. We will become those who will establish the Oneness of God and will spread the message of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (sa) across the globe.”



Huzoor also mentioned that Baitul Aafiyat was the first purpose-built Mosque in Philadelphia.

Huzoor said:

“It is said that this building has been constructed as the first purpose-built Mosque of Philadelphia. This Mosque should not merely show the locals what the physical attributes of a Mosque are, rather it should manifest the true beautiful and peaceful attributes of the teachings of Islam for the whole world to see and observe.”

Huzoor mentioned that when the first Ahmadi Muslim missionary in the United States, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, came to America in 1920, he landed at the port of Philadelphia. He was denied entry into America for two months and was unjustly imprisoned. Yet, even during that period he did not waver from his duties to serve his faith and fifteen people accepted Islam during his period of detention.



Huzoor also mentioned that the message of the Promised Messiah (as) reached the United States in his own life through the *Review of Religions* magazine and that a person named Dr A. George Baker accepted the Promised Messiah (as) at that time and was buried at a cemetery near the new Mosque.

A mountain climbed

With the Mosque officially now 'open', many of the local Jamaat members were overwhelmed and emotional, especially those who had worked on the

project or who had observed first-hand the various obstacles that had delayed the process for many years.

No doubt, it had all been worth it, as their beloved Khalifa had travelled from London to be with them and to open their Mosque.

A friend of mine told me that two days before Huzoor's arrival in Philadelphia he observed a devoted member of the Philadelphia Jamaat, *Syed Fazal Ahmed* sitting in the basement of the Mosque after midnight with tears in his eyes.

Upon being asked why he was crying, Syed Fazal Ahmed sahib responded:

"In my mind, I have dreamed a hundred times of the day when beloved Huzoor would walk into a new Mosque in the heart of this city and address our neighbours. Now we are 48 hours away and my only prayer is that Allah lets me live to see this happen. I do not want to leave this hall until it does."

Then, when Huzoor had inaugurated the Mosque, Syed Fazal Ahmed said:

"My life is complete. The person I love more than anyone on earth has visited my city and my Mosque. I can pass away now and need nothing else more."

His words were emotional and are even more poignant today, as Syed Fazal Ahmed sahib passed away in February 2019, *Inna lillahey wa inna illahey*

rajeoon. Alhamdulillah, he was able to see the fruits of his prayers and the prayers of countless other Ahmadis last October.

Another person closely involved in the Mosque project was a Khadim called *Niaz Butt*. For the past two years, he was a member of the committee that was charged with delivering the Mosque project.

As he had a background in construction, Niaz arranged contractors and also physically did a lot of work himself. Now the Mosque was finally ready and opened by Huzoor, he was incredibly emotional and proud to have been part of it.

Explaining his own involvement, Niaz Butt said:

“For the majority of 2018 up until Huzoor’s visit, I spent three full days a week working at the Mosque and three days at my own personal job. Towards the end, right before Huzoor came, I spent almost no time at my job and was working at the Mosque almost every day. There was so much work to be done and I remember I felt as though a mountain was to be climbed when I found out Huzoor was coming in October.”

Niaz continued:

“We were working until the very last minute, for example the elevators stopped working just before Huzoor’s arrival. I called the company, who were not normally friendly, and they came immediately to fix it just two hours before Huzoor arrived. Overall, there were so many things that

could and should have gone wrong but Alhamdolillah through Allah's Grace we finished the Mosque preparations in time."

Niaz further said:

"When Huzoor arrived, I saw him looking at the Mosque and I was overwhelmed with emotions. Even now remembering that scene brings tears to my eyes. I felt such honour that Allah enabled me to be part of a project that brought Huzoor to our city. There were many times when I thought that we cannot achieve our task and it was too difficult but then I would think of Huzoor's schedule and that motivated me to work even harder. I feel like my whole life up to this point was for this project. I felt as though I was fighting in a battle for the sake of Islam and Ahmadiyyat and once the Mosque was built I felt as though I had been given a new life."

Meeting with dignitaries

A formal reception to mark the inauguration of the Mosque was arranged for that evening, where Huzoor was due to deliver the keynote address.

Prior to the main function, Huzoor held a meeting with local dignitaries and a brief Press Conference in his office.

At exactly 5pm, Huzoor came to his office and noticed that the chairs were arranged in the same way they would be for a *'family Mulaqat'*, with Huzoor sitting at his desk across from the guests.

Upon seeing the arrangement, Huzoor said:

“This is not the way to set up for meetings with dignitaries.”

Thus, Huzoor instructed us to change the seating and told us where to put each chair. He said that instead of sitting at his desk, he would sit with the dignitaries on the other side of the office.

Just as we had rearranged the seating according to Huzoor’s direction, the *Mayor of Philadelphia*, James Kenny entered Huzoor’s office and welcomed Huzoor to Philadelphia. A few minutes later, another dignitary, Congressman Dwight Evans, also joined the meeting.



During the meeting, Mayor Kenny offered his congratulations to Huzoor on the inauguration of the Mosque.

Mayor John Kenny said:

“Your Holiness, I congratulate you and the members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community on the opening of this beautiful Mosque. We believe in multiculturalism and tolerance and so we are delighted that the local Ahmadi Muslims now have a place of worship here in Philadelphia.”

Congressman Evans also congratulated Huzoor on the opening of the Mosque and informed Huzoor that he was a member of the Congressional ‘Agriculture Committee’. Huzoor was interested to hear of the work of the committee and enquired about local farming conditions and agriculture.

Sampling a cheesesteak

As the meeting ended, the dignitaries were escorted to the main hall, whilst Huzoor returned to his desk and the chairs were repositioned to their normal position.

Thereafter, several journalists entered Huzoor’s office and took the opportunity to ask Huzoor questions during a press conference.

A journalist from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asked Huzoor if he had been able to sample any of the local food.

In reply, Huzoor smiled and said:

“My people did not tell me of any local specialities but if you recommend something I will look to try it.”

Without hesitation, the journalist said:

“You should try a Philly cheesesteak.”



Later in the evening, the local Jamaat ordered the local speciality, known as a Philly cheesesteak, comprising strips of beef steak, with melted cheese in a long bread roll, from a local restaurant and, as he had promised the journalist, Huzoor tried it. Afterwards, Huzoor told me he had liked it and that it was a good recommendation by the journalist.

An unfortunate beginning

After the press conference, Huzoor proceeded directly to the large multipurpose hall in the basement of the Mosque where the reception was being held.

The guests were already seated and at exactly 5.30pm, with Huzoor's permission, the event started.

Rather unbelievably when the person due to give Tilawat was called to the podium he did not come forward and for a few moments there was a lot of confusion. It soon became clear that he was not in the hall.

The next few minutes proved painfully embarrassing, as Huzoor was present and the guests were all waiting.

Finally, after what seemed much longer, but was probably 4 or 5 minutes, the Jamaat representative given the duty for Tilawat entered the hall and the event finally started.

It transpired that he had become stuck in traffic and so arrived late. I talked to him later and he was very embarrassed and apologetic that he had not given himself enough time. He knew he had made a mistake and was very sorry for it.

The USA Jamaat hosts were also embarrassed and realised that it is not wise to call anyone up to the podium until sure they were physically present.

Secondly, it was important to have a back-up in place for things like Tilawat and hosting such functions.

Thus, for the rest of the tour, at all public events, the Jamaat had people ready as back-ups, in case of a delay to the appointed person.

The next day, I spoke with Huzoor about the incident and it was clear that Huzoor was not happy that such a delay had occurred and that there had been mismanagement. Huzoor reiterated the need for Jamaat members who are given duties to perform them diligently and responsibly.

An emotional address

Though, it had been an unfortunate opening few moments, once the event finally started it proceeded smoothly and proved to be a memorable and blessed occasion, where the blessed words of Khalifatul Masih penetrated the hearts of many local people.

After a welcome address, brief guest remarks were given by local dignitaries, including the Mayor of Philadelphia, James Kenny.

Thereafter, Huzoor delivered the keynote address, entitled '*A Beacon of Peace*', in which Huzoor sought to remove the fears and misconceptions held by many non-Muslims about Islam and about the purpose of Mosques.

Huzoor's words throughout were extremely moving and a call towards unity amongst society.

Huzoor said:

"Irrespective of differences of race, religion or social background, we are united as human beings and so it is vital that we interact with other people, rather than isolating ourselves or only mingling with members of our own particular community. In all respects, dialogue is crucial to

breaking down barriers and increasing mutual understanding and knowledge.”



Huzoor said the Holy Quran had taught Muslims to be sympathetic and tolerant to the people of all religions and beliefs and to stand with them in their times of need.

Citing a recent incident, Huzoor said:

“Last year when a local Jewish cemetery was attacked here in Philadelphia and their gravestones were desecrated, the local members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community immediately went to offer their support to the Jewish community and to stand in solidarity with them, after that despicable crime. We seek no reward or gratitude for such things, because we are merely following what our religion has taught us, which is to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of other faiths and

beliefs in their times of need or distress. We champion the right of all people to live their lives, free from discrimination or prejudice.”



Huzoor said *freedom of belief* was an inherent teaching of Islam and this was proven by the way the Holy Prophet (sa) had governed in Medina.

Huzoor said:

“Alongside the leaders of other religions and communities, the Prophet of Islam (sa) established a covenant (in Medina) that served as the basis for governance in that diverse city. It ensured that all members of society were able to live in peace, free from oppression, and were free to practice their religion or beliefs.”

Huzoor continued:

“All people, no matter their faith, had a responsibility to uphold the peace of the state and to treat others with respect. The treaty fostered peace and ensured that a tolerant society prevailed. Thus, more than 1400

years ago, a multicultural melting-pot of a society was successfully managed and administered in Madinah.”

Huzoor went on to describe the true objectives of Mosques and made it clear that true Mosques were not hotbeds of extremism or terrorism, as commonly portrayed in non-Muslim countries.

Huzoor said:

“If our mosques serve to incite Ahmadi Muslims, it is not towards terrorism or extremism, it is only towards serving humanity and opening our hearts to our fellow beings. Our mosques increase our determination to spread peace and to cultivate bonds of brotherhood and mutual affection with people from all walks of life and to eliminate all forms of hatred, bigotry and division from society.”

As he continued, Huzoor’s vast expectations of the members of the Jamaat were clearly evident.

Huzoor said:

“Whenever any of you stand in need of help, we pledge to be there to aid and assist, in whatever way we can. In times of grief and despair, we will always be there to wipe away the tears of our neighbours and to support and comfort them.”

Perhaps, due to the fact that the Mosque was situated in a deprived area, it was this part of Huzoor’s speech that seemed to resonate and leave the

deepest impact upon guests. Many later remarked about how they were touched by Huzoor's pledge to 'wipe away the tears' of the local people and to support them whenever they faced difficulties.

Speaking about the Baitul Aafiyyat Mosque itself, Huzoor said:

"It will prove a beacon of light and hope to all peace-loving people, irrespective of their caste, creed or colour."

Concluding his address by referencing Philadelphia's history, Huzoor said:

"It is said that Philadelphia was the first colonial city, which permitted freedom of religion and freedom of worship in this country. Furthermore, it is the historic city where the Declaration of Independence was signed. Hence, this city has a rich and proud history and it is my prayer that its people are able to build upon their distinguished past and that these great traditions remain a hallmark of your future. I pray that this city forever remains a beacon of freedom of belief and that the people of this city each play their role in advancing peace, not only in this city, but throughout the United States and indeed, across the world."

'My name is Anetta Curry'

Whenever I have attended receptions or events where Huzoor has addressed dignitaries and guests, I have always witnessed that the impact of Huzoor's words is incredibly strong and positive.

Time and again, I have seen people openly admit how Huzoor's presence and words have changed their view on Islam for the better. I have met scores of people who have felt deep emotion and pride at seeing and hearing Huzoor.

Nonetheless, the atmosphere amongst the guests in Philadelphia was amongst the most emotional I have ever seen.

When I talked to many guests, the feelings of joy, relief and emotion were inescapable. Joy at the fact that they had been able to meet Huzoor and to listen to his message of unity and hope. Relief at the fact that they now knew that Islam was not the religion of extremism they had feared. And they felt emotion that finally there was a voice who spoke for *their* rights.

Amongst the people I met, one person I will not forget was a middle-aged African-American lady, a practicing Christian, called *Anetta Curry*.

As we sat together for a few minutes in the same hall where minutes before Huzoor had delivered his address, she repeatedly became emotional, as she reflected on an evening that had made a profound impact on her.

As we sat down together, Anetta Curry told me she had come to the event with some very strong preconceived beliefs about Islam. She said:

"Definitely, I came here with a very different impression of Islam and Muslims. Before I came here, I was fearful – actually very fearful. You do not know what thoughts I had in my heart! I actually believed that this Mosque was going to be built as a front for terrorist financing and as a hub of extremism and that you would plot another 9/11 at this Mosque."

It's no exaggeration to say that I thought that this Mosque will destroy the peace of this city and in fact of the United States. You know I may be the only person open enough to admit this but there are thousands of other people in this city who have exactly the same fears that I had. They hide them but the fears exist."

I was taken aback by her words. In fact, I was a little stunned. In the past, I had experienced a lot of people who had preconceived notions of Islam as a 'violent' or 'extremist' religion.

Yet, here was a lady who was telling me she thought our Ahmadi Mosque was going to be used to plot a huge terrorist attack and that her views were shared by thousands of others.

Upon reflection, I realised that it was not at all surprising she had such fears of Islam or that thousands of others shared similar concerns, given how divided the United States has become in recent years and how fears of Islam and of Muslims have been spread by the media and countless other influential figures.

I asked Anetta, why she had accepted our invitation to attend the Mosque opening when she harboured such fears about Islam.

In reply, she said:

"Because I was raised to give people the chance to present their side of the story and to get first-hand information. I was taught to investigate to

find out the truth. So, yes I was scared but there was no one who was going to stop me coming!"

Before I could ask anything further, Anetta told me about her experience of listening directly to Huzoor. She said:

"I had those fears right up until the moment your Caliph started speaking. But as soon as he started to talk, he immediately put my heart at ease. He made me feel comfortable. Honestly, I cannot tell you how glad I was that I came this evening! Today, after listening to him I feel I have been educated. I have realised that every religion has some bad people but that we should not assume all Muslims or Mosques are extremist."

Wiping tears from her eyes, Anetta continued:

"Even the way he looked and spoke put my heart at ease. The Caliph is so elegant, so beautiful. It is as if there is a halo around him. I feel so peaceful now. I feel so peaceful. You have no idea how peaceful I feel! I never expected to feel like this. I honestly never did. I was in awe of the Caliph. I kept looking at him and thinking he is a man of truth and a man of peace. The more he spoke, the more I relaxed and eventually every single fear I had completely disappeared."

Telling me about those parts of Huzoor's address that particularly affected her, Anetta said:

“At one point the Caliph said that if any neighbour ever needs our assistance the Ahmadis will be there for them. At that point I felt so emotional. His words and language were so touching and poignant. At another point, he said that Ahmadi Muslims will be there to wipe away the tears of their neighbours. What he does not know is that when he said these words, I began to weep and had real tears in my eyes. I thought of how my fears were completely wrong and how miseducated I had been.”

Given her initial suspicion and downright fear, I found what Anetta said next quite incredible. She said:

“The sad truth is that I do not feel this welcomed in my own community and in my own church as I have felt in this Mosque that I thought was going to be a terrorist centre. The Caliph is a man who is embracing us and it is like he is a shield for the people of Philadelphia and further afield.”

Anetta told me to write down carefully what she was going to say next. She spoke slowly and carefully to ensure that I was able to note down her exact words. She said:

“I promise you that I am going to tell my people everything I have seen and heard here tonight. I am going to tell them about Islam and educate them, like I have been educated. My name is Anetta Curry and I promise you that Anetta Curry is going home with a message to tell her people to embrace this Mosque, just like this Mosque has embraced me. That is my mission now and what I am going to do. I promise. I promise. This is my

task and I'm not going to waste any time. Starting tomorrow, I am going to be preaching the message of the Caliph!"

With that our conversation came to an end. We had talked for just a few minutes but those few minutes remain marked indelibly in my mind. It was a moment in time I doubt I will ever forget.

I had seen first-hand how Islam's fiercest critic had become Islam's advocate. Islam's denouncer had become Islam's defender. Why? Because she had seen and felt the blessings of Khilafat-e-Ahmadiyya.

'A diamond in the sky'

I also met an African American guest called *Khadeeja* who was extremely moved by Huzoor's words. She said:

"I am crying – you can see my tears. I can't tell you how overjoyed, happy and emotional I am right now. I did not expect to feel this. I honestly believe that our community will change forever after today because of the powers of your leader's words. Both during his speech, and also when I briefly met His Holiness afterwards, I was stunned. I have never felt such emotions before, as I did when I met him. No one can deny his spirituality. He is soft-hearted and dignified. His words are drenched in love. The Khalifa is a diamond in the sky. Do you feel emotional too? Or is it just me?"

Another person attending was *Senator Sharif Street*, a member of Pennsylvania's State Senate.

After listening to Huzoor's address, Senator Street said:

"His Holiness has shown us what is needed in this day and age and he showed the people what Islam can be if it is practiced properly. He showed it can be a unifying force in the world and has the power to bring people together. He showed that Islam is not what the media says. It is not what the terrorists do. It is a religion whose core is humanity."

Regarding the location of the Mosque, Senator Street said:

"Most places of worship are in affluent areas and the fact you came here shows that you are willing to reach out to all people. I have to say it was a surprise for me you chose this location but it shows that you do not discriminate when it comes to places of worship."

An American man, *Michael Ferrin*, told me he had recently converted to Islam and worshipped at a local Sunni Mosque.

Commenting on Huzoor's address, Michael Ferrin said:

"Some people have suspicions of Ahmadis but now they should remove all those suspicions! The way the Khalifa spoke was very appealing – he spoke with compassion about compassion. Many people fear Islam and so I greatly respect the Khalifa for travelling across the world to confront the anti-Islam prejudice directly. He speaks from the heart and with courage. It was an education to be here."

I met another African American lady, who told me she was struggling to deal with the racial divide she felt was growing in America. She said:

“Sadly, I don’t feel safe in America at this time as a black woman. Our President does not protect us. But I feel safe in this mosque and I feel safe in the presence of the Caliph. He makes you feel safe. I love how he said that this is the city of brotherly love and that Islam is a religion of brotherly love. He speaks to my heart and the only reason I’m sad is that there were only a few hundred people here today. We need the entire city and nation to hear this message.”

A night time view

Following the event, Huzoor proceeded to the Mosque to lead *Maghreb* and *Isha* and after Namaz, Huzoor walked out into the courtyard of the Mosque complex.

For a few minutes, Huzoor enjoyed the view of the Mosque, which was lit up, amongst the night sky.

As he stood with Ameer Sahib USA and a few other members of the Jamaat, Huzoor looked up in the direction of the Mosque’s Minaret.

Huzoor said:

“Someone had told me that the minaret was too wide but I think it is very attractive and appropriate.”

Visit to the grave of Dr A. George Baker

The next morning, several groups, including the local Amila, had the opportunity to have their photo taken with Huzoor.

Huzoor also planted a tree at the Mosque, where hundreds of Ahmadis had gathered to see off Huzoor as he moved on to the next stage of his tour after three successful and blessed days in Philadelphia.

After a silent prayer, Huzoor left Philadelphia at 11.25am and the Qafila drove for a few minutes before arriving at the *Laurel Hill Cemetery*, where Huzoor prayed at the grave of Dr A. George Baker the pioneer Ahmadi Muslim mentioned by Huzoor in his Friday Sermon the day before.



The local Sadr Jamaat informed Huzoor about how the Jamaat had found the grave of Dr Baker.

Huzoor enquired if the Jamaat knew of any of Dr Baker's descendants.

In reply, Sadr Sahib said that the Jamaat had been able to trace his progeny up till the late 1950s but after that they were not aware of any members of his family.

As Huzoor returned to his car he walked over some grass that was somewhat wet and muddy. Thus, upon returning to his vehicle, a Khadim had placed a mat outside Huzoor's car door for Huzoor to clean and dry his shoes on.

Immediately, Huzoor noticed that the Khadim who had put down the mat was the brother of the person whose car Huzoor was seated in.

Thus, Huzoor smiled and jokingly said:

"Did you put the mat there so that your brother's car does not get dirty?"

A memorable drive

With that the Qafila drove through Philadelphia, escorted by local police, and the route included a drive through city centre and through the historic parts of the city, such as the exact point where the *Declaration of Independence* was signed, *Liberty Bell* and across the *Ben Franklin Bridge*.

We drove past various museums documenting different elements of the history of the United States and along the curiously named '*Strawberry Street*'.

I was glad Huzoor and Khala Saboohi (*Huzoor's respected wife*) had the opportunity to see the more developed parts of the city. I was in the car directly behind Huzoor's car and I could actually see that Huzoor was looking out of his window at the different sites.

At one point we drove past a street lined with restaurants and hotels, including a restaurant with an extremely large and inviting sign which read '*Jimmy G's Steaks*'.

The restaurant was accompanied by another sign that proudly read '*Best Fries in Philly*'.

I suddenly felt extremely hungry and wished I could taste the 'best fries in Philly'! Instead, I sated my appetite with some dried mango pieces that were our constant companions during our travels on the road in the United States.

Finally, before leaving the city, the Qafila drove to the seaport where Mufti Muhammad Sadiq sahib, the first Missionary of the United States, had landed almost a century earlier in 1920.

As we reached the exact point the cars slowed down almost to a standstill.

As we looked out of our cars, a local member of the Jamaat, informed Huzoor and the other Qafila members via walkie talkie, of the exact place where Mufti sahib had been arrested.

Those of us present all felt fortunate to be retracing those historic first steps of Ahmadiyyat's first entry into the United States with the true representative of the Promised Messiah (as). *Alhamdolillah.*

With that Huzoor's visit to Philadelphia reached its conclusion and the Qafila drove onwards towards Baltimore.

We were all eagerly anticipating not only the inauguration of a Mosque in Baltimore but also looked forward keenly to Huzoor's travels to Texas and Guatemala over the next few days, Insha'Allah.

End of Part 1

Any comments or feedback: abid.khan@pressahmadiyya.com