

## A Mosque in Clitheroe

**Directions:** Read the following article and then discuss the connection questions that follow.

On a chilly night this winter, this pristine town in some of Britain's most untouched countryside voted to allow a former Christian church to become a mosque.

The narrow vote by the municipal authorities marked the end of a bitter struggle by the tiny Muslim population to establish a place of worship, one that will put a mosque in an imposing stone Methodist church that had been used as a factory since its congregation dwindled away 40 years ago.

The battle underscored Britain's unease with its Muslim minority [...] whose devotion has challenged an increasingly secular Britain's sense of itself.

Britain may continue to regard itself as a Christian nation. But practicing Muslims are likely to outnumber church-attending Christians in several decades, according to a recent survey by Christian Research, a group that specializes in documenting the status of Christianity in Britain.

[...] In Clitheroe, the tussle involved a passionate young professional of Pakistani descent coming up against the raw nerves of tradition-bound local residents.

"We've been trying to get a place of worship for 30 years," said Sheraz Arshad, 31, the Muslim leader here, his voice rattling around the empty old Mount Zion Methodist Church that will house his mosque. "It's fitting it is a church: it is visually symbolic, the coming together of religions."

With a population of 14,500, a Norman castle and an Anglican church established in 1122, Clitheroe is tucked away in Lancashire County in the north. People here liked to think they represented a last barrier to the mosques that had become features in surrounding industrial towns. But Clitheroe had not bargained on the determination of Mr. Arshad, a project manager at British Aerospace. He is the British-born son of Mohamed Arshad, who came to Clitheroe from Rawalpindi [in Pakistan] in 1965 to work at the cement works on the town's outskirts.

When his father died in 2000, leaving his efforts to establish a mosque for the approximately 300 Muslims unfulfilled, Mr. Arshad took up the challenge.

"I thought, why should I be treated any less well?" Mr. Arshad said. "One quarter of my salary goes in tax, too. I was driven to do the mosque."

In all, Mr. Arshad and his father made eight applications for a mosque. [...]

Often there was booing at council meetings, and, he said, cries of "Go home, P[\*]ki!"

The authorities' official reasoning for the rejections was generally that a mosque would attract outsiders – a veiled reference to Muslims – to Clitheroe.

[...] Mr. Arshad decided to get organized and demonstrate that he was a moderate Muslim who could take part in all the town's affairs.

He formed an interfaith scout group – Beaver Scouts – that honored many religious occasions, including the Taoist and Jewish new years. He established the Medina Islamic Education Center as an interfaith group for adults, and persuaded the local council to allow the group to lead a key committee. He organized a series of lectures on global conflict that attracted important academics.

On Dec. 21, the night of the vote on the mosque, the council chambers overflowed with 150 people. The police were poised outside. The vote was 7 to 5 for the mosque; there was no violence.

"I went in resigned to the fact we would lose," Mr. Arshad said. "In the end, it was very humbling."

"The church's [listing] as a place of worship in the town's planning records helped carry the day," said Geoffrey Jackson, chief executive of Trinity Partnership, a social welfare agency, and a Methodist who backed Mr. Arshad.

So did Mr. Arshad's demeanor. "He's a top lad, with a Lancashire accent, born and bred here, and educated at Clitheroe Grammar," Mr. Jackson said.<sup>1</sup>

## Connection Questions

1. **What is the role of religious institutions in the life of a community?**
  - a. Why do you think religion plays an important role in immigrant communities?
  - b. How do those answers explain why it was important for Arshad to build a local mosque?
2. **Islamic scholar Riem Spielhaus explains, 'Each [mosque building] conflict presents an opportunity to open communication because they raise rarely discussed issues.'**
  - a. What issues do those conflicts raise?
  - b. How can these conflicts be turned into opportunities to promote integration?
3. **How do you explain the initial resistance to Arshad's proposal at the town council meetings?**
  - a. What role did fear play?
  - b. How did Arshad overcome that resistance?

<sup>1</sup> Jane Perlez, 'Old Church Becomes Mosque in Uneasy Britain', *New York Times*, 2 April 2007, accessed 13 March 2023.