W. D. Mohammed, 74, Muslim reformer: Rejected Nation of Islam's black nationalist teachings

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Muslim leaders and community members across the nation mourned the loss of Warith Deen Mohammed, a key African-American figure who worked to unite Muslims of different races to follow an orthodox form of Islam.

Mohammed, 74, was the former leader of the Nation of Islam who broke with the black nationalist teachings of his father, Elijah Muhammad, and inspired thousands of African-American Muslims to follow mainstream Islam. He died September 9 at his home in Markham, Illinois.

"For those in his community, it is a dire loss. For those not in his community, it is both the loss of a pioneer and a very influential person," said Aminah McCloud, director of the Islamic World Studies Program and a professor of religious studies at DePaul University in Chicago.

McCloud described Mohammed as a "kind, gentle and knowledgeable man." She said he regularly worked with Christian and Jewish leaders to include Muslims in interfaith dialogues.

Mohammed was born Wallace Dean Muhammad in October 1933, the seventh son of Elijah and Clara Muhammad of Michigan. His father preached black supremacy and denounced whites as "devils" to followers in the Nation of Islam, a group that initially shunned standard Islamic practice, such as reading the Qur'an and praying in Arabic.

He soon learned that his father's beliefs did not match what he read in Islam's holy book.

Mohammed assumed control of the group in 1975 after his father's death and led Muslims down a path of orthodox Sunni Islam.

In 1979, minister Louis Farrakhan revived the Nation of Islam with African Americans who followed the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. But Mohammed and Farrakhan eventually reconciled and publicly embraced in 2000 in an attempt to unite Muslim factions as Farrakhan began to back away from some of his controversial views.

"We mourn the loss of our brother Imam W. Deen Mohammed," Farrakhan said in a statement. –*Religion News Service*