Faisal Alam knew as a child that he "wasn't like other boys."

Still, growing up in Connecticut after his family emigrated to the United States when he was 10, he became a model student of Islam.

"One of the things that was taught to me at my mosque was that homosexuality is forbidden within Islam," he says. "There's no such thing as a gay Muslim, because they just don't exist."

He became increasingly religious in junior high. In college in Boston, "I was basically the token Muslim youth that every parent wanted their kid to grow up and to be like," he says. As a freshman, he represented the Muslim Student Association in the New England region. But in the city's nightclubs, he had "exploded out of the closet."

Brother Faisal by day, Club Kid Faisal at night, he says of his separate lives.

A failed engagement to a woman contributed to a nervous breakdown at 19 that illuminated the need to resolve his sexuality with his faith.

"They were both part of who I was," he says.

Alam, 32, has come to terms with both. Now he is trying to help other Muslims do the same.

Alam is the leader of Al-Fatiha, a U.S.-based organization dedicated to empowering gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Muslims. Alam's personal jihad reflects why the larger gay Muslim movement remains closeted and the challenges in coming out.

Speaking recently at Michigan State University at an event sponsored by several student organizations, Alam said he created a listserv for gay Muslims in 1997 called Al-Fatiha, "the beginning" in Arabic. About 40 participants representing 13 ethnicities and five nationalities met for a retreat in Boston the next year. The groups now claims 700 members among eight national chapters and has affiliate organizations in Canada, Great Britain and South Africa. Local chapters hold social events, regional retreats and participate in gay and Muslim events. Other gay Muslim organizations exist in Lebanon, Malaysia, Palestine, Syria and Turkey.

Alam estimates 95 percent of members had stopped practicing Islam before joining the organization.

"They come to Al-Fatiha trying to find a way back — because it's still there," he says. "It's such a powerful, spiritual experience to be in a space finally that welcomes you as you are, doesn't question you in any capacity — what you're wearing, where you stand. Because these dogmatic principles are instilled in our lives — to overcome that is much more difficult."

He claims 50 percent of these people find a way back to Islam. But he's not necessarily one of them. With growing evidence that he's no longer alone with his struggle, Alam says he has not fully reconciled his sexuality with his own faith. He doesn't attend mosque, and considers himself more spiritual than religious.

"At the end of the day, we're fighting 1,400 years of theology that in many ways is against us," he says. "The personal battle is much more difficult."

Other challenges to gay Muslims gaining acceptance within mainstream Islam include the threat of being ostracized from the religion's traditionally close-knit family groups, and the lack of an institution they can petition to.

"There isn't this hierarchy that we can go to and say, ‘pass this law and everything's going to change,’” Alam says. "One mosque can vary to another to a great degree, ideologically."

Alam wants gay Muslims to build a stronger coalition before directly confronting power holders.

Dawud Walid, executive director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a leading Muslim advocacy organization, says his group has no official position on gay Muslims.

"It's the majority consensus amongst classical and contemporary Islamic scholars that homosexual intercourse is not permissible in Islam, similar to heterosexual intercourse outside of marriage," he says.

Walid says whether or not adulterers would be treated differently than gay or lesbian Muslims at a mosque would depend on the mosque and the individuals.

"Both would be frowned upon," he says.

Mohammed Al-Kabour, a 22-year-old international relations major, was among about 40 people who listened to Alam's presentation Dec. 7 at MSU. A practicing Muslim, Al-Kabour says seeing women being made to pray behind the men during last year's Ramadan prayer at the Islamic Center of East Lansing kept him from attending this year.

He supports the progressive undertone in Islam, but believes change should come slowly through small steps from within, rather than through an ideological break from the mainstream.

"You want to pull it — you don't want to just say, ‘all right, we're going to be super advanced, but as a minority,’” he says. "You want it to come with you."

American Islam isn't ready to tackle sexual identity issues, Alam says.

"American Muslims are fighting bigger battles — they're worrying about the FBI infiltrating their mosques. There are imams being deported. Civil liberties, civil rights — these real issues we're dealing with right now," he says.

He says Al-Fatiha has joined mainstream Muslim groups on these issues.

The two Muslims in Congress, Reps. Keith Ellison of Minnesota and André Carson of Indiana, are members of the LGBT Equality Caucus, Alam notes. And the Council on American-Islamic Relations was among mainstream Muslim organizations that supported the 2009 hate crimes bill that expands federal law to include crimes based on a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

"We don't believe it's acceptable for people to get assaulted or for quasi-vigilantes to take to the streets to beat up homosexuals,” Walid says.
Closet Jihad

But Walid, who doesn’t know any gay Muslims personally, says “the issue hasn’t really come up on my radar.” Increasing visibility through dialogue is the movement’s next step, Alam says.

“The challenge as we engage the mainstream Muslim community is it’s going to be from one mosque to another,” he says.

Al-Kabour says young Muslims and American converts will eventually lead Islam to evolve.

“Once the older wave dies and they don’t have that grip on the power on the mosques, the change will come,” he says.