



March 5, 2018

**Open Spirit
Advisory Committee**

Shaheen Akhtar,
Islamic Center of Boston

Rabbi Katy Allen,
One Earth Collaborative,
Ma'yan Tikvah

Rabbi Larry Bazer,
Temple Beth Shalom,
Mass Nat'l Guard

Dara Berry, Director of
Operations

Helen Berman,
Prayer Shawl Group
Leader

George Burton,
First Church of Christ,
Scientist, Personnel
Consultant

Sandy Hewitt,
Business and Finance
Consultant

Rev. Dr. Deborah Clark,
Interfaith Coordinator

Neela DeZoyso,
New England Buddhist
Vihara, Botanist

Dr. Nancy Gaulin,
Psychologist, Facing
Cancer Together

Rosanne Kates,
Coordinator of Community
Connections

Bette Norton,
Edwards Church Liaison

Dr. Danielle Rousseau,
Assistant Professor,
Boston University

Elizabeth Roy,
Community Consultant

www.openspiritcenter.org
508-877-8162

Dear Judges of Interfaith Harmony Week,

I am writing to testify to the qualifications and dedication of Shaheen Akhtar. Shaheen organized, publicized, and led a Community Interfaith Discussion at the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland, Massachusetts on Sunday, March 4th, as part of Interfaith Harmony Week. This is the third of such discussions she has led, and they have all been very well attended with a wide diversity of participants.

I first got to know Shaheen when I moved to Framingham, Massachusetts in 1996, to become pastor of Edwards Church, United Church of Christ. She was an active member of the Framingham Interfaith Clergy Association, representing the Islamic Center of Boston, which is in the neighboring town of Wayland. Each year, she participates in the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, offering beautiful readings from the Koran and illuminating them with her explanations.

I gained more insight into Shaheen's depth of knowledge and her commitment to interfaith dialogue after September 11, 2001. My congregation asked her to come and speak with us about Islam. Courageously and thoughtfully, she helped debunk myths and misunderstandings. Our church council was so grateful for her willingness to put herself out there during a time when many Muslims felt very vulnerable.

Since that time, I have had many occasions to work with Shaheen. When our Confirmation Classes wanted to visit the Islamic Center, Shaheen hosted us. She also brought in some of the youth from the mosque to talk with our young people.

When we started Open Spirit: A Place of Hope, Health & Harmony as a multi-faith center for healing and community building, Shaheen graciously offered to start an Interfaith Book Group here, which she has led for the last six years. This is in addition to the Interfaith Book Club she leads in Wayland. We meet monthly, and we have discussed at least 10 different books in depth. She invites new people in and helps them feel welcome.

I remember the day our group read about Cordoba, Spain, once a Muslim city where Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in peace and harmony. Shaheen told us about her trip there and what it meant to her. Her personal sharing helped us understand the power of that city more fully, and to celebrate the pluralistic values embedded in Islam.

Some of the new people Shaheen has invited to our group come from neighboring communities, and attended in order to learn more about what we are doing so they can start a group in their own towns. Shaheen has supported the start-up of Interfaith Book Clubs in many towns in Metro West Boston.

Shaheen serves on Open Spirit's Advisory Committee and participates in many of our interfaith programming. She offered a blessing from the Islamic tradition for the dedication of our new Multi-Faith Welcome Mosaic. For the last three years, she has helped us organize an *Iftar*, which we host for our Muslim neighbors. It is an opportunity for people from many faiths to learn about Ramadan; it is also an opportunity for us to offer hospitality to a community that has sometimes not felt welcome. Without her help, we would not have the contacts and the expertise to extend this invitation.

I am looking forward to working with Shaheen next month on Framingham's Faith Traditions in America series, which will be held at our public library. Shaheen has brought this 3-session model, with panel discussions including a pastor and a rabbi along with Shaheen, to many libraries in our area. I am eager to have the opportunity to bring these important interfaith conversations to a new audience.

Shaheen's commitment to interfaith dialog is deep and long-standing. I believe she would be a perfect person to be honored for her interfaith work.

Thank you for considering her.

Peace,

Rev. Dr. Deborah L. Clark
Pastor, Edwards Church, UCC
Multifaith Coordinator, Open Spirit: A Place of Hope, Health & Harmony