

WOMEN'S INTERFAITH DISCUSSION GROUP BREAKS BARRIERS, BUILDS UNDERSTANDING

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By Marshall Weiss, The Dayton Jewish Observer

Four years ago, Bushra Shahid, a member of Dayton's Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, decided the time was right to start an interfaith discussion group for women.

Born in Africa and raised in her parents' native Pakistan since her teens, Shahid knew little about other religions.

"I said, we need to have some ladies who are passionate about their faith, who want to talk about it, and who want to maybe teach other people about it, and let's just get together and have meetings," Shahid explained.

For a year, Shahid visited various churches to promote the idea and asked friends to connect her with churches. She received no response.

"Most people were suspicious, like, 'Why would you want to do that?' Or, 'You're really trying to do something else and this is just a cover,'" she said.

Then, she met Phyllis Pavlofsky Allen, a member of Beth Jacob Congregation, and soon after, Sister Jeanette Buehler with the Sisters of the Precious Blood. The three now organize the Women's Interfaith Discussion group, which meets every four to six weeks at different houses of worship across the Miami Valley.

The group, which drew a dozen women to its first meeting — at Shahid's mosque in 2014 — now brings together 80 to 90 women from various religions to learn from and about each other.

For their first program, Shahid and Allen selected the topic, Basics Of Our Faiths. Each agreed to bring five friends to the meeting.

"I have to tell you, I had the hardest time getting five people," Allen said. "Bonnie Rice ended up being my only person who came that day."

After two or three meetings, Shahid and Allen met Buehler. They asked the Catholic sister to help them organize the programs, as their go-to person on Christianity.

"There was so much we wanted to know about Christianity," Allen said. "And she is a leader."

The sister coordinates the Community Homicide Prayer Vigils in Dayton, Trotwood, and nearby townships.

Buehler and Allen, both retired, have teaching backgrounds: Buehler holds a bachelor's degree in education, a master's in theology, and a master's in organizational development; Allen holds a bachelor's degree in education and a master's in theatre management.

Shahid received her master's degree in English literature in Pakistan.

Through word of mouth, they started attracting 20 to 25 women at their programs, including Baha'is, Unitarians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Sikhs, and members from all of Dayton's synagogues and temples.

"We started to look for different venues," Allen said. "What we found was people at the different venues — the volunteers — then would start coming."

They've held sessions at Beth Abraham Synagogue, Temple Beth Or, and Temple Israel's Jewish Cultural Festival.

"We did one at Westminster Presbyterian," Allen said. "Our topic was Song In Our Faiths. We listened to the organ and their minister talked to us. Every venue we've been to, we've collected a few people along the way."

Allen added that the group never set out to have a formal membership base.

"We've always said on our flyers to bring a friend," Allen said. "We thought maybe the first people that came would never come back again. We would be happy with 30 different people every time. But it hasn't worked out that way."

Most attendees have been Christian.

"The one hesitation I told them when they asked me to be a part of this," Buehler said, "is that I'm Catholic. I said, 'Some people don't consider Catholics Christian. And so you need to be aware of that.' And so it's been a challenge for me to make sure when I do presentations that I do some research on general Christianity too, so it's not just Catholic."

A similar issue confronts Shahid. Women from her faith community of Ahmadiyya Muslims attend the programs, but very few Sunni Muslims have come out.

"There's a reason for that," Shahid explained. "Our community has been excommunicated from Islam."

Founded in Punjab, India in 1889, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community believes that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) is the messiah and renewer of Islam.

Dayton's Ahmadiyya mosque, the Fazl-I-Umar Mosque on Randolph St., was



Top: Women's Interfaith Discussion organizers (L to R) Sister Jeanette Buehler, Bushra Shahid, and Phyllis Pavlofsky Allen at the Dayton Fazl-I-Umar Mosque. Photo: Marshall Weiss. Bottom: Rabbi Judy Chessin hosted a Women's Interfaith Discussion luncheon at Temple Beth Or in September 2017. Photo: Sharon Bengel.

constructed in 1955 and is identified in The Oxford Handbook of American Islam as the first mosque built in the United States by black converts to Islam. According to Shahid, it is also the first mosque building erected in Ohio, and the first mosque constructed by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in America.

"In Pakistan in the '70s, the National Assembly decided that this group of Muslims (Ahmadis) would be excommunicated because of their belief in the messiah," Shahid said. "That excommunication led to persecution, and our caliph had to leave there and settle in England. But that excommunication follows us everywhere."

An estimated 10 to 20 million Ahmadis live around the world, with 15 to 20,000 in the United States. Israel is the only country in the Middle East where Ahmadi Muslims can openly practice their faith.

"We thought it was an important enough topic to do three sessions: one on the Christian messiah, one on the Ahmadi messiah, and one on waiting for the messiah," Allen said.

Shahid's dream of an interfaith group for women came out of her religious practice of gender separation to preserve modesty.

"We have the observance of separate socialization for men and women in all of our activities," Shahid said. "I thought it would be a good idea to introduce that to a community, where we are so used to having men and women together, and see how it goes."

"As a Catholic," Buehler said, "I come from a very patriarchal model, particularly for women who are religious. We've struggled with that. We've moved beyond that in ways maybe the ordinary woman in her pew hasn't always moved, because we've been somewhat independent in the ways we run our congregations, even though they are approved by Rome. We have ways of being responsible for ourselves."

"Recently, I was reading some things about feminine qualities in terms of creativity, imagination, being in touch with emotions, inclusivity. And these are things I see happening when we come together as women. We bring those out in one another without having to fear that men dominate us or that we have to listen to what the men say in the group. We're free to offer our own suggestions. We have really learned to respect our differences. And every time new women come and experience that, we're building a better world."