



Video Story Transcript

A Change of Heart: Muslims & Whites Crossing Cultures in a Memphis Neighborhood

By: Storyteller Kate Dudding
www.katedudding.com

Link to YouTube Video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uU_LBZG8iAA

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Kate Dudding.

During an interview in 2010 in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. Bashar Shala said, “We were just looking for a place to pray and play, to hold weddings, and celebrate holidays, to have a place to relax on weekends. Uh, activities for our seniors and a day care for our young children.

We had put a bid in on a piece of land. But as soon as the owner found out about our community, he rejected our bid. It took us several more months to find another plot of land. Oh, it was ideal! 30 acres of rolling hills and a pond. We put a bid in and it was accepted. But the plot of land was right on a road in Memphis that is known as “church road” because of so many Christian churches that are on that road. We knew we would have to work very hard to prove that we are a peaceful community.”

Again, this was 2010, Dr. Bashar Shala was a 49-year old cardiologist and the chairman of the board of the Memphis Islamic Center. He said, “Memphis is the buckle of the Bible Belt. And here we were, Muslims going to establish a community right in the middle of ‘church road.’”

Meanwhile, on the other side of church road was Heartsong Church, a United Methodist community, uh, with Pastor Steve Stone as their leader. One day, he was home reading the newspaper having... enjoying his morning coffee when he saw a headline, “Muslims to build a large community center.” He said, “A large community center? I didn't realize that there were that many Muslims in Memphis.” He read on, and then he got to the address and then he checked the address. “Hah! It's right across the street? What are we going to do?”

1

So, he went to Heartsong and sat in his office and prayed. As he was praying, one of the stories that Jesus had told came to him.

One day, a traveler was robbed and beaten and left at the edge of the road. Many people passed him by. But only one stopped - a Samaritan. At that time, Samaritans were a despised religious sect because they only believed some of the Jewish principles. But it was the Samaritan who stopped and did all that he could to ensure that this traveler would recover and be able to return home.

Pastor Steve thought, "We're going to have to figure out a way to be good neighbors to these Muslims." So, the next day, he ordered a big red vinyl sign, six feet wide with right... with white lettering. When it came, he put it right on the edge of Heartsong's property, so everyone traveling on church road could see it, "Heartsong Church welcomes the Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood."

A few days later, Dr. Shala drove past, stopping to look at that idyllic piece of property that they had purchased. And he saw the sign. He later said, "Almost all the nervousness I had had disappeared once I saw the sign." He went in and introduced himself to Doct... uh, to Pastor Steve.

Pastor Steve said, "If you need a place to hold a meeting while the construction is going on or, um, you need to use our parking lot, please feel free to do so."

So, his community did use, uh, the facilities at Heartsong Church to hold business meetings during the construction of their mosque and their large community center. Now you might have guessed that perhaps not every member of the Heartsong Church welcomed, uh, wanted to welcome the Muslims.

Some of them were very confused as to what Pastor Steve was doing. One of them was a man named Mark, a painting contractor. He and his wife had been members of Heartsong Church for 10 years. Mark said, "I didn't understand what was going on. I was very uncomfortable." He and his wife talked about leaving Heartsong Church but decided that they would speak with Pastor Steve first. At that meeting, Mark said, "Why are we welcoming Muslims? What's going on here?"

Pastor Steve said, "I've met these people. They are educated, peaceful people. It is my Christian faith, not a deep study of Islam, that is at the root of my decision to welcome these people. Mark, I want you to go home and read the first four books of the New Testament, the Gospels. And if you find anything there that contradicts what I'm doing, I want you to come back and tell me about it."

Mark did as he was asked. And later he said, "I realize, I realized that I was the problem. They weren't the problem, I was the problem."

Mark and his wife decided to stay at Heartsong Church but not everyone was convinced. Pastor Steve spoke with everyone who questioned his decision. But 20 of his 800 members left the church, some of them in key leadership positions. Pastor Steve said, "While we were sad to see them go, at the same time, we realized that if that's how they felt, if that's what they really believed, they didn't really belong in Heartsong."

The next year, well, Dr. Shala and the rest of the leadership team at the Memphis Islamic Center were racing the calendar. The schedule had been that the construction of the mosque would be done in time for the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, where Muslims, uh, fast during the daylight and then come to the mosque for special evening prayers.

As the holy month of Ramadan grew closer, Dr. Shala was getting more and more nervous. Finally, he scheduled a meeting with Pastor Steve and said, “Would it be possible if our mosque isn't ready by the beginning of Ramadan for us to meet here for several nights for our evening prayers? Of course, we would pay you.”

Pastor Steve said, “How many people do you think you'd be bringing?”

Dr. Shala thought about his new community and said, “A hundred, maybe 200.”

Pastor Steve said, “Well, then you would have to meet in our sanctuary and that would be just fine except one thing. You can't pay us. We will not accept any money. We're neighbors.”

At that, the two men embraced with tears of happiness in their eyes. As he was leaving, Dr. Shala said, “I am going to pray that our mosque will be ready in time.”

Pastor Steve said, “You can pray the way you want but I'm going to be praying that it won't be ready, at least for a few nights. I think that would be good for your community and it would be good for mine.”

Pastor Steve got his prayer answered and then some. The mosque was not ready 'til after the end of Ramadan. So, every night during that holy month of Ramadan, Muslims came and prayed in the sanctuary of Heartsong United Methodist Church. And every night, some members of that congregation were there to greet the Muslims. Pastor Steve said, “We wanted to make sure they felt at home.”

After the prayer service at the last night of Ramadan, the Muslim scholar who had conducted the, the prayers gestured to Pastor Steve to come to the front of the sanctuary. Then the Muslim scholar said, “I know we Muslims have heard bad things about Christians and they have heard bad things about us but now we have met real Christians (*gesturing to Pastor Steve and the hosts that had come that night to welcome the Muslims*) and they have met real Muslims.”

That month of Ramadan was the beginning of many friendships and connections between those two communities. They started holding joint events: feeding the homeless, having interfaith discussions, near the anniversary of 9/11 holding joint blood drives. And then two months later, celebrating Thanksgiving together. Mark, that painting contractor who had been skeptical about welcoming Muslims, he said, “I never thought I would ever meet any Muslims. I love it. It's like my world has gotten bigger.”

Dr. Shala and Pastor Steve occasionally are asked to speak in front of area schools and community groups. Whenever they do, they are always asked this question, “Have any Christians converted to Islam or have any Muslims converted to Christianity?”

They always say, “No. No one has converted but we've all become stronger in our own faiths.”

Now these two communities have a new plan. They want to make church road into a destination where people can come and celebrate interfaith respect and camaraderie.

Each community has donated land to create a large park to be called Friendship Park. Dr. Shala likes to say, “We are making world peace, one friendship at a time.”

They are in the midst of fundraising for Friendship Park and about to hire their first executive director. Because both communities have donated land on either side of church road, there's going to have to be a bridge across church road to connect the two parts of Friendship Park.

I view that bridge as a second sign, not as explicit as that big red vinyl sign that had welcomed the Muslims to the neighborhood in 2010, but I think that bridge will be a sign, nonetheless, that indicates good neighbors live here.