

# The Dallas Morning News

## CONNECTIONS

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### Q&A WITH M. BASHEER AHMED

## 'I felt I should give back whatever I can'

Dr. M. Basheer Ahmed is a psychiatrist and founder of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services in North Richland Hills. Dr. Ahmed's work was recently featured in the book *Inspired to Serve* by Mark H. Massé (Indiana University Press, \$45). In recent years he has organized conferences on domestic violence, the role of religion in promoting world peace and Muslim contributions to civilization. He recently spoke with Special Contributor **Mary A. Jacobs**. Here are excerpts.



**Question:** Tell me about your vision for the community center.

**Answer:** The immigrant population — from Iraq, Southeast Asia, Somalia, and the Middle East — was having difficulty getting public services because of the cultural differences and difficulties with language. So, in 1995, we started as a telephone helpline, where people could call about various problems and we would direct them where to go. Initially, a lot of calls came in for common medical problems, like diabetes or minor infections. If people go to Park-

land they have to wait five or six hours, and if they don't take anybody who speaks English with them, they have difficulty. So we started a free clinic in 1998 with about 15 Muslim doctors who volunteer their time.

Then we built a relationship with the Tarrant County United Way. African-Americans, Hispanics and a few Anglos started to come to our clinic. So it's not exclusively for Muslims. We take everybody who comes to our door.

We also held the health fairs in places where a lot of Muslim immigrants go, like the mosques and community centers. We've been doing this every year for about eight years and we get about 500 people every time. We also have a helpline where people can call about issues like marital problems, childbearing issues or domestic violence.

**Question:** In dealing with these social issues, does it involve any special sensitivity to Muslim values and culture?

**Answer:** Sometimes we intervene in cases where Child Protective Services comes and takes the child away. A child is injured, the parents take him to the emergency room, and due to the language barrier, sometimes parents can't explain what happened. The parents get extremely frustrated and pan-

icky, and they call our center. So I usually reassure them — CPS is just doing their job, they are trying to protect the child, they don't know you. In many cases, where it's not abuse but more like negligence, we have managed to get children back to the parents in a short period of time.

Domestic violence is a very difficult problem; it's the same thing you see in American families. The woman becomes dependent and can't leave in spite of abuse. Unfortunately, we don't have a shelter for Muslim women, so the biggest problem comes when the woman goes to a shelter and feels alienated because of the language and culture and the food and the prayers. So we work with the shelters, we tell them any time a case comes please call us and we will do some counseling and reassure them.

In my private practice, I do some parent/child counseling. Especially in our communities, the children are Americanized. They speak a different language, they hear different songs. Parents have a hard time adjusting to that because they grew up with a different set of values. It's difficult to explain to the parents, no, the child is acting exactly normal, like any American child.

I had a workshop titled "Parents Don't Understand." We had a

lot of youth and parents come together and we had open dialogue and communication.

**Question:** How do Islamic teachings figure into the work you are doing?

**Answer:** It is a faith-based program, but we really don't talk so much about religion itself. However, people who are working with us — the doctors and volunteers — all have some passion for it. In our religion, it says, "Whatever you spend with a good heart, give it to your parents, your religion, to God, to the helpless and to the needy. And whatever good you do, Allah is aware of it." That's one of the basic tenets of Islam.

I spend about 20 hours a week on community services. I cannot describe how good this country has been to me. I had a very successful life. I came as a very young man and became a professor of psychiatry. I felt that anything I wanted to do, whether an academic achievement or a financial achievement, I was able to do it because this country has so much freedom. After 32 years here, I felt I should give back whatever I can.

**Question:** You've done a lot of interfaith work. Do you think people are becoming more aware and knowledgeable about Islam as a result of Sept. 11?

**Answer:** I worked with the Fort

Worth Community of Churches to develop an interfaith program called "Know Your Muslim Neighbor," about the basic tenets of Islam. The first question people ask is, "Tell me about jihad." I explain to them that in the year 2002, at Harvard University, a student gave a commencement speech on jihad. He outlined how jihad means you have to have inner struggle with yourself, to prevent yourself from doing evil deeds, from anything that's against Islamic tenets. Terrorism is not a jihad, it's just somebody misusing that word.

We have to understand, the terrorists of 9-11 had nothing to do with American Muslims. I have the same concern about the safety of this country as you have because my children are here. They were born here and went to school here. This is our country. How can we want any harm to come to this country?

There's still a lot of misperception. When I go to a shopping center, people will look at me and think, "Are you a terrorist?" No. I do human services. I treat people who are suffering, who are in misery and depressed, and I try to save their lives.

Mary A. Jacobs, a Dallas freelance writer, can be reached at [maryjacobs44@yahoo.com](mailto:maryjacobs44@yahoo.com).