



Religious Leaders Find Support, Acceptance In One Another

By **RACHEL STUART**
Daily Sun Staff Writer

It may seem as though local places of worship would have to compete for the spotlight in order to grow and succeed in The Villages area.

Religious leaders of various faiths, however, have learned the benefits of supporting one another.

To get a better understanding of how leaders of various religions feel about working together, the Daily Sun spoke with Jenny Heldrich, a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Sumter County; Abdurrahman Sykes, the imam of the Islamic Society Leading American Muslims; Sheldon Skurow, the spiritual leader of Temple Shalom of Central Florida; and the Rev. Drew Willard, pastor of United Church of Christ at The Villages.

Why Do You Think it's Important to Work With Other Religious Leaders?

"Because that's the only way that the religions can come together under one common purpose of unifying mankind. The unification of mankind under the name of love, peace and unity. Once we're on the same page of unity, we can really move forward fast."

—Heldrich

"With what's going on in the world today, I think interfaith is really important. We have to learn to get together, treat each other with respect, learn to react with other religions and people from other cultures, and treat them like we would treat our own."

—Skurow



Jenny Heldrich



Abdurrahman Sykes



Sheldon Skurow



Drew Willard

"I think it's important to identify with each other. God created diversity so we can identify with each other and get to know each other better. The Islamic faith teaches that there should be no compulsion in religion. We should understand each other's positions, celebrate and accept that, so we're able to build bridges of understanding instead of bridges of fear and mistrust."

—Sykes

"That's what makes it work — to find a friend in the other. Christianity is about reaching out and helping people become who they are. The common denominator is rational love and kindness. It minimizes the ignorance and misunderstanding that leads to violence. It leads to people building walls out of fear, rather than trusting in their own belief. In other words, the best defense is to be yourself and value your tradition. Don't be afraid of how you see your values mirrored in another group."

—Willard

What is the Benefit of Learning About Other Religions?

"I'm humbled when I work with other people of different faith because I learn so much."

—Heldrich

"We all pray to a God that we all believe in, but when it comes down to it, we pray to one God."

—Skurow

"Knowledge empowers people. By learning from the scholars, I'm not under false prejudices about other people."

—Sykes

"I think it helps me to become a better Christian. The overall goal is to be a true human being."

—Willard

What Does it Mean to You Personally to Open Your Heart to Other Religions?

"There are different hues and shapes in a rose garden. This is how we look at mankind, as a flower garden."

—Heldrich

"I really think it's important that we don't make one religion better than the other."

—Skurow

"What it means to me personally is I'm fulfilling my responsibility to let them see who I am. I'm being responsible to build these bridges of peace and connection."

—Sykes

"I believe that God is a living being waiting to be discovered, and it takes all of us to do it. That's the beauty of the interfaith."

—Willard