

## **Freedom of Worship**

*On this, the tenth day of October 2017, the Franklin D. Roosevelt*

*Freedom of Worship Medal is awarded to:*

**Pastor Steve Stone and Dr. Bashar Shala**

Today, one does not have to look far to find religious division in this country and throughout the world. Many of the first immigrants to what would become the United States came in search of religious liberty. The right to worship, however one sees fit, has been enshrined in our Constitution. It is a foundational freedom.

Franklin Roosevelt, of course, declared in 1941 "the freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world." Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1948, said, "Basic human rights are simple and easily understood...freedom of religion and worship... We must not be deluded by the efforts of the forces of reaction to prostitute the great words of our free tradition and thereby to confuse the struggle."

In a time when religious violence from distant shores dominates news coverage, it can be easy to think of religion as a source of rancor. But, Pastor Stone and Dr. Shala, through the Memphis Friendship Foundation you founded together in Tennessee, we can see religion as a source of comfort. Together you have demonstrated that people of different faiths can come together, united by a commitment to the greater good, to build something beautiful.

In 2009, when you, Dr. Shala, sought to establish the Memphis Islamic Center, you and your congregation needed a place to pray while your mosque was being built. You found a friend and an open door at the Heartsong Church, a Christian house of worship led and co-founded by Pastor Steve Stone.

This was to be more than a powerful example of Southern hospitality. Through this shared space, two communities often portrayed as being at odds came to know, respect, and love one another. Members of both your congregations have been able to build fuller and more

meaningful lives, by learning about different cultures and coming to understand the importance of standing together as a community strengthened by its diversity.

In the years since, your congregations began celebrating Thanksgiving together and hosting regular picnics and gatherings. And you have sought to take this community to even greater heights with the building of Friendship Park, a community space in which people of all backgrounds—regardless of race, culture, or creed—can come together, learn from one another, and form lasting bonds.

In America, we are guided by the phrase: *e pluribus unum*—"Out of many, one." In these polarized times, that can sound to some like wishful thinking. But you both show that this vision is alive and well in the United States. You prove that people don't have to pray the same way to enrich each other's lives and make their entire communities better.

Freedom of worship is only safe when people of all faiths can pray as they choose. Thank you for devoting your lives to your religious communities, and to an America where this freedom is protected and celebrated. It is an honor to award you both tonight with the [Freedom of Worship Medal](#).

**Citation read by Jonathan Soros, Senior Fellow, Roosevelt Institute.**