

Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening.

My name is Mustafa Akpinar, and I live in Elkridge. I've lived in Howard County since I was in seventh grade, so this community has really become home for me and has played a meaningful role in shaping who I am.

I currently work full time as the Outreach Director at the Maryland Turkish American Inhabitants - MARTI, where much of my work involves building relationships with people from different backgrounds, cultures, and faith communities. I'm also a master's student at the University of Maryland studying artificial intelligence, with a background in cybersecurity, and I serve as an advisor for Bridging Paths, UMD's interfaith dialogue club. I also founded LeadUp, a community service organization focused on bringing young people together through service. As a Turkish Muslim, community service and interfaith work have been an important part of my life for many years.

One experience that really shaped the way I think about interfaith relationships happened when I was in middle school. I attended my first Ramadan dinner at a church, and I still remember how eye-opening that was for me. I was young, and it was one of the first times I really saw people from different faiths coming together, not just to talk about religion, but to actually get to know one another.

That day showed me something simple but significant: our friendships and our communities should not be limited by our religious backgrounds. People who are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or from any other background can sit at the same table, learn from one another, work together, and build genuine friendships.

Since then, I've carried that mindset into the work that I do. Through MARTI, LeadUp, youth mentoring programs, and Bridging Paths, I've had opportunities to bring people together through service projects, interfaith dinners, youth programs, and conversations. Some of the moments that I carry with me are seeing people who don't normally cross paths sit down together, talk, and realize how much they actually have in common.

If confirmed by the Council, one of my biggest priorities on the Interfaith Advisory Commission would be getting more young people involved. I think younger generations have an important role to play in this work. A lot of prejudice and misunderstanding can come from simply not knowing one another or never having the opportunity to have these conversations.

I would be committed to creating more service projects, educational events, interfaith gatherings, and opportunities where young people from different faiths can meet, work together, and build real relationships.

I'm honored to have been selected to serve on this Commission. I hope to bring a younger perspective, help break down some of the assumptions we may have about one another, and do my part to make Howard County an even more welcoming, connected, and diverse community where people from different backgrounds truly know one another.

Thank you for your consideration.