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File photo

Bishop Matthew H. Clark (left) and Imam Muhammad Shafiq sign an agreement of understanding and cooperation between the Catholic and Muslim faith communities May 5, 2003, at the Islamic Center in Brighton.

and a strong voice for harmony. In addition, he regularly meets with a group of Christian denominational executives to discuss concerns.

At the heart of these agreements and ecumenical and interfaith activities is the bishop's sense that dialogue between people of differing faiths — not meant to convert or persuade — is crucial to creating a community of respect and peace.

At a recent reception commemorating the Muslim-Catholic Agreement and the formation of a Muslim-Catholic Alliance to implement it, Bishop Clark described why this work is so important.

"Many would ask, why dedicate so much time and labor into such a ministry? John Paul II clearly answered that question shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, when he said, 'Dialogue is the

obligatory path to the building of a reconciled world, a world able to look with serenity to its own future. ... It is in this manner that we shall be truly able to open our hearts to others, and walk with them as fellow pilgrims towards the destiny God had prepared to us.'

"Dialogue," the bishop said, "is an ever-more essential endeavor the more complicated our society and the world society becomes. The small but important interpersonal communications here in the Muslim-Catholic Alliance prove to skeptics that good, believing people can truly accept, respect and love one another, even while disagreeing on religious beliefs."

Perhaps the greatest testament to Bishop Clark's reaching out to people of other beliefs comes from those with whom he shares community leadership in interreligious relations.

Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, spiritual leader at the Islamic Center of Rochester, said recently that Bishop Clark is a very real presence, a strength, in the interfaith work of

this community. "He takes part himself when others might send a deputy. He is very committed to this work and has made a tremendous difference. That is also true in the area of social concerns, too, when the religious community wishes to speak with one voice. He is a strong voice for the people. He is always there in person to speak out."

Bishop Clark's personal qualities add to the synergy around interreligious affairs, says Lawrence Fine, executive director of the Jewish Community Federation.

"The unique agreement between the Catholic and Jewish communities in Rochester is a testament to the environment that Bishop Clark helped to create. He has an extraordinary ability to accept others as they are, to listen between the lines and to identify the commonalities among us all."

Bernard Grizard is diocesan director of Parish Support Ministries and oversees the office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

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