

People of many faiths enrich Huntsville area

By **YVONNE WHITE**

Times Religion Editor

Last week, as I was scrambling to meet a deadline, I happened to call the Rev. Cheryl Russell, associate pastor of Huntsville's First United Methodist Church.

My assignment was to write a story about the religious diversity in the Huntsville area, which is no small task since it seems Huntsville has virtually every religious group in the world represented here.

Although she has just been here a little more than a year, Cheryl has already been a key figure in improving interfaith relations. She now serves as vice president of the Interfaith Mission Service board of directors.

I told her my mission and she began to speak glowingly of how impressed

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she was when she came here to learn about the IMS and its work in the community. After a few minutes, she told me she had invited a group of people who participated in the IMS Interfaith Dialogue project this last year to her home for dinner Sunday night. I really don't believe in coincidences, but her dinner list was virtually the same as the list of people I had planned to talk to about my story.

She then invited me to the dinner, and I jumped at the chance.

On Sunday night we gathered at her home — Christians, Muslims and Baha'is all breaking bread together in what turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable evening. Some of those invited weren't able to make it. They missed a delicious meal, cooked in part by Cheryl's husband, Chris. More importantly, they missed the wonderful dialogue, jokes, puns and other religious and political rhetoric one could imagine coming from such a diverse group of people. I even felt a little guilty telling my editor I worked Sunday night because it was so much fun.

No one got angry about anything the other person said, despite any disagreements. While there may have been notable differences in beliefs, those were set aside while the group discussed their similarities and how they wished others would come togeth-

er in fellowship in more settings such as this.

That same type of effort to bring people of different backgrounds was attempted in Huntsville several years ago in a project called One Huntsville. It met at Britling's, but when the cafeteria closed, so did the project.

While the adults ate and conversed Sunday, the three children, two white and one black, played quietly together in the adjoining room.

Shortly after the meal, the Muslim couple, Dr. Razi Hassan and his wife, Mumina, excused themselves to say their prayers. Meanwhile, I interviewed Darren Hiebert, a local Baha'i, about his views of the Huntsville religious community. Like Cheryl, he also spoke glowingly of the IMS and how impressed he has been with the Huntsville community's acceptance of Ba-

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ha'is, despite their differences of beliefs.

For Dr. Hassan, acceptance by those from the Christian faith in Huntsville has not always been as cordial, but he said he is optimistic about the future. He, too, had praise for the IMS which has

gone to great lengths to include Muslims and other faith groups in community religious dialogue and activities.

Dr. Hassan said it is going to take educating people, beginning from the cradle, that God loves everyone and everyone deserves to be treated with respect, regardless of religious belief.

The crowning moment of the evening came when Cheryl's 4-year-old son, Jackson, walked into the room where the Hassans

were saying their prayers. In a gesture of hospitality, Cheryl had joined them, on her knees with her head bowed.

Although he had never seen or heard this method of prayer, Jackson immediately dropped to his knees, bowed his head and waited until he heard "amen" before he uttered a word.

The Bible says in Isaiah 11:6, "...and a little child shall lead them."