

All About Huntsville

Huntsville-area faiths share a large umbrella

By **YVONNE WHITE**

Times Religion Editor

Four-year-old Jackson Russell walked into the den of his home and saw his mother, the Rev. Cheryl Russell, on her knees, head bowed, alongside a couple visiting in their south Huntsville home.

Although he had never witnessed this particular scene taking place in his home, without question he immediately dropped to his knees and bowed his head until he heard "amen."

The energetic and bright youngster is no stranger to prayer since his mother is a Methodist minister. She had invited several people of different faith backgrounds to her home on a recent Sunday night for dinner and interfaith dialogue.

When it came time for the Muslim couple to say their prayers, their hostess joined them as a gesture of hospitality, not having time to explain to her young son what was taking place.

While the prayers were being said, in the adjoining room, a member of the Baha'i Community of Faith and a Southern Baptist were in deep conversation about religious diversity in Huntsville.

In still another room, two youngsters,

one black Muslim child and one white Christian child, were quietly playing together.

Shortly before, the group of people had dined together. Some politics were discussed, a few jokes and anecdotes told, and of course, religion was the key ingredient in a conversation that would have intrigued even the most unreligious bystander.

That scenario indicates a relatively healthy religious community in a town that is most known for its space industry, a place where science and religion don't often cross paths.

The group of people who gathered socially were part of the interfaith dialogue group which began meeting several months ago to discuss the differences, but more importantly the similarities, in their religious beliefs.

When Russell moved here about a year ago, she said she was "impressed" with the fact Huntsville has such an active Interfaith Mission Service. She wasted little time involving herself in the organization, which has faith groups including Christians (including Protestant, Catholic and Mormon), Jews, Muslims and Baha'is. She is now serv-

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Huntsville Times file

Flowering dogwood frames the steeple of First United Methodist Church in downtown Huntsville.

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now serving as vice-president of the IMS board of directors.

"The interfaith dialogue has been one of the most meaningful religious experiences I have had this past year," said Russell, associate pastor at First United Methodist Church. "We have really made great strides in trust and have moved beyond just tolerance for each other. We have people from all over the world and from all faiths working together. We also have good relations with Hindus and Buddhists, and hope they, too, will become part of IMS."

While Russell is pleased with the religious diversity of Huntsville, she is also realistic that everyone is not jumping on the interfaith dialogue bandwagon.

"The 11 a.m. hour on Sunday morning is still the most segregated in all of America," she said. "Huntsville is as ecumenical and interfaith as possible, but it is also as fundamentalist as any place in the state. I do think Huntsville is more open to other faiths more than any place in the state."

Darren Hiebert, a member of the Baha'i Community of Faith, is pleased with what he discovered about Huntsville's religious community.

"I have been very impressed with what I've seen since becoming involved with IMS, and with the warmth and ease with which we were welcomed," said Hiebert, a member of the IMS board. "I've never encountered any intolerance with anyone in the IMS. They were very willing to adapt their organization's policies to fit our religion."

Hiebert said he came to Alabama expecting something entirely different, but found Huntsville to be "a unique oasis" of religion. He says most people are "more curious" about his faith than critical of it.

"I have been pleasantly surprised overall because I was expecting more opposition than I have encountered," he said. "I'm not sure if my experiences have come with my own change of attitude about the South."

Hiebert said the Baha'i Community "felt more ignored and in obscurity" for the last 15 years, but that attitude has rapidly changed over the past few years.

The Baha'i faith, one of the largest world religions, has several hundred families throughout the state of Alabama, said Hiebert. Next year, they will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the

first Baha'i to come to Alabama, Paul K. Dealy.

While Baha'is have had a relatively easy time with acceptance from the Huntsville community, it has been a little more difficult for members of the Huntsville Islamic community.

Dr. Razi Hassan, who grew up a Baptist in Birmingham, left Alabama in 1965 for New York, where he converted to Islam. He said he was unpleasantly surprised at the reaction he met when returning to Alabama in 1989.

"While growing up, the church was always very much a part of our culture," said Hassan, imam of the Huntsville Islamic Mission. "After converting to Islam, I never realized how unacceptable culturally it would be (here). I think it is not as much of a racial thing as a religious issue."

Hassan said while "dramatic changes" have taken place in white Southerners' attitudes toward blacks, he says most still consider the words Muslim and militant as synonymous.

"We have come a long way, but we've got to teach people more about our religion," said Hassan. "We have more in common than different. It's going to take a lot of patience."

Hassan said he has been impressed by the IMS reaching out to include religious groups not considered mainstream, and hopes it will expand.

"We've got to get rid of the 'boogie man' image and the fear of the unknown," said Hassan.

While religious dialogue is an important function of IMS, it is not the only role it plays in the community.

Dick Titus, president of the IMS board of directors, said the basic roles of the IMS is "to get people from various faith groups to come together for dialogue and to provide on-going community service programs."

"We're just one of a small number of all service organizations in town," said Titus. "We just work with the interfaith aspect of what we're all about."

The IMS has been the launching pad for many organizations such as HOPE Place for abused women, HELpline for emergencies such as utility and housing needs; FOODline which directs needy families to various IMS food pantries throughout town; and the police chaplaincy program in which local ministers offer their time to counsel police officers.

Titus said one of the newest programs of IMS is "First Call," which offers a

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mentor (known as a Life Coach) to first-time youth offenders who have committed nonviolent crimes.

The mentor negotiates a restitution plan for the victim that includes paying for or repairing damages so the youngster will not be placed in the criminal justice system. The Life Coach then works with the youngster by offering moral and spiritual guidance, even after restitution is made.

While Huntsville is a community of vast religious differences, it is also a

community that gets involved to help needy neighbors and even strangers such as with Habitat for Humanity, a Christian-based organization that builds affordable houses for low-income families.

Many local churches have built or been involved with building one or more local Habitat houses.

Other groups such as the Greater Huntsville Ministerial Association and the Greater Huntsville Interdenominational Ministerial Fellowship, and the Huntsville Association for Pastoral Care, are also keys in helping bring about unity and dialogue through their organizations.

For more information on any local faith groups, call the IMS at 536-2401.