

RELIGION

In time of great tragedy, faith helps bring people together



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Isn't it tragic it took a tragedy to bring the Huntsville religious community to the same table?

For years, the Interfaith Mission Service and the National Conference for Community and Justice have done their best to bring about better religious understanding and tolerance in this city. Interfaith dialogue has been a slow process. Programs designed to help people understand other faiths have drawn only a few handfuls most of the time.

Even interdenominational programs designed to bring different Christian groups together have not always succeeded.

But all that changed last week in the wake of the worst terrorist attack in America's history.

Everything that mattered the day before — the stock market, college football, professional football and baseball — was closing or being postponed.

Meanwhile, houses of worship usually vacant on a Tuesday morning were quickly opening their doors to anyone who needed a place to be with others at this grievous time.

Ministers and religious leaders immediately began scheduling prayer services. Some were simply held at individual houses of worship. Others were on a larger scale such as the citywide interdenominational service at the Von Braun Center which

drew some 1,500 Christians, and the interfaith gathering at Holy Spirit Catholic Church attended by more than 1,200 worshippers.

While local Christian groups have joined together on a variety of occasions, it was believed to be the first time in Huntsville that people representing virtually all of the world's major religions have come together under one roof, united in a single cause — to remember and pray for those victims killed or injured in the attacks and their families and friends.

Baha'is, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and likely others joined hands to show solidarity among the faith groups in a standing-room only crowd at Holy Spirit Church. Some people left, unable to get into the building.

Some of the organizers expected only 300 to 400 people.

Oh, ye of little faith. . .

What I saw last Sunday night was nothing short of a miracle. Tears welled in my eyes as the people together sang "God Bless America."

I saw people — not Bahai's, Christians, Hindus, Muslims or Jews, but simply people of faith — praying to their creator for comfort and healing. As painful as the events of the previous week had been, it was people's faith that sustained them during this sorrowful time. It was truly a sunbeam on the darkest single day in our nation's history.

While that stirring interfaith event brought peace and joy to many, unfortunately, other events that transpired during the same week were not as comforting.

At least one local Muslim woman from Pakistan was told to "go home" as she walked to her car from a local shopping center. Muslims throughout the

U.S. became instant targets of insults, slurs and even attacks on their mosques. At least one Muslim was reported killed in the wake of the attacks.

While physical attacks are abhorrent, verbal attacks can also inflict deep wounds. Another less obvious form of religious persecution is ignoring or omitting — intentionally or not — certain faith groups from a citywide prayer service such as the one held at the Von Braun Center's arena.

Although it was billed as an interdenominational "Greater Huntsville Prayer Gathering," many people of other faiths were not aware that interdenominational usually means Christian, at least in the Huntsville area. Many of those not of the Christian faith were hurt they weren't included on the program.

I'm sure organizers meant no

harm and said everyone was welcomed, but I doubt people other than Christians would have felt comfortable in that setting. While it was certainly a moving and beautiful service in its own right, I think it would have been better held at a local church — and there are plenty that could have accommodated the 1,500 people — rather than at a city-owned facility.

It doesn't mean Christians don't have the right to gather without other faith groups being present. It simply means government property is owned by all of the people — not just the majority. When you bill something as a city prayer service being held at a city-owned facility, it should be inclusive of everyone.

Let's pray something of this magnitude never happens again to force us to come together as a show of unity.