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500 People Attend Sept. 11 Interfaith Event

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Published: September 15, 2011



(L-r) Charlette Henry, a practicing Buddhist from Marietta, Pat Darden, a Catholic from the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception Church, Atlanta, and Saadia Ilyas, a Muslim from Marietta, discuss how the Golden Rule is expressed in their respective faiths and what it means to each of them individually. (Photos by Michael Alexander)

DECATUR—“Salaam, Shalom, Pacem, Shanti,” sang hundreds of people holding lit candles at the Sept. 11 interfaith gathering at the Decatur Hotel and Conference Center. Whether spoken in Arabic, Hebrew, Latin or Sanskrit, the word was peace.

The “Chant For Peace” was the concluding activity in a somber but uplifting memorial sponsored by the Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta.

Nearly 500 people of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Bahá'í and Sikh faiths gathered on Sunday, Sept. 11, to remember those whose lives were lost on Sept. 11, 2001 in New York, Pennsylvania and outside Washington, D.C., and also to foster dialogue among ordinary people from different faith traditions.

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Through reflections and small group discussions, people were given an opportunity to share their thoughts and form new relationships with people of varying faiths.

The Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta was formed in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. FAMA expanded the interfaith dialogue work of its predecessor, the Interfaith Coalition of Atlanta, a group of clergy who had met monthly for 10 years for dialogue and understanding among their faiths.

"Tonight we remember those who died on Sept. 11, 2001," said Nafeesah Madyun, a Muslim who served on the planning committee. "The purpose of this event is to shift our combined energies toward the building of relationship between faith communities and across lines that have divided us in the past."

"Our hope is to help heal the wounds ... and to move our wider community forward with hope and peace," she continued. "Our vision is to create space to foster dialogue, prayer across faith traditions, and mutual understanding. ... Our aspiration is that at the end of this evening, we, the participants, will have formed new relationships that will live and move beyond 9/11/11."

Carmen Agra Deedy, author of the children's book "14 Cows For America," about the Sept. 11 tragedy, spoke briefly and read her book to the crowd. It is the true story of a Kenyan who brought the events of Sept. 11, 2001 back to his Masai homeland, where the people offered a gift of their cows to the United States to show their compassion.



Michael Lacour and his wife, Carole, attend the Sept. 11 interfaith gathering at the Decatur Hotel and Conference Center. The program, sponsored by the Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta, brought hundreds of people together from various faith communities. The Lacours are members of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Atlanta.

"Last night, I didn't sleep," confessed Deedy, who said she stayed up to watch television coverage of the Sept. 11 events. But "today is a day of unity," she said.

Following the reading, the assembly held a moment of silence so people could pray in their own traditions for the victims of the attacks and their families.

Members of various faiths then read an example of the "Golden Rule" from their own traditions, including passages from Vedanta, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Sikh texts.

Leaders asked the crowd to form small groups, each including members of various faiths, to discuss the Golden Rule and how it is applied in their lives.

Julie Binney, a parishioner at Transfiguration Catholic Church, Marietta, attended with her husband, Dan. While admittedly not knowing what to expect

and a little nervous before the gathering, she quickly realized she was in good company.

"It is daunting to go out and do something different. I was a little nervous," said Binney, who had been on the FAMA mailing list for a couple of years but never attended an event. She said she learned a lot about other faiths during the dialogue sessions.

"All the preconceived ideas were dispelled," she said. "Sometimes you need those experiences where you re-learn. . . . We are all basically the same. We all hold the same values. Everyone is just as much a child of God as I am."

Binney felt the open and welcoming atmosphere helped foster the dialogue and she hopes to be involved in more interfaith events, a feeling that was shared by many of the attendees.

"I think it is wonderful," said Roya Esfandi, who belongs to the Bahá'í faith and was attending with her 13-year-old daughter, Anissa. "We are all saying the same thing in different words."

Esfandi joined a small group with Oakhurst Baptist Church member Beth Vann, a Tucker resident.

"I love learning and I have learned so much," Vann said.

"I really enjoyed the different expressions of faith, the prayers and poems," she added.

Cathy Crosby, an Atlanta resident who serves on the National Council for Pax Christi USA, a Catholic peace organization, said the interfaith event contrasted with some of the conflicting sights she witnessed earlier in the week in Washington, D.C., where Sept. 11 events included heightened security.

"I was in Washington, D.C., for Pax Christi's annual Teacher of Peace Award presented this year to Colleen Kelly, founder of 9/11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, as her response to her brother's death in the World Trade Center," wrote Crosby by email. "Her message, then as now, is rooted in the Gospel and the nonviolent love of Jesus. Meanwhile in parts of metro D.C., we saw police on corners with helmets and machine guns; two very different, and stark, images."

"How welcome, then, was the gathering in Decatur, where an unanticipated number of people of multiple faith traditions . . . witnessed through dialogue, song and attentive listening to the powerful presence of God's Spirit, healing, transforming and uniting people who believe that the power of God's love is stronger than any division," she wrote.

Among parishes represented, in addition to Transfiguration, were the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Immaculate Heart of Mary and Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Atlanta.

"It was a great memorial . . . that touched on grief and mourning," said Binney. "And even more it was a gathering that looked toward the future, bringing people of different backgrounds together."

Participants were encouraged to continue the interfaith dialogue to promote respect and understanding.

"I'm delighted to be a Christian, but tonight I'm delighted to be a human being," said James Brewer-Calvert, a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church and the event's planning committee, at the conclusion.

"It's all about community," said Binney. "Why have I not gone to some of these events before?" she asked her husband following the gathering.

"This was a way of creating a community that is more global," she added.



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