Interfaith memorial at mosque remembers fallen soldiers

COLUMBIA, S..C. Members of eight different faiths took off their shoes and entered a mosque Thursday night to remember those killed in the Iraq war and pray for peace.

Interfaith memorial services were held Thursday night across the country, but Columbia's service was the only one in the nation held in a mosque, said Carl Evans, chair of the religious studies department at the University of South Carolina.

"We're not making any political statement, we're trying to affirm core values of all religions when we pray together." Evans said

The faithful sat and knelt

By Justin Bergman THE ASSOCIATED PRES

ple to stand.

outside

asked to leave.

written policy.

discriminated

ever seen.'

side.

Pyle

RICHMOND, Va.

Rev. Todd Pyle thought it

was the perfect spot to bap-

tize 12 new members of his

church - the river was calm and shallow and there was a

shaded area offshore for peo-

"It was a very serene place," he said. "It was spe-

But officials at the Fal-

mouth Waterfront Park, just

weren't pleased. They tried to break up the religious cer-

emony, claiming it might be

offensive to swimmers frol-

icking nearby or other people using the park. After Pyle finished the baptism, he was

Now free-speech advocates

are outraged and are threat-

ening to file a lawsuit if the

park refuses to allow future

gatherings by religious groups, something for which

the park admits it has no

"These people are being

because of the content of their speech," said the Rev.

Patrick Mahoney, who heads

the Christian Defense Coali-

tion. "It's one of the most

egregious violations of the

First Amendment I have

Pyle said he chose to hold

an outdoor baptism, still

common in parts of the

South, because his Corner-

stone Baptist Church in

Stafford lacks an indoor bap-

tismal pool. He has used

other churches or private swimming pools for the ritu-

al in the past, but decided

"Originally, it was a public

declaration of faith in Jesus Christ," he said. "Baptism

was intended to be done out-

seemed to notice the small

congregation during the 30-

gious groups seeking to per-

form a service in the park still need to apply for a per-

mit or else gather under a

shelter or inside an activity

"We don't want to tread on

conducted the service in the diocese

cese spokesman Jim Naughton.

anybody's First Amendment

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

minute ceremony May 23.

said few people

this year for a change.

against

Fredericksburg,

Virginia waterfront

park nixes baptisms

inside Masjid as-Salaam as each faith tradition prayed "Om, Peace, Peace, Peace," and listened to words from the Quran, the Beatitudes of the New Testament and a Native American blessing. Leaders from the Muslim, Unitarian Universalist, Bahai Faith, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Native American traditions read prayers.

The names of 19 people from or stationed in South Carolina who were killed in the war with Iraq were read as participants took turns placing white roses in a vase.

Eyes showed tears as about 200 people of all colors - some with heads covered and traditional dress, others

or constitutional rights," said Brian Robinson, director of the Fredericksburg-Stafford Park Authority. "What we

try to discourage is anything

not formally permitted that

just sort of occurs sponta-

John Whitehead, director

of The Rutherford Institute,

a Charlottesville, Va.-based

civil liberties organization,

said that's a clear violation of

the church members' consti-

"Could a church have a pic-

nic in the park and sing hymns? Of course they could," he said. "Parks have

been forums since time

immemorial to do these

types of things. Nobody really cares except a couple of

people employed by the gov-

The American Civil Liber-

ties Union of Virginia also

said in a statement: "If the

park rules allow people to

wade and swim in the river,

then they must allow bap-

tisms in the river. If the rules

allow groups to gather for

cultural, social or political

purposes, then they must

allow religious gatherings as

neously."

tutional rights

ernment.

with street clothes- remembered the 800 Americans killed in the war, the 100 others from eleven nations killed and what organizers said were more than 11,000 Iraqi civilians killed in the conflict.

"Everyone in their own tradition expressed scriptures and prayer and we all benefited. It seemed as if we have

reached a level of transparency," said Imam Omar Shaheed, leader of Masjid as-Salaam. "All souls were

Evans, who heads the Partners in Dialogue group which planned the service, said choosing the mosque as the site for the memorial had a purpose.
"We wanted to share in the

"Salvation, Healing and Deliverance for the total Man reaching the lost at any cost

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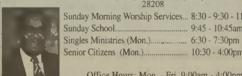
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Dr. C.V. Owens

well." Robinson said the park's board has formed a special committee to examine its policy and to put it in writing. If the church applies for the proper permit, it's "certainly possible" they would be granted permission to use the river for another

baptism. This group just showed up and began their service," he "We would have the same issue with the Washington Redskins showing up on our football field.

Mahoney said he has spoken with the American Center for Law and Justice in Washington about filing a lawsuit if the park denies his request to hold a religious service there in the next couple weeks. He and the ACLU both sent letters to Robinson that the park will not curtail religious expression in the future.

Meanwhile, Pyle said he will find another place to hold outdoor baptisms.

"We're disappointed," he

Episcopal bishop to perform

COLLEGE PARK, Md.-The bishop of the Episcopal Diocese

Bishop John Chane will perform the ritual June 12 at St.

While not a marriage ceremony, the blessing is a recognition by the diocese of the gay couple's partnership, according to dio-

"It is a way for the church to say, 'Yes, we affirm the goodness and holiness of the love between these two people," he said.

'We can't at this point sacramentalize it, but we can bless it.'

Hopkins, the former president of an Episcopalian gay and lesbian organization called Integrity, was out of town Friday

In a statement, Chane said Hopkins and Bradley deserved to have their relationship blessed by a Church that in the past

too often dismissed their love, faithfulness and Christ-centered

and did not return a phone message left at St. George's.

George's Episcopal Church for the for the parish's pastor, Rev.

of Washington will perform a blessing service for a gay couple at a Glenn Dale church in June, the first time a bishop has

blessing service for gays

Michael Hopkins and his partner John Bradley.

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grief of our Muslim brothers and sisters to recognize that Islam is a religion of peace,' he said.

Fourteen-year-old Juliet

Sheridan read a Bahai prayer and said she was moved by the traditional dress and diversity in the

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