

# Interfaith memorial at mosque remembers fallen soldiers

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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

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

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 touched."

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

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 room.

## Virginia waterfront park nixes baptisms

By Justin Bergman  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RICHMOND, Va. - The Rev. Todd Pyle thought it was the perfect spot to baptize 12 new members of his church - the river was calm and shallow and there was a shaded area offshore for people to stand.

"It was a very serene place," he said. "It was special."

But officials at the Fal-mouth Waterfront Park, just outside Fredericksburg, weren't pleased. They tried to break up the religious ceremony, claiming it might be offensive to swimmers frolicking nearby or other people using the park. After Pyle finished the baptism, he was asked to leave.

Now free-speech advocates are outraged and are threatening to file a lawsuit if the park refuses to allow future gatherings by religious groups, something for which the park admits it has no written policy.

"These people are being discriminated against because of the content of their speech," said the Rev. Patrick Mahoney, who heads the Christian Defense Coalition. "It's one of the most egregious violations of the First Amendment I have ever seen."

Pyle said he chose to hold an outdoor baptism, still common in parts of the South, because his Cornerstone Baptist Church in Stafford lacks an indoor baptismal pool. He has used other churches or private swimming pools for the ritual in the past, but decided this year for a change.

"Originally, it was a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ," he said. "Baptism was intended to be done outside."

Pyle said few people seemed to notice the small congregation during the 30-minute ceremony May 23.

But park officials said religious groups seeking to perform a service in the park still need to apply for a permit or else gather under a shelter or inside an activity center.

"We don't want to tread on anybody's First Amendment

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 spontaneously."

John Whitehead, director of The Rutherford Institute, a Charlottesville, Va.-based civil liberties organization, said that's a clear violation of the church members' constitutional rights.

"Could a church have a picnic 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 government."

The American Civil Liberties 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 baptisms in the river. If the rules allow groups to gather for cultural, social or political purposes, then they must allow religious gatherings as 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, he said 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 said. "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 seeking written assurance 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 said.

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## Episcopal bishop to perform blessing service for gays

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLLEGE PARK, Md.-The bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington will perform a blessing service for a gay couple at a Glenn Dale church in June, the first time a bishop has conducted the service in the diocese.

Bishop John Chane will perform the ritual June 12 at St. George's Episcopal Church for the for the parish's pastor, Rev. Michael Hopkins and his partner John Bradley.

While not a marriage ceremony, the blessing is a recognition by the diocese of the gay couple's partnership, according to diocese spokesman Jim Naughton.

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

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 commitment."