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INTERFAITH PRAYER SERVICE RESPONDS TO RELIGIOUS HATRED

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich.—An interfaith prayer service took place on Monday, Nov. 5, at 7 p.m. in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Over 200 individuals attended the standing room only program, which promoted solidarity and healing and took a stand against all religious hatred and prejudice.

Following the tragic shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Interfaith Committee of the Andrews University Community Engagement Council reached out to the Temple B'nai Shalom of Benton Harbor and together they began to plan the service. Southwest Michigan's Interfaith Peace & Justice Collaborative and The First Hebrew Congregation of South Haven joined the effort as co-sponsors.

The program began with a welcome from Marcus Muhammad, Benton Harbor mayor, who shared both a Scripture reading and a reading from the Quran. He commented, "I would like to challenge those who are here today to take this as a moment of new opportunity, freedom, love and justice for all, regardless of creed or religion."

Teresa Reeve, chair of the Interfaith Committee at Andrews University, introduced the evening's focus on prayer in the midst of mourning. She said, "Your action in being here tonight can help take some of the momentum out of the tide of hate that surrounds us. We share profound commonalities as we gather tonight...and we believe there is no place for hatred among God's children."

Christian, Muslim and Jewish calls to prayer were offered by various local faith leaders, and two inspirational musical selections provided messages of overcoming and healing.

Diane Rapaport Yampolsky, of Temple B'nai Shalom, shared the reflection, saying, "I am a Jew because wherever there is suffering the Jew weeps...I am a Jew because we must be partners in God's creation."

Significantly, candles were lit in honor of the victims of the Pittsburgh shooting—one for each victim and a twelfth for all others who have been victims of hate.

Attendees were given opportunity to participate in a litany that talked of moving forward. They read, "Amidst the darkness of hatred, we advance the light of love. Amidst the threats of violence, we advance the balm of peace...We come together, different people from different places, united in a common humanity and seeking a common good. In that there is hope."

Time was also given for silent prayer and stone laying. Sid Mohn, convenor of Interfaith Action, says, "Within the Jewish faith, it is customary to leave a small stone on the grave. The visitor positions the stone on the grave using his or her left hand. Placing a stone on the grave serves as a sign to others that someone has visited the grave. It also enables visitors to partake in the mitzvah tradition of commemorating the burial and the deceased. Stones are fitting symbols of the lasting presence of the deceased's life and memory."

Following the stone laying, a representative of each of the three Abrahamic faiths (Christian, Muslim and Jewish) shared a Scripture, prayer and/or contemplation. Barry Fidelman, of the First Hebrew Congregation of South Haven, shared his struggle to come to terms with the events in Pittsburgh. Ultimately, he says he realized, "It was me." He explained that he or anyone else who passes by an act of hate or injustice without standing up against it shares in the responsibility for such acts that follow. "There are three choices: anger, teaching and apathy...Yes, my apathy killed these people. I have always been afraid of losing friends or alienating business associates by calling them on their racist comments. I will choose never to miss a teaching opportunity again. Our generation must shed the moniker of the 'generation of the ostrich!'"

After the program, Reeve reflected, “I have seldom been in a room where the spirit of peace and harmony and dedication was so strong and palpable. This happened because people cared enough to reach outside their comfort zones and go beyond what fit in their busy schedules. God is good for planting the idea and bringing us all together!”

Founded in 1874, Andrews University is the flagship institution of higher education for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and offers more than 200 areas of study including advanced degrees. Its main campus is in Berrien Springs, Michigan, but the University also provides instruction at colleges and universities in 19 countries around the world.

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