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Religious leaders react to terrorist attacks on U.S.

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By Bob Allen

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Religious leaders issued calls for prayer in wake of major terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington Sept. 11.

Americans watched stunned as the tragedy unfolded live on national television.

The terror began when a hijacked American Airlines jet crashed into New York's World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. Minutes later, with cameras trained, a second large plane crashed into a neighboring skyscraper. The twin towers, which anchored one of the world's most recognizable skylines, eventually collapsed into rubble.

A similar attack destroyed part of the U.S. Pentagon in Washington. The U.S. government responded by grounding flights at all the nation's airports for the first time in history. A fourth hijacked airliner crashed in Pennsylvania.

Officials termed the coordinated suicide attacks the work of international terrorists. The attacks came without warning, and no group immediately claimed responsibility.

Leaders of the National Council of Churches issued a statement condemning "these vicious attacks in the strongest possible terms."

NCC General Secretary Robert Edgar and John McCullough, executive director of the relief organization Church World Service, urged Americans to "hold together" and for people of faith to "reach out to one another."

"We especially urge churches, synagogues, mosques and other houses of worship to join in prayer and practical help," the statement said. "We must stand united against the temptation to retaliate against innocent persons."

Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt called on Southern Baptists around the world to pray for those affected by the attacks.

"Our SBC family has been reminded again that the only hope for this world is the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga. "I pray that many would turn to the truth of the gospel and that believers everywhere would sense a new urgency to bring people to a saving knowledge of God."

Morris Chapman, head of the SBC Executive Committee, issued a call for "a prayer vigil" on behalf of victims, their families and the nation's leaders.

"These tragic events underscore the fragile peace we take for granted and reminds us that beneath the facade of order, our world can be a very dangerous place," Chapman said in a statement.

Southern Baptist disaster-relief units across the country were placed on standby, and Baptist chaplains planned to minister to thousands of people affected by the tragedies in coming days.

Chapman said Southern Baptists in churches, associations and state conventions "will be pouring themselves out in service to the injured and broken people who were the direct victims of these attacks."

A Baptist seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, gathered Tuesday evening in the school's chapel for prayer "for those who have been affected in any way by this dreadful series of events," Rector Keith Jones said in an e-mail.

"The International Baptist Theological Seminary community extend to all our many friends in the U.S.A. the assurance of our prayers and concern in the light of the terrible terrorist attacks of today," Jones said.

Baptist-affiliated Baylor University canceled a scheduled speech by former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno because of the attacks.

"In light of today's tragic events and the uncertainty surrounding so many, I want to call on the Baylor University community -- students, faculty, and staff -- to join together in prayer," said Baylor President Robert Sloan. "Let us remember especially those who have lost loved ones, those who await word of the safety of friends and family, and those who are called to lead our nation in this time of profound anxiety."

Another Baptist-affiliated school, Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C., canceled classes at extended-education programs at Ft. Bragg, Pope Air Force Base, Camp Lejeune/MCAS New River, and Morrisville, N.C., campuses until further notice.

Jerry Wallace, assistant to the president, said classes would meet on the school's main campus and try to function as normally as possible. "We understand some students will wish to return to their homes and be with their families, but we believe that maintaining a normal main campus schedule will help the university family maintain a sense of calm and reassurance," he said.

President George W. Bush placed U.S. military on high alert and committed the nation's full resources to finding those responsible for the attacks.

"Make no mistake, the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," Bush said.

"The resolve of our great nation is being tested," the president said. "We will show the world that we will pass this test."

U.S. officials treated the attacks in New York and Washington as acts of "overseas terrorism" but said they had received no credible claims of responsibility. Accused terrorist Osama bin Laden denied involvement.

A diplomat with Afghanistan's fundamentalist-Muslim Taliban government decried the attacks. "We want to tell the American children that Afghanistan feels your pain," said Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, Taliban ambassador to Pakistan. "We hope the courts find justice."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., urged keeping the temptation to demonize Muslims and talk of quick retaliation in check.

"Jesus' wisdom and witness must set our course in this very sinful world where evil multiplies evil, anger feeds anger, injustice breeds injustice, vengeance begets vengeance," Parham said.

Casualties came into New York hospitals at a steady stream during the day. Requests for blood donors went out nationwide.

Early estimates of the casualties were in the thousands in the worst terrorist act on U.S. soil and most serious attack on the nation since Pearl Harbor.

The April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the nation's worst act of domestic terrorism, resulted in the deaths of 168 people.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, killed 2,403, including 68 civilians; sunk or damaged 21 ships of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and drew the U.S. into involvement in World War II.