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Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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President proclaims Friday day of prayer and remembrance

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President George W. Bush signed a proclamation Sept. 13 designating the following day a "national day of prayer and remembrance" for victims of terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The proclamation asks people of the United States and places of worship to hold noontime memorial services Friday, Sept. 14, the ringing of bells at that hour and evening candlelight remembrance vigils.

The president encouraged employers to give workers time off to attend noontime services to pray for America and asked others around the world to join the U.S. in remembrance.

"Scripture says: 'Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted,'" Bush said. "I call on every American family and the family of America to observe a national day of prayer and remembrance, honoring the memory of the thousands of victims of these brutal attacks and comforting those who lost loved ones."

"We will persevere through this national tragedy and personal loss," the president continued. "In time, we will find healing and recover; and, in the face of all this evil, we remain strong and united, 'one nation under God.'"

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-- By ABP staff

Baptist chaplain offers prayer, comfort at Pentagon

By Ken Camp

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In the hours after a hijacked jetliner crashed into the Pentagon, a Baptist chaplain moved among the injured, offering prayers and words of comfort to the hurting.

And as he ministered, it dawned on him that a 20-minute coffee break and God's grace were all that kept him from being a victim.

Brigadier General Charles Baldwin, deputy chief of the United States Air Force chaplain service, was in a basement cafeteria of the Pentagon at 9:30 a.m. on Sept. 11. He planned to enjoy a cup of coffee and a

few minutes of quiet between early morning meetings.

"I had just paid for my latte when somebody came in and said, 'We've been bombed,'" Baldwin said. "Had it been 20 minutes later, I would have been on the fifth floor of the opposite side of the building, where the plane crashed."

Immediately, he felt torn between his sense of calling and his duty to follow orders to evacuate.

"My first thought was, 'Which way should I go?' I felt like I needed to go towards those who were harmed, but security wouldn't let us go. I felt a certain amount of guilt growing out of this need to be present immediately among the wounded," he said.

Some chaplains who were in the basement near the crash site helped carry the injured on litters into ambulances.

When doctors turned a nearby hotel into a medical receiving area, Baldwin found his place of ministry, praying with the evacuated injured.

After comforting the wounded, he returned to the Pentagon to counsel firefighters and rescue workers.

"They were trying to put out the fire so rescue teams could be sent in, but they never let anyone in to attempt rescue," he said. "There was a tremendous fireball and billowing smoke, and the building was too unstable.

"The firefighters were the main ones to whom we ministered. We prayed with them and asked them if we could contact any family members, just to tell someone they were alive and OK."

Although they were urged not to come, some family members of Pentagon personnel could not resist standing vigil at the crash site.

"Chaplains took the family members aside. They prayed, talked, and tried to console them," Baldwin said.

Thirty-five chaplains, representing all branches of the armed services and including several Baptists, ministered at the scene. When a family receiving area was established, the chaplains set up a rotating schedule to provide an around-the-clock presence.

Chaplains helped those who wrestled with questions of God's existence and involvement in human affair in the light of such unspeakable horror.

"At a time like this, you offer assurance that God did not cause this to happen," Baldwin said. "Evil people in the world were the ones who attacked us. Where was God? God was present with those who suffered. He was in the fire with them."

The Air Force chaplains' mission statement is to be "a visible reminder of the holy." And that incarnational ministry is perhaps the chaplains' greatest contribution, Baldwin observed.

"The great chaplains' privilege is to be present," he said. "We are able to say, 'God is with you, and we are with you, too.'"

It was the same message that chaplains around the country shared with military personnel who were placed on a heightened state of alert, Baldwin added.

"The anxiety level goes up tremendously at a time like this. Those in the military don't know what will happen next. They don't know if there will be an order to deploy," he said.

"The constant message one delivers is simple. God does not leave us when evil rises up. He is with us."

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Pastors, others gather for prayer in Florida

By Kristi Hodge

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Linking hands across church aisles -- and across racial and denominational lines -- nearly 1,000 north Florida residents prayed Sept. 12 for solidarity and peace at a prayer service at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.

The prayer service was organized by an interracial, interdenominational group of local pastors called Mission First Coast. The pastors meet regularly to pray for the city and hold prayer rallies at various churches throughout the year.

The organization called the prayer meeting because "there's unity in prayer," said Ted Corley, interim director of Mission First Coast. Corley is pastor of Mayfair Baptist Church in Jacksonville.

"This is a day in which the people of God need to rise and stand in the gap for America, calling on the power of prayer and the power and mercy of God," he said.

During a time like this, "We set aside peripheral differences and focus on the Lordship of Jesus Christ," said Ron Rowe, director of missions for Jacksonville Baptist Association. "The Christian faith is made for times like these."

During the service, area ministers led in prayers for the president and his advisers, for the victims and their families, for the rescue workers, for peace in Israel and around the world, and for America's enemies.

"We have to recoup from the anger," Corley said. "Justice should come, but anger can hold us in its control. God doesn't seek vengeance. He seeks justice.

"We are praying that we would not be overcome with fear, because fear is the tool of the enemy," he said. "There is a dark and pure evil presence of Satan that will destroy lives with hate and death. Let us understand with strong conviction that our only hope is Jesus Christ."

As attendees sang hymns of comfort, including "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" and "Amazing Grace," many struggled to come to terms with the tragedy. "I can't speak about it right now," a woman remarked. "I don't know what to say, how to put it in words. I'm just here to pray."

Paul Zink, pastor of New Life Christian Fellowship, told the gathering, "We don't know how to pray for this situation outside the Word of the Holy God."

Pastors quoted Scripture during their prayers, including Rom. 8:38, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus," and John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Jacksonville police officer R.J. Guhl, a member of Agape Christian Church, was one of a number of law enforcement officers attending the service. He said his thoughts and prayers are especially with the rescue workers in New York and Washington.

"This is a time to show our unity, our willingness to do what we can to help others," Guhl said. "It's God who gives us the peace and the help we need."

John Guns, pastor of St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church, prayed for "ministry angels" to comfort victims and their families.

"Forgive us for being so absorbed in our own lives that it requires this kind of experience to draw us back together again," Guns said. "For those who are feeling lost and overwhelmed, help them to know that someone is praying for them."

Mickey Boney, a member of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, said the tragedy has caused her to draw closer to her family and friends. "God's trying to tell us that we need to pull together as a nation," she said. "And the best way to do that is through prayer. Together we stand, divided we fall."

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-- Kristi Hodge works in the communication office of the Florida Baptist Convention.

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