

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Houston Interfaith leaders urge to fight hate with love and voting

By Olivia P. Tallet

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In the wake of the worst attack against a Jewish congregation in American history, a group of Houston's interfaith leaders came together Thursday and called on residents to stand up against hate and division.

About two dozen religious leaders from Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths met at the Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, urging communities to unite in light of a recent massacre at The Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. As they spoke, the man charged with opening fire with a semiautomatic rifle leaving 11 Jewish worshipers killed and more wounded entered a plea to the charges in a courthouse across the country.

"Let's show the world that in Houston, the most diverse city in the country, we are a role model of how to lift each other in times of concern and anxiety," said David Lyon, rabbi of the synagogue that hosted the event in Houston. "Let's make a photo (of this) that can be seeing everywhere," as the religious leaders in attendance held hands in a gesture of unity.

There were calls to take action against hate by using "words of love," and encouragement for citizens to vote in next weeks midterm elections to defeat leaders who engender evil and division.

In memorializing the Pittsburgh massacre, Lyon said that the country is "facing many fragile moments recently," referring to the Pittsburgh mass shooting as well as to other recent events.

Lyon cited the explosive devices sent by a President Donald Trump supporter to Democratic leaders and members of the media last week, heightened anti-immigration rhetoric from the administration, characterization of migrants escaping from violence and poverty in Central America as "an invasion," and proposals to eliminate the birthright citizenship established by the U.S. Constitution.

"We leaders of faith can build bridges of peace and understanding; we need to lift all of us up for the sake of a bright and blessed future," Lyon said.

"Words matter and people of faith, Christians, Muslims, Jews, other religions, must combat the kind of hatred that has become standard on the internet, in our society and between each other," said Bishop Scott Jones, with the United Methodist Church.

Many people have expressed outrage in social media about recent events, expressions of racism and hate crimes, such as mass killings at synagogues, churches and schools. Hate crimes increased by 12 percent in 2017 alone, according to a report from the California State University's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism.

John Ogletree, pastor of the First Metropolitan Church in Northwest Houston, said the reason hate is heightened at this moment in the country is because "it comes from the top and goes

down.” He explained that both negative values like hate and positive ones like love are learned just as taught by parents at home, by teachers at schools, by religious leaders at community temples.

“Right now, people need to hear a message of love and anti-hate, and that’s why we have to raise up as pastors, as civic leaders, as politicians to stand up against hate,” Ogletree said.

Daniel Hernandez, the Iman of the Pearland Islamic center that opened as a shelter during Hurricane Harvey, agreed with Ogletree. He said that to understand what is happening today with racial and ethnic tensions “We have to look from the top down, we have to look at the rhetoric that our leadership and our president is passing on to the people in regards of immigration and sometimes generalizing about (negative) qualities of some people.”

Hernandez explained that words from leaders provide guidance for people, and hateful rhetoric serves as “fuel for loners that are just looking for that motivation to spark actions,” he said. Several of the faith leaders observed that many people are confused when it comes to how to react or what to do against expressions of hate and divisions in society.

Hernandez suggested that hate should be “eradicated with justice,” explaining that “one of the ways to demand justice is by being civically engaged, by learning about candidates, learning about the political process, being part of the election cycle, casting a vote, educating our children and families about the vote.”

Ogletree, from the First Metropolitan Church, said that one simple thing that people can do is to listen to the message emanating from the national leaders.

“I recommend two things. One, speak out against hate, and two, vote. That’s your American privilege, to look at who’s at the top and ask if that person has a message of love and unity, or of hatred and division.” Ogletree added that “You have the choice to decide who is going to be the person at the top. It’s time now for us to stand up and voice our objection to hate. It’s time now to vote against hate.”

Bishop Jones, with the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, advised people that if they are directly attacked by a person of hate, “remember that Martin Luther King said that you cannot drive out hate with hate, you can only drive off hate with love.”

Jones added that “you must verbally respond to those people with words of love and appeal to the highest values.”

In trying to appease social anxieties during the current national tensions, Michael Rinehart, with the Texas Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, advised that people remember that waves of hate “come and go depending upon changes in society, fear, and often fear is what drives a lot of hatred.”

“Houston can continue to be a model, like we are doing now, coming together and proposing our common vote for higher values for our communities,” Rinehart said.



Rabbi David Lyon, of Congregation Beth Israel, speaks about unity during a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Imam Waleed Basyouni, of the Clear Lake Islamic Center, during a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Faith leaders lock arms with Rabbi David Lyon (center) during a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Faith leaders lock arms with Rabbi David Lyon (at podium) during a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Interfaith leaders from around the Houston region lock arms during a press conference organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Bishop Scott Jones, of the Texas Conference United Methodist Church, speaks during a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Rev. John Ogletree, of First Metropolitan Church, speaks during a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.



Rabbi Gideon Estes (left), of Congregation Or Ami, hugs Imam Daniel Hernandez, of the Pearland Islamic Center, after a press conference by interfaith leaders from around the Houston region organized by The Metropolitan Organization, Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston.