

Interfaith service recognizes 'Haitian brothers and sisters'

By David A. Schwartz, Staff Writer

January 19, 2010



Left to right, Kamruz Hosein, 65, Rabbi Marc Labowitz and Bishop Michel Pugin. (Eric Bojanowski, FPG / January 14, 2010)

Cecile Dumornay had reason to pray. Dumornay, 54, who was born in Haiti, had recently learned that her 14 relatives in Port-Au-Prince, including her youngest brother, survived the deadly earthquake that struck Haiti on Jan. 12. "Everybody's safe," a relieved Dumornay said. "I'm very grateful. I feel very privileged. I thank God. I feel he performed a miracle for us."

Dumornay joined about 100 other worshipers from TAO, The South Florida Center for Jewish Renewal for an interfaith service last Friday evening at the ArtServe auditorium in Fort Lauderdale. The 250-member congregation, which usually meets on the first and third Friday of the month, has an interfaith service four times a year.

On this Friday evening, the death and devastation the earthquake inflicted on Haiti re-enforced the message of the interfaith service.

"We need to know that more than ever now our Haitian brothers and sisters are suffering," TAO Rabbi Marc Labowitz, 41, said. "We have to do more than pray. We have to do more, period." Labowitz urged the congregation to donate money for Haitian relief through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency.

"You come to the point in your spiritual journey where you can then hear the other," Labowitz said before introducing Father Michel Pugin, a Benedictine monk and bishop in the Catholic Church of America, and Kamruz Hosein, a Muslim and president of JAM & ALL, an organization of Jews and Muslims started after Sept. 11, 2001.

Pugin asked the congregation to "open their hearts to receive all the good that Catholics, Jews and Muslims have to offer." Each must forgive the old transgressions, he said, before reciting a long list of "commonalities" between Catholicism and Judaism in particular, and Islam.

"We all stem from the same roots, the same matriarchs and patriarchs, the same laws that came down from the mountain," Pugin, 56, of Hollywood said. "Let's pray to our common God. That's what it's all about. We need to live in peace with one another. That's my vision and I know it will happen."

This interfaith service is a "solution to the world's problem," Hosein, 65, of Hollywood, said. "This is the message. Let's get it out there," he said to Labowitz and Pugin. "Otherwise, we are failing in our duties."

Florence Ross, 90, of Tamarac, a founding member of TAO, said the congregation believes in "the concept of each religion having something to contribute to the world and for each to be honored."

"We're all human beings. We're just God's people," 16-year member Trudi De Grazia, 74, of Sunrise Lakes said. "We share each other's love."

Some members of the congregation are not Jewish, said Fleur Heaton, 57, of Plantation. Heaton's family attended an Orthodox shul in South Africa when she was a child but stopped going to synagogue when they moved to Israel. "That was the end of temple except for weddings and bar mitzvahs," she said.

Heaton, who is in an interfaith marriage, said her husband Bob plays guitar on the *bima* and accompanies Labowitz at the start of the Friday night service. "The music opened up the doors of my soul," she said.

"I fell in love with the rituals and the style of spirituality," said Dumornay, who was raised as a Catholic, was a nun for five years in Haiti and later married a Jewish man.

She said she felt like she was on a journey in the desert and finally arrived at her destination. "It's like the angels in heaven," Dumornay said. "I feel committed to the spirituality. I feel at home."