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Evangelical tone of memorial spurs backlash

By Valerie Richardson
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

LITTLETON, Colo. — Some liberal Christian, black and Jewish leaders are outraged over the strongly evangelical Christian tone of Sunday's memorial service for those massacred at Columbine High School.

"The entire community was invited to come and mourn, and then it turned into an evangelical prayer service," said the Rabbi Stephen Foster of Temple Emanuel in remarks before the Denver Interfaith Clergy Alliance.

"I've had many complaints from people saying, 'Where were the Jews?' but that's not the issue," he said. "The issue was one of insensitivity to the kind of statements being made that were exclusively directed to not just Christians, but fundamental Christians."

Another rabbi called the service reflective of an "ignorant, narrow-minded" streak of Christianity.

None of the parents expressed objections about the memorial or its speakers, which included a rabbi. Several of the slain students were known for their born-again Christian faith, and the testimony of one of them, Cassie Bernall, in the face of death seized the attention of millions of readers and viewers across the nation.

One of the gunmen, who seemed to be seeking out believers, asked her whether she believed in God. She looked him in the eye and said, "Yes, I believe in God." He shot her dead.

Critics are trying to arrange a



Saying goodbye: Michael Shoels (right) and Vonda Shoels view the body of their son, Isaiah, before a funeral service yesterday in Denver for the Columbine High School student who was killed last week.

meeting with Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, a Republican, whose office organized the service. About 70,000 persons attended the service in a parking lot across the street from Columbine, which was attended by Vice President Al

Gore and Colin Powell, the retired general. Both sat on the platform.

"The consensus was [that the program] was not inclusive to all faith communities," said the Rev. Michael Carrier of Calvary Presbyterian Church.

Critics said they were aware of numerous phone calls to the governor's office objecting to what they called the "lopsided nature" of the service, although Owens spokes-

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Reuters

Fifteen crosses stand on a hilltop near Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., in memory of those who died. The killers are included.

SERVICE

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man Dick Wadhams said he was unaware of any complaints.

The rabbis apparently took offense at remarks by the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, and Jefferson County pastor Gerald Nelson. Both, following the custom of many Christian funerals, encouraged listeners to follow the example of several of the slain students to accept Christ as personal savior.

Mr. Nelson told an anecdote about two women Holocaust prisoners, one of whom said she overcame her despair through her faith in Christ.

The rabbis said they took this as an implication that Christians had a better chance of surviving the Holocaust.

"That's pretty offensive," said Rabbi Foster.

The program also featured songs with a Christian theme by Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith and Phil Driscoll. Two Columbine students, Jonathan and Stephen Cohen, sang "Columbine, Friend of Mine," a song with a Christian spiritual message they wrote with help from their pastor.

Rabbi Fred Greenspahn, who gave the service's closing prayer, told the Denver Post the program exhibited "a pretty ignorant, narrow-minded streak of Christianity." He was the only non-Christian religious leader featured during the service.

Some black religious leaders complained that the program featured only white speakers, even though one of the victims, 18-year-old Isaiah Shoels, was black. Gen. Powell, who is black, sat on the dais but did not speak.

Dick Wadhams, the governor's spokesman, bristled at the criticism, describing the complaints as "inappropriate and groundless" in the wake of the massacre. Two Columbine seniors killed 12 students and a teacher in a shooting

committing suicide.

"It's just reprehensible that they would try to politicize the memorial service in the immediate aftermath of such a tragedy," he said.

Mr. Wadhams said the event was organized in about 72 hours with advice from ministers in the community.

"[The critics] were nowhere to be found last week when this was being put together," he said.

The Rev. Lucia Guzman, executive director of the liberal Colorado Council of Churches, said the memorial service was representative of the Columbine community, which is heavily weighted toward "what you might call evangelical or independent churches."

"In no way do I feel I was excluded, but I have many rabbi colleagues who were incensed by the one-sided nature of the service," she said. "You can't put the focus on that [evangelical Christianity] and then say it was inclusive of the whole community."

But she said her organization would not complain.

Another debate with religious undercurrents bubbled over a row of 15 crosses on a hill overlooking the makeshift Columbine memorial, each cross named for a dead student, and includes the gunmen, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17.

The gunmen have been excluded from much of the mourning surrounding the tragedy. At the service, Mr. Owens read only the names of the 13 victims, and 13 doves were released to memorialize the 13 students.

Several mourners said the two crosses should be removed. "I don't think it's right to have the killers up here with the victims," said Anna Whitcomb of Denver.

Others said the crosses show the community may be ready to forgive, if not forget. On the Harris and Klebold crosses, someone had written, "Hate breeds hate," but another message said, "I forgive you."