Day of prayer, patriotism, protests

By DARREN BARBEE
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They tried shouting over the noise of the Trinity Railway Express. Then they just let their bodies do the praying.

By the time the 6:17 rumbled out of the Texas & Pacific Station on Thursday morning in Fort Worth, the National Day of Prayer was moving, too. A dozen people pumped their arms and swiveled their hips, exercising Christian-aerobics style, led by Dafiete Paschal, a physical trainer from Fort Worth.

"We move and direct our thoughts toward" God, Paschal said. "It gets the blood flowing and the spirit alive."

Across the Metroplex, flags flew, and thousands of Muslims, Jews and Christians asked God to guide the nation's leaders on what has become an increasingly patriotic day.

The religious observance also brought out atheists in

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Dallas and Denton who object to the day of worship as unconstitutional because it is set aside by presidential proclamation.

The last time the nation was asked to pray as one, on Sept. 14, wreckage at the World Trade Center was still burning from the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history.

Although Thursday's observance, designated America United Under God, was filled with music and laughter, posters for the event featured a New York firefighter, an airline captain and a U.S. Marine, all of them holding candles.

For some, it was hard to see the Stars and Stripes and not remember how things have changed.

Susan Hixson, 46, of Southlake came to Southlake Town Square for her third National Day of Prayer observance.

"Prayer to me has become more personal," she said. "9-11 brought a certain uncertainty."

Retired Rear Adm. Jim Lair, who attended the Southlake observance, said he knows that many of the prayers were for the soldiers, sailors and airmen fighting in Afghanistan and around the world.

"And I think people understand they're there for the long haul," he said.

Lair's observation was confirmed during an evening service at Trinity United Methodist Church in Arlington. About 100 people prayed for the military and heroes and victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Many of the prayers were led by young people.

"Thank you for pulling us through at this rough time," said Landon Long, a seventh-grader at Bailey Junior High School. "I pray tonight for all the victims' families."

People clutched Bibles, bowed their heads and squeezed their eyes shut as Lindy Dibi prayed for the military.

"I pray you will protect them as they protect us," said Dibi, 17, a freshman at Tarrant County College Northeast Campus. "Protect them as they go and fight for us."

In a proclamation read by religious leaders in the Metroplex and across the country, President Bush credited prayer with comforting the country during a time of grief and suffering.

"We have all seen God's great faithfulness to our country," the proclamation says.

But some saw the event as a breach of the Constitution's wall between church and state. The day of prayer, was informally begun by the 1775 Continental Congress and was signed into law in 1952 by President Truman.
In 1988, President Reagan designated the first Thursday of May for the permanent observance. In the past, the day of prayer has been criticized because it has been organized primarily by Christian organizations such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

In Denton, about six protesters gathered near the University of North Texas. At one point, the group burned an American flag, said organizer Joshua Flores, 26, who was writing on another flag that had been duct-taped to the sidewalk.

They held hand-lettered signs bearing slogans such as “Jesus save us from your followers” and “Honk for freedom of religion! Honk Honk!”

About five Denton police officers stood watching the group, and a dozen or so UNT students sat on the lawn. Occasionally, passing motorists — including a delivery truck driver — sounded their horns.

“We don’t object to the president having his own religious beliefs,” said Keith Brown, 37, who said he is a tutor at UNT. “We object to these presidential proclamations on White House stationery ... using only this strict Christian verbiage.”

In Dallas, a few people from Metroplex Atheists protested at a gathering of about 300 people at the Old Red Courthouse. Some carried signs reading “Protect our Constitution, keep church and state separate.”

“I don’t have a problem with people praying,” said Chuck Clark of Frisco. “I just don’t think the government should determine when or how we should. It violates our rights.”

The religious gathering at the courthouse was also a show of interfaith unity.

Ergun Caner, whose family is Turkish, grew up a devout Muslim before converting to Christianity.

“For the first half of my life, I assumed I was supposed to hate you. But through the faith and hope of other Christians, they did not return the hate I had for them,” said Caner, an assistant professor at The Criswell College. “Pray for the capacity, ability and tenacity to love those who don’t love you back.”

During the closing blessing, Peter Hirsch, assistant rabbi of the Baruch Ha Shem synagogue, embraced Caner to the cheers of the crowd and said, “Where else can [we], committed Jews, and Dr. Caner, who grew up a committed Muslim, come together and show love for each other?”

Earlier Thursday, in Fort Worth, the experience was also emotional.

The clamor of train engines caused benches to vibrate at the Texas & Pacific Station. Air snapped and sighed through brake lines. A dozen people stood and prayed.

All the while, commuters kept moving through the cavernous, mostly empty station.

Staff writer Eva-Marie Ayala, Patrick McGee and Chris Neely contributed to this report.

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