

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 9, 2012 at 3:33pm

Public mourning urged in wake of violence against Sikhs, Muslims

by Zoe Ryan



Women attend a candlelight vigil Aug. 6 at the Sikh Temple in Brookfield, Wis., in memory of the victims of a mass shooting at the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wis. (CNS photo/John Gress, Reuters)

U.S. religious leaders are urging people of faith to respond to the violence against Sikhs by standing in solidarity with them, visiting gurdwaras this Sunday, increasing interfaith dialogue and mourning publicly.

"Too often in our culture, grief and sorrow are private expressions of the moment, and I think we have way underestimated the power of public communal lament to form us as a people," said Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

Prominent religious leaders in a conference call Thursday expressed their sorrow for all those affected by the shootings at a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wis., and for the Muslims in Joplin, Mo., whose mosque has been set afire twice this summer.

"Public lament names suffering, it names sorrow, it names injustice, and at the same time it creates the

community of the suffering who are then resolved to take on that injustice in new ways, to reject violence and create communities of understanding and hospitality," Hanson said.

The motivation of the shooter in Oak Creek is unknown, and the mosque in Joplin was destroyed by fire Monday, though the cause of the fire is still being investigated. An online fundraiser on a crowdfunding website has raised, as of Thursday, almost \$175,000 out of the \$250,000 goal to rebuild the mosque.

Sikhs around the country are inviting people to their gurdwaras -- houses of worship -- Aug. 12 to educate people on the Sikh faith.

Visiting gurdwaras on Sunday was encouraged by Kathryn Lohre, president of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

We need to extend interreligious dialogue efforts beyond the Abrahamic religions, to religions such as Sikhism, she said.

Imam Mohamed Magid, president of the Islamic Society of North America said as Muslims who believe that humanity is one body, if any part of the body hurts, the other parts must help it heal.

"When we publically mourn tragedies, we are putting ourselves in the situation to understand the pain of others," he said. "To be compassionate is to try to understand what others are going through. Put yourself in other people's shoes."

Silence can sometimes be misconstrued as indifference or support of the acts, said Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. "Our public lament and also public outrage is critically important."

The Oak Creek shooting brought up memories from 2008 for Morales, when a man entered a Unitarian church in Knoxville and shot and killed two people and injured six others. The Unitarian community was grateful for the interfaith support it received, he said.

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The conference call was organized by Shoulder-to-Shoulder, an interfaith organization founded in November 2010 in the U.S. by more than 20 national religious groups "dedicated to ending anti-Muslim sentiment by strengthening the voice of freedom and peace."

Rabbi Burton Visotzky, director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue at the Jewish Theological Seminary, encouraged more action: Seminaries need to teach more about other religions, clergy members need to educate people in congregational classes and from the pulpit of positive images of other religions. The media, he said, does not need only to emphasis religious conflicts -- they should cover positive aspects of religion too.

Auxiliary Bishop Denis Madden of Baltimore, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs expressed his sadness with the people of a faith with which Catholics share "a very warm and fruitful friendship as well as a love of God and a belief in the community of all peoples."

The bishops "stand with the Sikh community and reject all violence, particularly violence afflicted out of religious intolerance. We are especially saddened that this horrendous act of violence was carried out in a house of worship, against people joined together as a family to worship God."

This event affects us not only as individuals but as a whole community, he said, and it lessens the whole community.

It highlights also, he said, "the need for all of us to be mindful of our language, the language that we use. When you see negative ads coming out so strongly in campaigns and so on, we must be more aware of these things. This has an effect -- it erodes civility of our nation."

Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, is a monotheistic religion founded in 15th century India. Sikhs began immigrating to the United States more than 100 years ago and today, there are more than 500,000 Sikhs in the U.S., according to the Sikh Coalition website.

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For more information on the Catholic church and Sikhism, see: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/dialogue-with-others/interreligious/sikhism/>

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