Churches, ministries rally for Birmingham Jewish community

Pre-Passover $111k donation for security campaign

On the eve of Passover and the start of the Christian Holy Week, a coalition of 19 Birmingham-area churches and seven ministries stood in solidarity with “our neighbors” in the Jewish community. On April 10, Tom Bradford of the National Christian Foundation of Alabama and Scott Dawson of Scott Dawson Evangelistic Association were joined by numerous pastors and representatives of the Christian community at a ceremony in the Levite Jewish Community Center board room. There, they presented a check for $111,745 to the campaign to enhance security at Birmingham’s Jewish institutions.

The campaign was launched after the LJCC and N.E. Miles Jewish Day School received four bomb threats from mid-January until early March, as part of several waves of threats that affected about half of the JCCs in the country. Though an arrest was made on March 23, an increase in other threats nationally, including vandalism and other incidents, has led to a continuation of efforts to enhance security at the facilities.

The overall campaign has a goal of up to $1 million and will focus in part on the community campus on Montclair Road, which contains the LJCC, Cohn Early Childhood Learning Center, Day School, and the Federation and Birmingham Jewish Foundation offices.

Area synagogues and other institutions will also receive funds to enhance their security, but the funds from the Christian campaign will go toward the Montclair Road campus. As of April 19, the campaign had reached $500,000, while recommended enhancements already identified by law enforcement and security advisors have topped $655,000 and may go higher.

Dawson referenced the holy days as a time of coming together for a good purpose, saying “we need some good news in Alabama on a day like today,” which was the day Governor Robert Bentley resigned.

Donald Hess, who is chairing the security campaign, opened the ceremony by remarking that he was at the 1959 dedication of the building. He thanked the Christian representatives for being “so responsive to the pressures we were feeling in the Jewish community.”

Growing up in Mountain Brook, he said people elsewhere in the country would ask about anti-Semitism in the area, but “generally that hasn’t been the feeling” here. Still, there were times when the Jewish community has felt isolated.

As many in the Christian community started attending AIPAC events, Hess said, “we realized a large part of the Christian community wanted to stand with us,” and “it makes us feel stronger.”

He said that though there are areas of disagreement, “it’s just incredible when we find issues we can coalesce around and work together.”

Dawson said there were three main reasons why the groups responded to the call. “God has commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves,” he said. It is also an opportunity “to share what we stand for” instead of being seen as against something. “We stand for religious liberty, that anyone can live out their faith,” he said.

The third reason was the children, Dawson said. “When innocent children have their days interrupted with bomb threats, anyone with common sense rises up.”

Over two-thirds of the LJCC’s membership is not Jewish, and it is seen as being a place to bring together those from a wide range of religions and ethnicities.

Honora Pinnick, communications director at Independent Presbyterian, spoke as a parent of two of the more than 100 Christian children who attend the Cohn ECLC at the LJCC. She said the effort by the churches show “the Gospel isn’t something (the children) listen to every Sunday at church, it’s a way they live their lives.”
Rebekah Weinberger, founder of Parents of the LJCC, which was formed after the threats began, said they felt “an outpouring of love” from the community over the last four months, and having so many churches stand in solidarity shows, as Elie Wiesel said, “people have learned from history.”

Hess said he and Bradford started to really get to know each other while working with United Way. “We were looking for ways to make this a stronger community for everybody.”

Bradford said he has done fundraising for decades, but “this was the most fun and easiest” campaign to raise money for.

Bradford said he spoke with Richard Friedman, executive director of the Federation, a month ago as the campaign began. That night, Bradford wondered what he would have done had he been a Christian in Germany in the 1940s. He also thought of “all the national publicity we get as a city of hate, but that’s not the Birmingham I know.”

Raising a substantial amount “would send a statement to the Jewish community, our whole community and maybe nationwide, that Birmingham is a city where people come together,” he said.

The next day he addressed a leadership meeting, and “about 7 or 8 came up after the meeting and said we have to do this.”

He mentioned it to Rick Burgess of the Birmingham-based nationally-syndicated “Rick and Bubba” radio show, and Burgess said he wanted to mention it on the air. That weekend, Harry Reeder, senior pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian church, said he wanted to be involved.

After sending out an email “so we’d all be singing from the same hymnal, the money started pouring in,” Bradford said.

The participating churches are Briarwood Presbyterian, Canaan Baptist, Canterbury United Methodist, Cathedral Church of the Advent, Catholic Diocese of Birmingham, Church at Brook Hills, Church of the Highlands, First Baptist Church of Birmingham, Gardendale First Baptist, Independent Presbyterian, Liberty Church, Mountain Brook Community Church, Mt. Signal Baptist of Chelsea, Oak Mountain Presbyterian, Shades Mountain Baptist, Shades Mountain Independent, St. Luke’s Episcopal, St. Mary’s Episcopal and St. Peter’s Anglican.

Participating ministries are Alliance Ministries, Center for Executive Leadership, JH Ranch, Lifework Leadership, National Christian Foundation of Alabama, Scott Dawson Evangelistic Association and Young Business Leaders.

In the first of two closing prayers, Reeder said it “pains our heart” to reflect on the threats that brought everyone together. He gave thanks for the LJCC “as an asset to the community” and for the opportunity to be “part of the continuing of its work.”

Rabbi Laila Haas of Temple Emanu-El expressed thanks “for the fellowship of those around us” and spoke about the Passover journey “from darkness to light, despair to hope and redemption.”

Dawson said the campaign crossed denominational and racial lines. And they’re not done.

“Just this morning I got emails from three churches” that want to participate, Bradford said, but “once we got over $100,000 I wanted to bring this check.”