

## BP oil spill called not accident, but sin

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The Rev. Gerald Durley, pastor of Atlanta's Providence Missionary Baptist Church, and the Rev. Sally Bingham of Interfaith Power and Light in San Francisco sway to the music during an interfaith service in New Orleans to promote recovery from the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. (RNS/The Times-Picayune/Ted Jackson)

NEW ORLEANS -- Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders from around the U.S. cruised through the oil-fouled upper reaches of the Gulf of Mexico July 7, and some said the BP oil spill looks not only like an accident, but a sin.

"From my perspective, it's an insult to God and a sin against creation," said the Rev. Sally Bingham, an Episcopal priest and environmentalist who heads the San Francisco-based Interfaith Power and Light.

Bingham and almost a dozen others motored through the upper reaches of Barataria Bay after assembling at First Grace United Methodist Church for a prayer service calling for restoration and renewal of the Gulf Coast.

"This is not a spill; it's a spoilage" of God's creation, said the Rev. Jim Wallis, founder of the Washington-based Sojourners social justice movement.

Bingham, Wallis and others framed the spill as a wake-up call with not only economic but moral dimensions to people of many faiths.

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, head of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, said the larger lesson of the spill is a call to reduce energy dependence on petroleum.

"We all need to turn from short-term gratification ... rather than indulge ourselves with this unlimited consumption," she said.

Bingham, Wallis, Schonfeld and other visiting clergy from Washington, Chicago, California and elsewhere assembled in New Orleans for a three-day visit to see firsthand the effects of the spill.

The group met New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu and toured part of the coastal zone to talk to cleanup workers and affected fishing families, and to see what, if anything, their ministries back home could do to help.

Beyond scouting for relief opportunities, some also work for policymaking bodies within their denominations. They said they wanted to see whether their denominations should press Congress and the White House to alter domestic energy policy.

The pastors and representatives were assembled by the Sierra Club, which regards them as partners in pursuit of its energy agenda. Still, some were not easily pigeonholed as conventionally liberal.

The Rev. Chris Seay, pastor of the 1,400-member Ecclesia Church in downtown Houston, described his evangelical community as Bible-centered, antiabortion, anti-death penalty, and environmentally aware. He said his congregation includes oil industry workers, among them a woman drilling the relief well seen as the best hope for killing the runaway BP well 50 miles off the mouth of the Mississippi River.

"We have a remarkable number of people in the oil industry keenly aware of their responsibility to care for the environment," he said.

The clerics invoked their sacred texts to frame the spill as more than an isolated industrial accident, and more as an offense against creation and a consequence of industrial society's addictive reliance on oil.

Dr. Mahmoud Sarmini, a New Orleans-area physician and a Muslim, cited a passage in the Quran referring to man as God's viceroy on earth, with its implications for humans' responsibility for creation.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Washington-based Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, referred to Jewish tradition holding that creation is only on loan from God to humanity, and only for wise use. He called the spill a wake-up call for a change in energy policy.

"That doesn't mean we don't need to use fossil fuel, or drill for oil until we get ourselves off," Saperstein said. "But we have to move more quickly to get off, and while we are relying on these fossil fuels we have to be much more insistent that there be safety precautions."

[Bruce Nolan writes for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans.]

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