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America Mourns With Flags, Prayer

By RACHEL ZOLL, AP Religion Writer

Patriotism mixed with prayer Friday as Americans packed churches and clogged public squares on a day of remembrance for the victims of this week's sneak attacks. At dusk, the flicker of candles illuminated city streets, as people responded to call for unity spread on the Internet.

In places, the ceremonies felt like funerals. In others, they were like pep rallies for a wounded nation. Mourners at St. Paul's Church in Concord, N.H., called out the names of loved ones missing or hurt in the destruction. Outside, a crowd softly sang "Amazing Grace." Thousands in Chicago's Daley Center Plaza waved American flags and chanted "USA! USA!"

Midday services gave way to vigils in the evening. A widespread Internet message urged people to light candles and "show the world that Americans are strong and united together against terrorism." Untold numbers answered the call: all over New York, in Boston, in Birmingham, Ala. and elsewhere.

On Manhattan's upper west side, hundreds met at a Mexican restaurant that had advertised the event in fliers in Spanish and English earlier in the day. The restaurant handed out candles and flags as the crowd spilled into the street and blocked traffic. People cheered and sang "God Bless America" as military jets flew overhead. "I've been in the house for the last three days in shock. This is my first day out," said Millie Cintron, a Wall Street worker who saw the twin towers collapse.

Earlier, Cincinnati police had to shut down two streets in the heart of downtown when thousands of people united to attend a service in that city, which was torn by racial violence just months ago.

The bells in Bristol, Tenn., tolled for fallen firefighters. "The feeling I personally had all week, I guess you could describe it as a five-pound weight hanging from your heart, pulling on it," said Gary Madden, Bristol's deputy fire chief.

The mighty gathered in Washington. President Bush, who called for the day of remembrance, attended a service at the majestic National Cathedral with a who's who of American politics, including four former presidents. The president wove words of comfort in with messages of American resolve. "This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger," Bush said. "This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others; it will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing."

Everyday citizens assembled in their own houses of worship or city streets, remembering those who lost their lives in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, and finding inspiration in the volunteers working around the clock to clean the wreckage.

At the Oklahoma City National Memorial, the site of the 1995 bombing of the Murrah federal building, several hundred people sang "God Bless America" under an American elm that survived the blast.

People wore their patriotism creatively. A woman stitched American flags to her vest, then headed to a noon Mass in Newark, N.J. Office workers there carried small flags in shirt pockets. Others wore sweat shirts with stars and stripes. "It makes you proud that we've got the support of the American people at a time when we might be on the brink of war," said Army reservist Joedy Cook, who attended the Cincinnati memorial in his Army fatigues. A man walked up to Cook, thrust out his hand and told him, "Thank you for your service to our country." Cook said that happened a lot Friday.

Sayed Siddiqui, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, addressed his comments at a memorial service to "fellow Americans." Muslims have been targets of revenge assaults since the attacks. "God help us fight hate and change it with our hearts filled with compassion," Siddiqui said.

On the Las Vegas Strip, several marquees that usually advertise entertainers names instead featured flags with the message "God Bless America" or "One Nation Under God."

On the Mexican border, U.S. customs and immigration agents stopped traffic going into the United States for one minute to commemorate the victims.

The University of Georgia at Athens was among many campuses where bells chimed at noon and students observed a moment of silence. Charlie Thompson, a law student at the school, urged others to look to a "higher power" for answers.

But around the country, others were more consumed by anger than sorrow. "I'm supposed to be a Christian, but my prayers are for revenge," said Al Thompson, who attended a Mass at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. "What's the saying? God may forgive them but I never will."