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Habitat building up many faiths

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DURHAM -- About 75 Durham residents forsook the comforts of home on a chilly Sunday afternoon so they could help deliver those comforts to some recent arrivals to this country.

They also did it to show that in a time when religious and other differences divide the globe, people of multiple faiths can come together to serve others.

Habitat for Humanity of Durham began building its 232nd house Sunday. At two stories, and with five bedrooms, it may be the largest structure the 24-year-old group has ever tackled. Something assuredly unique about it is that, for the first time in local Habitat history, Christians, Jews and Muslims are collaborating on the project.

Father Robert Kaynor, a priest at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, participated in Sunday's "interfaith build" home blessing service. Afterward, he compared the project to a candle in the darkness.

"It's one small thing that allows people ... to transcend differences," Kaynor said, "to be drawn together for a higher purpose and to say that there are things that matter more than words or more than human belief. There are things that matter about being human, [and] the way we are most ourselves is ... to be with and to be caring for one another. Not in how we sound, not in how we look, not in what we know, but ... in the work of caring for one another."

Michael Goldman, Duke University's Jewish chaplain, read the Hebrew blessing known as the Shehecheyanu at the ceremony.

"Basically, it's praising God for keeping us alive and bringing us to the present moment, and it's something that Jews traditionally say whenever something has come to fulfillment or something new is beginning," Goldman explained. "And this event was both -- commencing to build a house and also convening a large group of people with a similar noble purpose."

Goldman, like an Episcopal partner of Habitat for Humanity, said that the Durham branch of the organization approached him with an invitation to join the interfaith project. Goldman forwarded the e-mail to Muslim and Jewish students who had been intending to organize a get-together anyway and got a positive response.

Abdullah Antepi, a Muslim chaplain at the university, gave an Islamic invocation during the ceremony. And Gregory Marrow, imam of the Ar-Razzaq

Islamic Center, provided a Muslim perspective on service that complemented the Christian one provided by Kaynor.

The new home is being built for the Rahlan-Sius, until recently denizens of an Asian refugee camp. A family of Montagnards, the mountain people who were persecuted by the Vietnamese government after siding with American forces in the 1960s and 1970s, the Rahlan-Sius have two adults and eight children ages 5 through 21. The father emigrated two years ago and the rest followed earlier in 2009.

The family is sponsored by Binkley Baptist Church and has permanent American residency, said Miguel Rubiera, the executive director of Habitat of Durham.

Their new house could be finished by January.

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