

# Messages of inspiration mark prayer services

## Faithful flock to mayors' breakfasts

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LANCASTER - More than 1,000 Antelope Valley residents turned out Thursday on the annual National Day of Prayer to offer thanks and praise to God and ask his help for the United States, its leaders, military personnel and ordinary Americans.

Mayors' prayer breakfasts drew nearly 850 people to the Antelope Valley Fairgrounds in Lancaster and more than 150 to the Cascades restaurant in Palmdale. Others gathered outside Lancaster City Hall at noon to pray, and more gathered in the evening at an interfaith service featuring prayers from six faiths.

"Our society needs us," retired NFL quarterback Jay Schroeder told the crowd at the Lancaster Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. "Lancaster needs you."

The Lancaster breakfast is the Antelope Valley's oldest and largest National Day of Prayer Observance. It was initiated in 1992 when Bishop Henry Hearn, recently named mayor emeritus, was serving his first rotation as Lancaster mayor.

Thursday's assemblage included attorneys and plumbing contractors, teenagers and senior citizens, members of the military and the public safety community.

Schroeder, a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes who got to Super Bowl XXII as a member of the Washington Redskins, regaled the crowd in a packed Poppy Pavilion with his account of how what looked like a football career wrong turn became tangible manifestation of the Lord's plan for his family.

Coming off a stretch with the Los Angeles Raiders after starting 10 regular-season games for the 1987 Super Bowl champion Redskins, the Cincinnati Bengals did not exactly fill the bill of particulars that Schroeder wanted for NFL employment.

Schroeder told his wife he only wanted to play with a terrific team, in a locale that was warm, where the game was played on the grass.

"It was cold ... the team (play) was awful, and we played on turf," he said. "We started out the year 0-10. It was miserable."

Not much of a career move. Then Schroeder and his wife, Debbie, learned that headaches plaguing his 6-year-old son, C.J., first believed to be from a cyst on the child's brain, turned out to be from a tumor.

Telling physicians he'd search the world for the tops in the field to help his son, he came full circle with all experts telling him the best of the best in the field happened to be in Cincinnati.

"The Lord put us there not to play football," he told the rapt audience. "The Lord put us there for our son."

Surgery involved doctors removing a 4-inch rectangle of skull, making an inches-deep incision into the brain, and removing a walnut-size tumor. Doctors advised the Schroeders that the child might not remember his parents and had only a 50-50 chance for survival.

His son now is 21 and planning to marry, he said.

"You will be amazed at those things that God does if you allow him to," Schroeder told the group.

Decrying a society in which girls beat up other girls "just because" they want to show the video on YouTube, Schroeder said the group gathered in the Poppy Pavilion was not there to enjoy breakfast, but to join in fulfilling God's plan.

New Lancaster Mayor R. Rex Parris amplified those sentiments. He recalled a trip to the Great Wall of China with his clergyman, Pastor Paul Chappell of Lancaster Baptist Church. Parris said he wondered aloud how Chappell had built a Christian university within a decade, and staffed missions in China with graduates of that school. The answer, Chappell supplied with a grin, was, "It's what happens when you pray."

The Air Force Plant 42 commander, Lt. Col. Ronald Hirtle, led the gathering in a New Testament reading and the Rev. Tom Baker of Sacred Heart Catholic Church gave the Old Testament reading. Lt. Col. Donald Hoffman, the chaplain at Edwards Air Force Base, offered a prayer for military personnel serving abroad, in Iraq and Afghanistan and anywhere in "harm's way." The Highland High School Air Force Junior ROTC posted the colors.

State Sen. George Runner and Assemblywoman Sharon Runner, R-Lancaster, gave

prayers for the national and state leaders and Prayer Breakfast chairman Raymond Kaecker recognized serving military and asked all veterans and clergy to stand and be recognized.

"The men and women who come together each year to establish this prayer breakfast do so because of their commitment to our community and their belief in the power of prayer," Parris said in his mayor's message.

He added, "If we pray every morning, just imagine what God would bring to us."

Organizers of the original event in 1992 were Hearn and pastors Dave Prather and Bill Witt, who modeled the event after the first day of prayer observed by the first Continental Congress in 1775.

In 1952 Congress passed a joint resolution, signed by President Harry Truman, establishing the National Day of Prayer. The first Thursday of May was set as the National Day of Prayer by a congressional amendment signed by President Ronald Reagan.

At the Palmdale breakfast, boys home director Emmett Murrell looked out at an audience that included government officials and business people, quoted a selection from the New Testament book of Ephesians and told them that doing good deeds is of no value unless accompanied by faith in God.

Noting that the audience contained people who have done good things for the community and for their families, Murrell told them: "Works without faith is of no consequence at all."

Murrell, director and chief administrator for Murrell's Farm and Boys Home in Palmdale for 22 years, was the keynote speaker at the breakfast, which began with the ceremonial blowing of a shofar, a ram's horn trumpet used in Jewish worship, and included music by an acoustic quartet called Willing Heart and inspirational dance by John Michael, Betty Brown, Nom-L Brown and Trueful, costumed as angels.

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford offered a welcome to the audience.

"Let's keep praying for everybody, for our community," he said. "It's a hard day not to be inspired."

The breakfast was hosted by The King's Table, a weekly prayer and fellowship group, which has put on Palmdale's National Day of Prayer observance for three years.

"We are here to honor God, to ask him to cure and bless our country and our homes and

our finances and our health," event facilitator Brian Coleman told the crowd.

Government leaders at the Palmdale breakfast, besides Ledford, included Palmdale Vice Mayor Steve Knight and Councilman Mike Dispenza, Palmdale School District board President Sandy Corrales-Eneix, Westside Union School District board member Linda Jones, Palmdale Sheriff's Station Capt. Bobby Denham and Palmdale Water District board President Dick Wells.

Murrell told his audience that he had become disillusioned with church as a boy after seeing his pastor and a deacon chasing after women.

He and friends formed a gang in Long Beach, he said, and he watched as a friend, a talented football player, was shot to death outside a dance.

But he said he believes God never left him even as he decided he had no use for church. He worked for boys' clubs around Southern California and did work he considered good for others.

"I had no boundaries. All I knew is I was in the business of doing good," Murrell said. "I was still getting high every chance I got."

He married and moved to Palmdale.

One night, drunk, he walked across the desert and climbed up a scaffold, Murrell said.

"I laid there all night. That morning I found myself covered in tears," he said. "That's when I met Jesus. I called on him and said, 'I need you.' "

Murrell noted that he is now working with the Antelope Valley Union High School District's Violence-Free Zone initiative, which put 12 youth advisers to work at Eastside High School in Lancaster and Knight High in Palmdale. Murrell recruited the advisers, who walk school hallways and build relationships with students and help to defuse tension between teens.

A half-dozen advisers attended the breakfast, and Murrell introduced them to applause from the crowd.

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