

Clergy urge Americans to defend religious minorities

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

A group of religious leaders representing seven faith traditions have called for something more than a period of public mourning after a week that saw a shooting rampage at a Sikh temple and a suspicious fire at a Missouri mosque.

“It is my hope that this is more than a time to express personal sorrows,” said Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “Our most concrete rejection of violence occurs when we engage the neighbor, the neighbor who is new in our community, the neighbor who worships differently than we,” he said.

The gathering was mostly virtual—a national conference call sponsored by Shoulder to Shoulder, an interfaith group founded in 2010 to combat a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment. Faith leaders came together on August 9 in the wake of several recent acts against religious minorities.

On August 5, a gunman shot and killed six Sikhs at their Wisconsin temple. The following day, fire razed a Missouri mosque. It was the second fire at the mosque this summer, after a July blaze that investigators have determined was arson. Meanwhile, a Tennessee mosque has struggled to open despite protests from critics across the nation.

Kathryn Lohre, president of the National Council of Churches, encouraged congregants to participate in a national day of prayer on August 12 in support of the Sikh community. She also advised Americans to visit Sikh temples.

“We are also encouraging congregations across the country to be responsive to the gracious hospitality of our Sikh brothers and sisters who are opening their gurdwaras for prayer and fellowship and mutual understanding,” she said.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said that religious groups must together focus their efforts against hate crimes.

“America is the most religiously diverse nation in the history of humankind,” Saperstein said. “Hate crimes are not just mere acts of violence. . . . They are a betrayal of the promise of America.”

Also taking part in the conference call were Catholic Bishop Denis J. Madden; Imam Mohamed Magid, president of the Islamic Society of North America; Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue at the Jewish Theological Seminary. —RNS