

Lawmaker Asks Clergy to Foster Tolerance in Wake of Shootings

PATERSON, N.J. (RNS) In the wake of Saturday's (Jan. 8) shooting that left six people dead and an Arizona congresswoman critically injured, a New Jersey congressman is calling upon clergy to help people put aside their ideological differences during a "week of solidarity."

"I'm looking for some of the churches and the synagogues and the mosques, the places of worship, where they can come together and talk about what solidarity means at this moment for the nation," said Rep. Bill Pascrell, a Democrat.

Pascrell said he wants to tone down the heated political rhetoric he believes may have contributed to the shooting in Tucson, which left Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, an Arizona Democrat, in critical condition.

The shooting has sparked an intense debate over whether incendiary political talk across the country—punctuated with references to guns and the blood of slain politicians—is a real danger, or merely vivid political rhetoric.

The Rev. Leona R. James of the Thankful Baptist Church in Paterson agreed that clergy have a role to play, including preaching the golden rule to people who would hate others of differing political beliefs.

"They need somebody to guide them," James said. "Somebody has not been teaching them the right way, and the right way is, you treat people the way you would like to be treated."

Pascrell blamed the angry, unchecked rhetoric of some on-air personalities, including Fox News commentator Glenn Beck, for fanning partisan flames, and contributing to the kind of hostile environment out of which the shooting may have grown.

"They are entitled to their opinions, but they have consequences," Pascrell said. A spokesman for Beck did not immediately respond to Pascrell's comments.

Pascrell said it was not only elected officials who need to come together, which is why he is calling on clergy to help still the waters.

“I don’t think the two parties can resolve this,” he said. “We’ve got to have leadership in the Congress, but the Congress also needs to hear leadership in our nation.”

At a ceremony Monday (Jan. 10) unveiling the initiative, Rabbi Craig Miller of Passaic urged people to use kind words and to “guard your tongue” against speaking with hatred.

“Let’s speak words that build, not destroy,” he said, according to The Record newspaper. “Words that will unite, not divide.”