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ROBERT GREMILLION
PUBLISHER

EARL MAUCKER
EDITOR

SHARON ROSENHAUSE
MANAGING EDITOR

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KINGSLEY GUY
EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

INTERFAITH RELATIONS

ADD TO MEANING OF SEASON

The holiday season is off to a strong start this year, but not merely because the malls are packed with shoppers. Instead, the real spark was a gesture of good faith that South Floridians should build on throughout this hopeful time of year.

During Thanksgiving Day Mass at St. Katharine Drexel Catholic Church in Weston, a leader of South Florida's Muslim community spoke to parishioners, condemning the recent attacks by militants on Catholic churches in Baghdad. Altaf Ali, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Miami, told the congregation that the violence ran counter to the "true tenet" of Islam, and that he sympathized with the sorrow and suffering of all.

Ali's gesture is a welcome breakthrough.

U.S. officials have been encouraging Muslim leaders across the country to speak out against atrocities committed by Islamic fundamentalists. Others, including members of the American public, have been critical of U.S. Muslims for not being more vocal. In fact, Ali's appearance at Thursday's service followed a commentary in the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* by St. Katharine's pastor lamenting the assaults on Baghdad churches and parishioners.

Ali has responded, and it's up to South Florida's religious leaders and worshippers of all faiths to reach out as well with similar invitations and pilgrimages.

The gatherings could be publicized in weekly sermons and newsletters that houses of worship hand out to the faithful every week with listings for services. The holiday season, which is chock-full of special events, offers plenty of additional opportunities beyond weekly services for people of good faith to meet for interfaith exchanges.

People are busier, more stressed and harried than usual this time of year, so the temptation to put off such endeavors until things "settle down" exists. But what better way is there to bring more meaning to a season based on the concepts of peace and goodwill among all people than by erecting bridges across the most flinty divide in U.S. society today, religion?

One of South Florida's strengths is its diversity. But differences can become an albatross if people don't communicate, exchange views and break down the walls of silence and alienation.

Religious leaders have bemoaned that the commercial aspects of the holidays often overshadow the spiritual. Altaf Ali and the community at St. Katharine have set an example that, if others follow, could make this season much more meaningful.