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Life

Home » Life



God bless you : Clergy of various faiths pray in local homes

By DAVE MASON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER
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Victoria and Bryan Stewart's peaceful home has seen a lot of trauma.

Tenants had left the small Santa Barbara house, which the Stewarts rented out for three years, in a state of disrepair. The water and gas lines were broken. When the Stewarts moved back into the home in 2010 and turned on the water, the house was flooded.

The Stewarts lived without water and gas for nearly a year. They replaced the carpets and fixed the gas and most of the plumbing, but knew they needed one more thing.

God's blessing.

On Tuesday, they invited the Rev. Larry Gosselin, a priest at the Santa Barbara Parish (the Santa Barbara Mission), into their home. He used an olive tree branch to sprinkle holy water in every room and burned incense in the living room.

"We ask God's blessing on this home," the Rev. Gosselin, 66, prayed as he stood with Mr. and Mrs. Stewart in their living room. "This home is a gift. We pray it will be full of the spirit of God and the spirit of love, that God will provide for your needs."

The Franciscan priest prayed for nourishment of the mind, body and soul in the kitchen; for rest in the bedrooms; for cleansing in the bathroom.

Homes are blessed occasionally in Santa Barbara by Catholic parishes and Protestant denominations varying from Baptist to Episcopalian.

The Rev. Bob Honeychurch, interim rector of All Saints-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Montecito, blesses three or four homes a year. He attributed an increase in requests to an American renewal of faith during the

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The Rev. Larry Gosselin of the Santa Barbara Parish (the Santa Barbara Mission) prays with Victoria and Bryan Stewart as he blesses their Santa Barbara home. The Stewarts see the blessing as a means of protecting their home from evil.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



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wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the recession.

"When there are hard times, and we've certainly have been through them the last 15 to 20 years, people realize we can't make it on our own," the Rev. Honeychurch, 57, said, standing outside the Santa Barbara apartment of the Rev. Victoria Mouradian, his church's interim associate rector. He blessed it earlier this year.

People such as the Rev. Mouradian ask for blessings when they move into new homes, which clergy cited as the typical reason. Others are a renovation, the start of a marriage, the birth of a child or a new chapter after the death of a spouse. The Rev. Gosselin said blessings are a strong tradition in American Indian, Latino and Filipino cultures, but have been embraced by other people as well.

"It seems like you're blessing a home or a bedroom or a bathroom or dining room, but in reality, you're blessing the experience of being a family in that unit," the Rev. Honeychurch said.

Local clergy agreed a blessing sends a clear message: Don't worry. God is here.

Even during bad times.

"I believe everything that comes our way now will be good and positive," said Mrs. Stewart, 52, her faith unshaken by her home's troubles.

"The problems we have will be remedied," said Mrs. Stewart, the mother of two children — Carleigh, 18, and Brandon, 26. "He (God) is constantly caring for us. He cares for everybody. For us personally, it's a reaffirmation that our house is protected against any evil."

The Rev. Gosselin, who blesses one or two homes a month, said blessings can restore the spiritual energy where there have been negative emotions or a violent crime. He said he had to do several blessings in a Goleta home to get rid of some negative energy. "Now there's peace in the house."

He said blessings can inspire residents to be more loving. "If you know your house is blessed, you have to act differently."

The priest added that even though he can't prove it, he believes blessings will protect residents if a disaster occurs. "I've heard stories when a tree falls on a (blessed) house and no one was injured."

But the Rev. Dr. Roy Donkin, pastor at Cambridge Drive Community Church (part of the American Baptist denomination) in Goleta, said he and his congregation don't expect blessings to keep the plumbing working.

"The people who want blessings of their homes are not doing it because they think it will fix something," said the Rev. Donkin, 59, who blesses one or two homes a year. "They're doing it as an expression of who they are and how they understand their faith. It's almost like a wedding vow. They tend to be folk who take their faith seriously and feel their faith needs to be integrated in every area of their house."

The Rev. Anthony Chaboya, pastor of Bethany Congregational Church on Hope Avenue, agreed blessings aren't a quick fix; people still must act to solve problems.

"After prayers of blessing, I will interview (residents) weeks later. 'Is there still fear in the home? Is there still anger?' " the Rev. Chaboya, 45, said. "To be honest, half of the time, they say they don't sense that anymore. The other half,



The Rev. Gosselin sprinkles holy water throughout the Stewarts' house.

The Rev. Dr. Ron Donkin, pastor of Cambridge Drive Community Church in Goleta, left, meets with David and Michele Wilson and their sons Michael, 2, and Jacob, 9, at their home in the same city. It's among the homes the Rev. Donkin has blessed.

The Rev. Bob Honeychurch, interim rector of All Saints-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Montecito, blessed the Santa Barbara apartment of Victoria Mouradian, his church's interim associate rector, earlier this year. Moving into a new home is a common reason for blessings.

they say, 'We still feel it. Can you keep praying for us?' "

The minister credited prayers of blessings in his daughters' bedrooms for chasing away nightmares. "I'll go in the living room, where the family hangs out the most, and I ask, 'Lord, whatever comes on TV may be things you want us to see and in the conversations that are happening, let there be a sense of laughter and joy and hospitality.' "

The Rev. Dr. Hillary Chrisley, who recently ended her tenure as senior pastor at the First United Methodist Church on Anapamu Street and is heading to Glendora United Methodist Church, has occasionally done blessings on homes. She said the prayers benefit both residents and their guests.

"It (a blessing) reminds you that God is everywhere," the Rev. Chrisley, 52, said. "God is where you are now, even though the home is new. ... You remember this is a sacred place."

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Home

Local News

Breaking News
Business
Celebrations
Columnists
Life
Sports
Scene

Editorials

Opinions & Letters

Obituaries
Travel

Special Publications

Parade Magazine

Classifieds

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Rentals
Employment
Announcements
Merchandise
Garage Sales
More

Real Estate

Finance
House & Home
Open Home Directory
Commercial Properties
Rentals

Archives

Events Calendar

Site Index

Weather
Traffic
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