

Pastor brings message of forgiveness to Washintgon

His Los Altos Hills church burns, cleric's faith doesn't flag

By Lisa Friedman
WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — As Pastor Samer Youssef walked through the remains of his Los Altos Hills church after suspected arsonists burned it to the ground in April, he came across charred remains of the New Testament that once had graced the church altar.

Fire had melted the Bible's metal cover and blackened most of its pages. But a few survived — including the verse in which Jesus instructed his followers, "if someone strikes you on the right cheek . . . turn the other to him as well."

On Wednesday Youssef brought that message of forgiveness and love from California to Washington, D.C., as he delivered the morning invocation to the U.S. House of Representatives.

"Always in the Orthodox church we pray for the president, the civil authorities and the armed forces everywhere. Maybe this message of peace, this message that evil cannot be overcome except by good, reaches the hearts of the members of Congress," Youssef said.

It also was a message that Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, said Youssef and congregants of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, of the Redeemer have taken to heart since the April 7 fire.

Authorities have declared the fire to be the work of arsonists, but have not made any arrests in the case.

"He has never uttered a cross word of bitterness," Eshoo said of Youssef. And, she said, the outpouring of financial and emotional support from Los Altos Hills residents since the fire "send a signal to people across the country that no one who tries to terrorize our community will win."

U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, To-

bacco and Firearms, which investigates all major church fires, is handling the case. Eshoo and other lawmakers also have called on the Department of Justice to investigate whether the fire was specifically directed against its largely Palestinian congregation because of Middle East tensions.

Since the fire, Youssef said, congregants have been meeting in Sunday school buildings near the former church grounds.

"The place is overflowing," he said.

Eshoo said Wednesday that she invited Youssef to lead the morning prayer in the House because the pastor has been "one of the greatest sources of pride and leadership to our community."

The invite also could lead to an injection of federal funds into Los Altos Hills to rebuild the church.

Introducing Youssef to congressional leaders after the opening ceremony Wednesday,



Submitted photo

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES Chaplain Daniel Coughlin (left) and Rep. Anna Eshoo meet with Father Samer Youssef, pastor of the Antioch Orthodox Church of the Redeemer, the Los Altos church that served a largely Palestinian congregation that was burned to the ground in April.

Eshoo took some time to schmooze with Rep. Sam Farr, D-Monterey, who sits on the House Appropriations Committee, and Rep. John Conyers,

D-Mich., who has long been active in investigating arsons at African American churches.

"Have we ever put money into rebuilding churches? Is that a

separation (of church and state) issue?" Farr wondered.

"We'll look into that," he promised Youssef. "Thank you for praying for our House."