

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Thu, Jul. 19, 2007

Downtown Miami church blesses the animals

BY MARISSA D. CLARKE

Downtown Miami is not yet known as a pet-friendly place, but one church opened its doors last week to more than a dozen animals.

Cats, dogs, two hermit crabs, a lizard and two horses -- Sarah and O'Ryan of the Miami Police Department's mounted patrol unit, which covers the downtown area -- were part of an animal blessing Saturday at the First United Methodist Church of Miami, 400 Biscayne Blvd.

The urban setting of downtown Miami was a far cry from the field in rural Illinois where Pam Trowbridge, a visiting pastor with the church, held her first pet blessing about 17 years ago.

Then, she blessed cows, ducks, horses and pigs. "This one is a little more urban," she said Saturday. "It's a good thing to do and a great way to reach out to people."

"I thought it would be nice to be a part of this," said Miami Police Officer Luis Pal, who brought his horse, O'Ryan. "It's the first time for us, but we always like to cooperate with anything that's positive for the community," he said, noting he was open to divine intervention.

"They don't always behave that well but I'm hoping that maybe he'll relax a little bit."

Animal blessings usually take place in October, in honor of St. Francis of Assisi's love for animals. The church decided to move up the date to accommodate the church's busy calendar.

"We have several people who have lost animals that were really close to them, and we wanted to recognize that bond," said Trowbridge, who owns three rescued cats. "Pets are a part of people's lives today and they are a part of our family. The church is now recognizing that bond."

For the blessing, held in the church's social hall, Trowbridge knelt in front of each pet, asked the owner its name, placed her hand on the pet's forehead -- or cage, in the case of the lizard and crabs -- and then recited the United Methodist Church's standard pet blessing: "God's creation, may you be a blessing to the house in which you live and may you be safe for the year to come."

She then kissed each pet -- or their cage, in the case of the lizard and crabs.

Sarah and O'Ryan remained outside in the courtyard. For them, she added a line calling for the protection of their riders.

"It is very important, they do something beyond just being a companion," Trowbridge said of the officers.

Following the blessing, pets enjoyed cat and dog treats, and their owners had lemonade and cookies.

Church member Catherine Phillips said it was a comfort to have her 3-year-old Shih Tzu, Cookie, blessed.

"She's my best friend, and it's nice to have your best friend covered," Phillips said.

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