

Interfaith Thanksgiving service melds 600 voices

/ Jean Torkelson

was Religion Writer

Last year, worshippers at Denver's interfaith Thanksgiving service shared the mixed hopes and anxieties of a new millennium and presidency still under dispute.

This year, gratitude was expressed under the shadow of terrorism and war.

Still, the annual service, which as launched more than 110 years ago, carried on the theme of seeking common joys.

The hymn-studded hour got under way with Cantor Regina Beit singing the famous words of psalm 118, "Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good."

It ended with more than 600

singing *America the Beautiful*.

"I just want to share love and joy — I know it sounds corny but it makes me happy," said Judith Kohl, 49, who was attending her first interfaith Thanksgiving.

Kohl and the crowd rose as the choir, composed of almost 100 volunteers in shimmering blue and green robes, marched into the comfortably filled Montview Presbyterian Church. Next year's host will be the Denver Buddhist Temple. Last year's host was Congregation Emanuel, one of the two original founders of the service in the 1880s.

The other founder, the First Universalist Church, was represented this year by the Rev. Janet

Newman, who opened the service and was the first to make reference to the troubling times.

"We will not be divided against ourselves," Newman said, in a prayer. "We are of many minds yet single-minded, a people who believe that mercy and justice shall yet prevail."

The altar was laden with plates of bread from around the world. Ministers then passed the plates through the congregation, which sampled from Asian rice cakes, unleavened Jewish matzoh, thick French-style bread representing Europe and the Americas, barley from the Mideast, and Hispanic tortillas.

The Rev. J. Darrell Schaffer,

pastor at Christ the King Catholic Church, which hosted in 1999, offered a prayer for unity, calling for "a faith without fanaticism, for understanding of views not shared."

The most direct reference to conflict was a donation to its victims. This year's collection plate was for America's Fund for Afghan Children, the cause established by President Bush.

Conspicuously absent was the Muslim community, which had attended in previous years. Reached by cell phone Thursday, Muhamed Jodeh said he and his family were enroute to Cheyenne to spend Thanksgiving with his son, Nidal, who is in the Air

Force.

Jodeh said he had been uncertain whether he could visit his son this year, but had hoped things would work so he could see his son and attend the service. Given the sensitive times, he felt the worst thing to do was to put a Muslim representative in the program and then have no one turn up.

Many people appeared to be attending for the first time. Clemen Hanson, a physician, said his immediate reason was that his wife Mary, was in the choir. The couple are new members at Montview, "and appreciative of being able to pray and interact with other congregations."

Other first-timers were Buddhists Dwight Suzuki and Dick Chikuma. Of Japanese ancestry, both are Americans of several generations' standing.

As members of the Tri State Buddhist Temple and strangers to a Christian church, they were struck by, what to them, was the exotic wonder of Montview's soaring Gothic arches, glittering stained glass and candlelit altar.

"I feel real reverent in here — but kind of little, too," chuckled Chikuma, craning his neck at the towering ceiling.

"It's overwhelming — the vaulted ceiling," said Suzuki, who was intrigued with the religious significance of the stained glass.

In her homily, the Rev. Cynthia Cearley urged the present generation to move beyond the self absorption that often comes with individualism, and to reinvent, once again, the "American experiment."

"It's our turn to figure out how we will live together on this plan-