

Church defends Muslim call ban at Vets Day concert

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) _ Leaders of a northern Michigan church are defending their decision to ban a Muslim call to worship that was part of the planned program for a Veterans Day concert by public high school and community college vocal groups.

The call to prayer was part of a performance of ``The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace."

A video runs during the singing, showing graphic war scenes followed by people from different faiths drawing together.

At a point in the video where Muslim worshippers are shown, there was silence rather than the call to prayer.

The decision to ban led Northwestern Michigan College to withdraw its sponsorship on the eve of the Nov. 11 performance, part of First Congregational Church's annual Mel Larimer Concert Series.

The Rev. David Walls, senior pastor of Traverse City's First Congregational Church, said leaders of his congregation feared causing offense to those at the concert.

``We were concerned that there was potential that some of our active military personnel, military families with sons or daughters in Iraq, who have even lost their lives there, would find it much too hard to handle," Walls told the Traverse City Record-Eagle (<http://bit.ly/TafMFf>). ``A prayer in Arabic, addressed to Allah, with references to Muhammad for an event that was intended to honor veterans."

``We are clearly a Christian church and we don't apologize for that," said Doug Bishop, vice president of the First Congregational Church council. ``We have the right to control our content."

Dawud Walid, executive director of the Michigan chapter of Council on American-Islamic Relations, told The Associated Press on Sunday that the church's action was ironic given the religious diversity that he experienced while serving in the U.S. Navy in 1994-98.

Walls ``seems to be oblivious to the core values of the U.S. military," said Walid, who said he observed firsthand how the military provided worship opportunities for ``Jews, Christians, Muslims, even Wiccans."

Alya Nadji, 16, is Muslim and a member of the Traverse City West High School Chorale. She said she ran from the room crying during a rehearsal when she learned the call to prayer was being cut from the program.

``I felt like I wasn't being treated equal," Nadji said. ``I felt that I was unwelcome and that I didn't belong any place near there.

Kamran Memon, president of the Chicago-based Muslims for Safe America, said many Muslim Americans are veterans, with about 20,000 currently in the military.

``American soldiers have fought and died side-by-side with Afghan and Iraqi troops fighting against a common enemy," Memon said.

*Pictured above is David Walls.