



**Cheryl Lecesse/Staff**

**The Rev. Austin Fleming, right, offers a blessing to Jimmy Houshan's dog Cher during the Blessing of the Animals Sunday afternoon.**

## Pets get well wishes

**By Cheryl Lecesse/Staff Writer**

**Wed Oct 10, 2007, 05:14 PM EDT**

Concord - The event seemed like any other: A refreshments table at the front, near a microphone facing rows of folding chairs set up on the Emerson Umbrella lawn.

But around the perimeter bowls of water sat in the grass, set up for the event's primary audience — pets.

Residents came out Sunday with their dogs, cats, and guinea pigs in tow for the Blessing of the Animals. The event, sponsored by the Emerson Umbrella for the Arts, Animals as Intermediaries, Holy Family Parish, First Parish Unitarian and Trinity Episcopal Church, follows the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi. The blessing recognizes the universal love and care for animals and the comfort and companionship they offer.

The Rev. Austin Fleming of Holy Family Parish was one of the clergy to officiate the blessing. Fleming, who has been in Concord for 13 years, has done several animal blessings in his time.

"It's a beautiful thing," he said. "They're God's creatures. They bring so much love and companionship to people."

The event piqued the interest of many who had never had their pets blessed before, including Bill and Martha Walker of Concord. The couple brought their 9-year-old Labrador retriever Ony.

"It sounded interesting," said Bill of the event, adding that Ony also likes to socialize.

Martha, who has a studio in the Emerson Umbrella, said she was interested in hearing “St. Francis and the Wolf,” a book by Lincoln author Jane Langton. Langton read an excerpt from her book and also signed copies.

Joellen O’Neil of Concord brought her golden retriever Phoebe, who will be 3 in December.

“I love to do things with my dog,” she said. “She likes parades, art exhibits and music, and going down to downtown Concord,” where business owners are known for offering treats.

By the Umbrella’s front steps Barbara Willis of Acton sat with her Shepard mix, Flora. Willis, who has a studio at the Emerson Umbrella, said she had seen a blessing of the animals as part of a PBS program.

“I just thought it was a neat concept,” she said.  
Flora, 11, comes with Willis to her studio every day.

“She’s one of our resident dogs,” she said, along with artist Sing Hanson’s yellow lab Cody.

Dogs may have been in the majority, but they weren’t the only pet represented. Nathaniel Cassidy, 12, brought his pet leopard geckos, Bob and Bobby Lou.

“We missed it other years,” said Audrey Cassidy, Nathaniel’s mother. But when Fleming announced the event in church that morning, they knew they had to bring their pets.

During the ceremony, dogs barked intermittently through the singing of a hymn celebrating God’s creatures. Then clergy spread out across the lawn to individually bless each animal.

“May you eat many crickets,” Fleming said as he blessed Bob and Bobby Lou.

But Cassidy said she was glad the blessing was a non-denominational event, for Bobby Lou’s sake.

“We’ve decided she’s a Muslim because she comes from Pakistan,” she said.