

In Newtown churches, many questions - and tears - but few answers

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NEWTOWN, Conn. (RNS) Dealing with the pain of the school shooting that claimed 28 lives will take faith, support and joyous Christmas celebrations, church leaders said at the first Sunday (Dec. 16) services held since the tragedy.

At houses of worship around town, people gathered in pews, crying, kneeling and hugging each other through services that focused on remembering the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, uniting the community, celebrating the meaning of Christmas and preventing similar disasters.

Yet even this beleaguered town's day of worship provided a moment of fear when congregants at St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church fled the building, saying they were told there was a bomb threat. Police with guns drawn surrounded the church. No injuries were reported, but the church canceled all events for the day.

Earlier in the day, services at St. Rose, much like other places of worship in the area, were focused on the tragedy.

"All the world's eyes are fixated on us, and they must see the faith that keeps us alive," the Rev. Peter Cameron told more than 300 people who packed the pews at St. Rose. "The certainty of joy is that evil does not have the last word, that love wins. The most reasonable thing we can do is live that love in faith."

On Friday, police say, Adam Lanza killed his mother at home, shot his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 children and six adults before committing suicide.

Throughout Sunday's Mass, Cameron and other clergymen offered prayers for the victims and urged those gathered to take special care to support those around them. Soon after the Mass began, Cameron announced that the husband of one of the teachers killed was present at the service. He asked parishioners to pray for the man and the children he must now raise alone.

Cameron said he is still struggling to understand how the gunman could have been so lost without anyone knowing. "All of us have to be deeply united and pay attention to those who are hurting," he said. "We have lost those that we love but we know they are living forever. St. Rose now has saints in heaven."

St. Rose's Monsignor Robert Weiss, who has been counseling people since Friday, made an announcement that brought many, including himself, to tears: The church is looking for more volunteers for its Christmas pageant. A young girl who was supposed to be an angel in the pageant was among those killed.

A saddened, tearful congregation at Christ The King Lutheran Church was uplifted this morning by children performing their annual Christmas pageant.

Throughout the service, Pastor Rob Morris frequently had to reach for tissues to wipe away tears. It's been an extremely difficult time for the young pastor who, for the past two days, has tried to comfort the family of 6-year-old shooting victim Charlotte Bacon.

Morris said he also provided guidance to the family of another victim, 6-year-old Jack Pinto. Pinto had been baptized, and "I assured them that Jack would be saved," Morris said.

More than 300 people packed the Newtown Congregational Church as Rev. Matthew Crebbin urged parishioners to embrace each other and the community to alleviate pain.

"We need now more than ever to remind ourselves that we are one community," Crebbin said at the start of a 90-minute service that was punctuated by the sounds of sniffing from the pews. Many wiped their eyes throughout the service and embraced each other at the end.

"We feel the suffering this day because we love, because we love those children who were lost," Crebbin said. "That is the heartbreaking news. The love which causes our

hearts to break is the love that helps us heal."

When it was time for the sermon at Trinity Episcopal Church, the Rev. Kathleen Adams-Shepherd headed not to the pulpit but to the church's center aisle. "I just have this longing to be here, with you," she said.

Two children who were killed Friday will be memorialized at Trinity this week. Ben Wheeler, whose family attends the church, and Madeleine Hsu, whose family did not belong to a local church, Adams-Shepherd said.

"Every one of those precious lives is being held in the greatest love that could possibly be," she said.

To help families who never expected to have to bury their young children, the church has received offers of cemetery plots and funeral services are being donated, Adams-Shepherd said.

She asked the congregation to hold on to glimmers of faith in the face of sorrow.

"To lose this faith is for darkness to win. From what I have seen this weekend, darkness has not won."