After a mass shooting, what will a congregation do with the sanctuary?

Schools and other sites of violence have been razed and rebuilt. But it's a different question for places of prayer and worship.

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A memorial inside First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, with chairs bearing a cross, a rose, and the name of a person killed on November 5, 2017. AP photo / Eric Gay.

On the first Sunday after the mass shooting at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, the congregation held an outdoor service.

Frank Pomeroy, the church's pastor, who was away the day an assailant killed half of the congregation, including all of its Sunday school teachers and several music leaders, gave an emotional sermon under a tent.

"I know everyone who gave their life that day," Pomeroy said, his voice cracking as he spoke about his 14-year-old daughter, Annabelle, who was among the dead.

Survivors and the public were invited to view the memorial of chairs, one for each of the 26 victims, bearing the person's name painted in gold and a red rose. One had a pink rose for the child of a woman who was eight months pregnant when she died.

Constructing the memorial wasn't an easy decision, said Mark Collins, a former pastor at First Baptist who has returned to help. Some members have said they never want to step foot inside the site, while others have said they needed to see it.

Future services are expected to take place on the grounds of the church, Collins said. Church members have been discussing whether to demolish the church and build a new structure nearby.

An anonymous donor offered to fund the construction of a new church, said Frank Page, president and CEO of the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, who met with Pomeroy earlier in the week. Hundreds of bullets pockmark the walls of the current building.

Schools and other sites of mass shootings have been razed and rebuilt, but in the case of a religious building, worshipers have sometimes set out to reclaim their sacred space.

Michelle Walsh, a Unitarian Universalist minister who teaches courses at Boston University on trauma and theology, studied the effort by Knoxville Unitarian Universalist Church to recover after a lone gunman killed two and wounded seven during a children's play in 2008.

Pews were realigned, walls were repainted, and a curtain filled with bullet holes was removed but saved. A week after the killings, the church rededicated the sanctuary in a service that included blessing the spots where the dead had fallen and the

hanging of a plaque. The event concluded with a hymn, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door.”

“It is a reclaiming and it is a marking of a place as not just a place of death, not just a place of loss, but of life,” Walsh said.

At Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, church members have hung pictures of the nine people, including the pastor, who were killed by a white supremacist gunman during a Bible study in the basement in 2015. They continue to meet on Wednesday nights, their open Bibles before them. Their historic sanctuary was not damaged in the shooting.

When six people were killed and four were wounded inside a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in 2012, worshipers did not abandon the sanctuary and even preserved some of the bullet holes.

“It frames the wound,” Pardeep Kaleka, son of former temple president Satwant Singh Kaleka, who died in the massacre, told the Associated Press. “The wound of our community, the wound of our family, the wound of our society.” —Associated Press; Religion News Service

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