

Las Vegas church seizes the chance to serve after the massacre

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LAS VEGAS (RNS)—A mass shooting presents a test for any religious institution—even more so for a massacre like the one that left 58 dead and hundreds injured in Las Vegas. Hope Church, a growing multi-ethnic Baptist congregation that attracts 3,000 people each weekend, believes it's up to the challenge.



Vance Pitman, founder and senior pastor of Hope Church in Las Vegas. (Photo / Courtesy of Hope Church)

“This is the day when we get the opportunity to really rise up and serve the city and love the city and demonstrate the love of God for the city,” said Vance Pitman, the church’s founding senior pastor.

Pitman only learned of the magnitude of the killings at a country music concert when he awoke Monday, Oct. 2, but he quickly assembled his staff

to sketch out the beginning of a response:

- The church called in all of its 15 pastors to be on hand as it opened its doors as a safe space for prayer and counseling, and, if needed, a shelter for anyone dislocated as a result of the shooting at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.
- It urged church members to donate blood and worked to get a mobile blood unit on the church grounds to help with the effort.
- Pitman spoke by phone with police and other law enforcement officials to let chaplains and officers know the church was ready, willing and able to provide physical and emotional support to anyone in need.

By Monday afternoon, the church had not heard that any of its members were hurt during the rampage, but it was still too early to be sure. Pitman received two calls, one from a member whose best friend was wounded, another from a member whose friend's daughter was shot and undergoing surgery.

‘The church is to serve the city’

The church, located about 13 miles from the site of the shooting, the outdoor Las Vegas Village and Festival Grounds, sees its mission as being a blessing on the city.



Hope Church in Las Vegas, located about 13 miles from the outdoor Las Vegas Village and Festival Grounds, site of the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history, sees its mission as being a blessing to the city. (Hope Church Photo)

“We believe the church is to serve the city,” Pitman said. “That’s why the church exists.”

Hope Church, which affiliates with the Southern Baptist Convention, takes that mission seriously. The church has 45 families undergoing training to become foster parents. It is developing initiatives to fight human trafficking in the city and is working to improve local public education.

But it also wants to bring people to God and makes no bones about its evangelistic outreach. The shooting, Pitman said, is an “opportunity for the church to shine the love and light of Jesus and his gospel.”

Of course, other churches, synagogues and mosques, were also mobilizing to help a wounded city—regardless of their mission attitudes.

“I put myself and my church at the disposal of the county and law

enforcement and informed them that if there was anything we could do, I'm willing to do it," said John Nicholas of Las Vegas' St. Michael Antiochian Orthodox Church.

Ready to respond

But Baptists in particular have a reputation for their nimble, service-oriented response to natural and human-made disasters. Pitman is a product of that theological readiness.

He was commissioned as a missionary through the SBC's North American Mission Board and is now a national mobilizer for the board. An Alabama native, Pitman was sent to organize a church in 2000—which he did, from a humble cast of 18 people gathered in his living room.

Since then, he has been disabused of whatever stereotypical views he may have had of Sin City. Outside its downtown strip, Las Vegas is beautiful, family-friendly and multi-ethnic, he said.

"The reputation of it being 'Sin City' is because of the 1 million tourists a week," said Pitman, referring to its downtown casino scene. "It's not because of the people who live here and who call Las Vegas home."

Pitman knows his work is cut out for him. A recent Pew Center study found 49 percent of Nevada residents are "highly religious," but only 31 percent attend religious services.

At services this coming weekend, he'll address the issue of belief and ask, "Where's God in all of this?"

He already has a partial answer.

"In moments like this, the natural tendency is to run from God. But we think this is the opportunity to run to him," he said. "Scripture says God is

a refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble (Psalm 46:1). We think this is an opportunity for people to run to the Lord and to find shelter and peace and comfort and strength in him.”