

Woodmont provides sanctuary after school shooting

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NASHVILLE (BP)—They never had ridden a bus before, youth minister Beth Howe said of preschoolers transported to Woodmont Baptist Church in Nashville after an active shooter targeted their private Christian elementary school two miles away.

One little girl asked why there were bad guys. Howe bandaged the scratches on the arm of another who had been at recess when the shooting began.

“She jumped in the bushes to hide when they heard the gunshots,” said Howe, Woodmont’s minister of students and discipleship.

About 10:13 a.m., 28-year-old Audrey Elizabeth Hale had entered the Covenant School with two AR-style guns and a pistol. Hale killed three 9-year-old students and three adults before police shot her dead 14 minutes after receiving the emergency call, Nashville police said. No other injuries were reported.

Woodmont designated as reunification center

Anthony McGowan, facilities manager at the school run by Covenant Presbyterian Church, took it upon himself to tell police officers to take the children to Woodmont Baptist. And they did, no questions asked or notification given to the church.

Howe saw on a Twitter thread Woodmont Church was the designated

reunification center and informed Senior Pastor Nathan Parker, fellow ministers and church staff.

Parker welcomed the opportunity to serve the community.

“I was so grateful for our staff and just for the honor of serving in that position of helping to reunify families,” Parker said.

Based on reputation in the community

McGowan greeted him at Woodmont during the reunification process.

“He’s an older gentleman who’s deeply respected in the Covenant community, and he sought me out. ‘I’m the facilities director at Covenant,’” McGowan told Parker. “‘And when they asked me where we should send these kids, I said, Woodmont Baptist Church.’”

Parker inquired why.

“He said, ‘Well I’ve been driving by this church for 18 years, and I’ve seen the work you’re doing.’ And he said, ‘I just knew you were a good church.’ I think he said that we’re a Bible-believing church.

“And I just thought that was amazing that Woodmont had had this reputation, before my time,” said Parker, who became senior pastor at Woodmont in 2017. “I mean over decades of faithful service and ministry from this corner that had built that reputation in our community.”

Six busloads of children evacuated

With Woodmont as the reunification center, police and church staff escorted about 200 kindergarten through sixth grade students to the church’s fellowship hall. About six busloads of students arrived. Parents

rushing to the church were placed in the sanctuary.

Each group had to wait a couple of hours before police began reuniting one or two parents at a time with their children, with counseling encouraged onsite.

“The parents graciously waited very long for that reunification process to take place, hours. They called painfully few names at a time. They checked every kid off the bus,” Parker said.

“They had people in the sanctuary who checked the names of parents. Parents lined up and gave them their names, and they would take one parent at a time downstairs to be with their kid. And they would meet in a counseling room, and that was a slow process.”

Pulled together to care for children

Neighbors, church deacons, community leaders, professional counselors, Covenant School alumni, churches and nearby businesses and restaurants sprang into action.

They offered consolation and prayer. They brought snacks, full meals and bottled water, helped set up tables for the food. Church staff and police officers guided people to designated spots. Church staff kept restrooms stocked and cleaned.

Daystar Counseling Ministries of Nashville arrived with therapy dogs.

Parker and Clay Stauffer, senior minister of Woodmont Christian Church across the street from Woodmont Baptist, periodically spoke words of comfort to parents through the church’s public address system in the sanctuary.

One mother with family members was praying prostrate on the floor of a

counseling room near Parker's office.

"They didn't know if their child was OK, hadn't heard, and I'm not sure the outcome of that meeting. I was not in the meeting when she met with the chaplains and metro P.D.," Parker said.

"I just asked if I could pray with her, and of course they said, 'yes.' We just prayed together, and those words don't come easy in those times. But we trust in the Lord's goodness and in his sovereignty."

Deadliest school shooting in U.S. since Uvalde

Police identified those murdered as Evelyn Dieckhaus, Hallie Scruggs and William Kinney, all 9; Katherine Koonce, 60, head of Covenant School; school custodian Mike Hill, 61, and school substitute teacher Cynthia Peak, 61. Scruggs is the daughter of Covenant Presbyterian Lead Pastor Chad Scruggs, who served previously at Park Cities Presbyterian Church in Dallas.

It was the deadliest school shooting in the U.S. since 22 students were killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, 10 months ago.

The killer left a manifesto of sorts at her home, police said, but have not released the details or determined a motive. Hale was an alumna of the school.

Many area churches held prayer vigils that were well attended across Nashville, *The Tennessean* reported.

Howe encourages parents, whether their children were impacted directly by the tragedy, to help their children process their feelings. She recommended the resource "What Am I Feeling" by Josh and Christi

Straub. Howe encourages parents to discuss conflict resolution with their children.

“I feel like, as a parent now, we have got to talk to our kids and do a better job,” she said. “That when someone hurts you, you go to them and deal with it, and you talk with them, and you use words.”

Teach children that their “hurt and anger against someone, even if it’s in revenge, should not have hurt other people.”

Reunification is the church’s task

Parker sees a spiritual purpose in the church serving as a reunification center.

“Reunification is kind of a theological term for Christians. We think about what was lost in the Creation, Genesis 3, and how since that time God has been about the work of reunifying what was lost, back to himself through Jesus,” Parker said. “That’s just gospel work that we were able to put into practice of connecting families who were separated from their children.

“Every Christian should be about that work of reunification at any time. And I think that’s what ... hit me hard last night.”

Parker appreciates that a grieving community found sanctuary at Woodmont Baptist.

“In that moment our sanctuary was really a place of refuge and safety,” he said. “And I was just so grateful that it could be used as not only a holy sacred place, but also to be a place of refuge for those grieving panicked families.”