

Sutherland Springs church demolishes site of mass murder

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SUTHERLAND SPRINGS (BP)—The site of the deadliest church shooting in the nation no longer stands, as First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs moved forward Aug. 12 with a 2021 decision to demolish its former sanctuary.

Church members voted 69-35 in August 2021 to demolish the sanctuary after a gunman killed 25 there in November 2017, including a pregnant woman, and injured 20 others before killing himself.

While a lawsuit challenged the decision, it was not filed until May 2024. On July 15, a judge's ruling removed a restraining order that had prevented the demolition.

Abner Neill, who became lead pastor of the congregation in late 2023, has helped it move forward in ministry to the unincorporated town of fewer than 1,000 people, discussing with church members and leaders how to proceed with demolishing the building.

"We were having internal discussions about what to do and when to do it, and that's when the lawsuit got filed and a temporary restraining order was issued," Neill told Baptist Press Aug. 12. "The judge did not renew the restraining order mid-July. So, we said we're going to wait a little and just let the dust settle."

Former pastor Frank Pomeroy, who had led the church 20 years and lost a daughter in the massacre, retired in 2022.

The building had served as a temporary memorial, and there had not been

an urgency to demolish it, Neill said.

“There was not a sense of urgency in tearing it down until such time as we had a really good idea of what would replace that temporary memorial as a permanent memorial,” Neill said. “It was left up so that we could give an extended period of time for people to reconcile themselves to the fact that it would be going away, and they could say their goodbyes.”

Contractors removed asbestos Aug. 10, bulldozed the sanctuary Aug. 12, and were demolishing the office building Aug. 13, Neill said.

Since 2019, the congregation has worshiped in a new facility funded by the North American Mission Board with gifts made through the Southern Baptist Convention’s Cooperative Program and other donations.

The demolition was delayed as the congregation grappled with the feelings associated with the loss of life and community when Devin Kelley methodically walked through the sanctuary Nov. 5, 2017, killing or injuring dozens before killing himself.

Mixed emotions and disagreement continues

While emotions and views remain mixed among congregants and community members, Neill believes the demolition is best for the community.

“We’ve got some folks who their vote was ‘no’ (in 2021), and if we voted today, their vote would still be ‘no.’ Their hearts are tender right now,” he said.

“Many of our folks, including many who were a part of the church at the time of the tragedy—they may or may not have been in attendance that day—many of them have expressed privately that they are ready to move on.

“For this to finally happen brings them to a place of closure. I had someone tell me just yesterday,” Neill said Aug. 12, “now that we’re doing this, we can get back to just focusing on ministry. That’s kind of the heart that we’re dealing with.”

While opinions vary, Neill said the church is united in ministry.

“I think it will help us move forward,” he said, “in that I have had people in the surrounding community who have said things to the effect of, ‘As long as that’s there, I won’t come.’”

In the lawsuit filed May 17 in the 81st Judicial District Court of Wilson County, plaintiffs Amber Holder and her daughter Aimee Crowder, both of Texas, and Deanna Staton of Alabama sought a preliminary injunction to dismiss the vote to demolish the building and have a new vote but were unsuccessful.

In the lawsuit, the plaintiffs asserted they had been unlawfully removed from the church membership rolls and were thereby unable to vote.

Judge Russell Wilson declined at a July 15 court hearing to extend the restraining order preventing the church’s demolition, effectively making the lawsuit moot as soon as the demolition occurred.

At the hearing, church attorneys argued the court should not interfere with church bylaws, ksat.com [reported](#) after the hearing.

First Baptist Sutherland Springs remains active in community ministry, offering a free community breakfast Sundays at 9 a.m., a free community supper Thursdays at 6 p.m., and feeding about 140 families weekly through its food pantry, Neill estimated.

The church averaged 115 in Sunday worship in 2022, according to the 2023 Annual Church Profile, with a total membership of 274.

First Baptist Sutherland Springs is actively searching for a youth pastor and operates a second campus 20 miles north of Sutherland Springs in St. Hedwig.

A memorial prayer garden remains on the grounds alongside the new church, and the congregation is considering a memorial garden on the site of the demolished sanctuary, Neill said.