

Pence tells grieving town, ‘Faith is stronger than evil’

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FLORESVILLE (RNS)—Vice President Mike Pence traveled to Sutherland Springs to offer prayers and words of comfort to a stricken community three days after a lone gunman killed more than two dozen people during a Sunday morning church service.

The memorial service was held Nov. 8 on a high school football field in neighboring Floresville, about 13 miles from the site of the massacre at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs. The service was replete with Bible readings and prayers. It offered few political points and no mention of guns, mental illness or domestic violence.

Pence said he was inspired by the strong convictions of the people of Sutherland Springs and especially the victims of its historic church, and he expressed his solidarity with their faith.

Off to the side of the stadium, a section was reserved for victims’ families, and it was to them that much of the prayers and words were addressed.

“Faith is stronger than evil,” Pence reassured the families. “Faith is the antidote to fear and despair.”

Thousands of people responded with shouts of “Yeah!” and “Amen!”

‘This evil must come to an end’

Earlier in the day, Pence visited the hospital where many survivors were treated and met with the families of the victims. He also spoke briefly to reporters outside First Baptist Church, cordoned off with yellow tape.

“This evil must come to an end in our land,” he said, citing “bureaucratic failures” that allowed the shooter, Devin Patrick Kelley, to buy multiple weapons, including the Ruger AR-556 rifle he used at the church, despite having been admitted to a psychiatric hospital while he was in the Air Force.

Federal law prohibits gun possession by anyone who “has been committed to any mental institution.”

Kelley was also charged with assaulting his wife and stepson.

The Air Force and the Department of Defense are conducting reviews, Pence said.

“We will find out why this information was not reported in 2012, and we will work to make sure it never happens again,” he said.

God never gave up

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott introduced Pence. Abbott offered his own testimony of turning to God after an accident severed a vertebra in his spine and left him in a wheelchair.

“I questioned God, but you know who didn’t give up on me? God,” Abbott said. “God brought me all the way forward.”

Floresville’s Bernard Cenney, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army who came to the service to pay his respects, said the faith emphasis was a natural part of small-town Texas culture.

“Belief in God is really, really big here and it transcends going to church,” Cenney said. “There’s this wholesome belief in God and in something greater than us.”

Closing his speech, Pence invited his wife, Karen, to offer a prayer.

“We’re a family that believes in prayer,” she said. “Lord, thank you for being here with us right now.”

Some dissent

Asking for prayers in the wake of a mass shooting has become as expected as thunder after lightning. But outside Texas, there were some signs of dissent.

Rep. Ted Lieu, a Democrat from Southern California, walked out during a moment of silence held on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives for the Texas shooting victims.

“I’ve been to too many moments of silences. Just in my short career in Congress, three of the worst mass shootings in U.S. history have occurred. I will not be silent,” Lieu said via Facebook Live. “What we need is we need action, we need to pass gun safety legislation now.”

Still, studies show communal grief rituals, like prayer vigils and moments of silence, can be crucial to the grieving process. A 2014 study by Harvard researchers showed such rituals can help people deal with negative feelings after a loss or tragedy.

“Since people who have suffered some kind of loss often feel as if their lives are out of control, using rituals can help restore that feeling of control and, in turn, make it easier for them to cope with grief,” Romeo Vitelli, a psychologist who specializes in post-traumatic stress disorder, wrote of the study in *Psychology Today*. “While rituals can vary widely, the underlying principle of restoring a sense of control is usually the same.”