

Unitarians steadfast after church shooting: No plans to alter teachings

News in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

Unitarian Universalist leaders say a fatal shooting at a church in Knoxville, Tennessee, will not deter them from continuing their socially progressive teachings, even as police say those beliefs appeared to be a factor in the deadly rampage.

One day after the July 27 shooting at a church musical that left two congregants dead and six wounded, members began the healing process with a candlelight vigil.

"We're here tonight to make sense of the senseless," said William Sinkford, president of the Boston-based Unitarian Universalist Association, who flew to Knoxville to comfort the 460-member congregation. "Fear will not prevent us from standing on the side of love," he said, adding that the UUA will continue to open its doors to all.

A children's choir ended the rain-soaked vigil by singing "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow," a popular song from the production of *Annie Jr.* that was interrupted by gunfire on that Sunday morning.

According to Knoxville police, Jim D. Adkisson, 58, who acted alone, opened fire inside the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and was arrested after three men in the congregation grabbed him as he stopped to reload his shotgun.

In a four-page letter found in Adkisson's car, the shooter wrote that the attack was motivated in part by the church's liberal beliefs. "Basically it indicated that he was upset because of his unemployment situation. It also indicated that he was not happy with the liberalism of [the UUA] movement, and also felt that that was partly the reason he was still unemployed," said Officer Darrell DeBusk, a police spokesperson. Adkisson's ex-wife once was a member of the church, the Associated Press said.

The Knoxville congregation has been active in pushing for racial justice, and it recently began holding events for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens,

according to Janet Hayes, a spokesperson for UUA headquarters.

The attack, the first of its kind on a Unitarian church, has prompted an investigation by the FBI and local police. Police Chief Sterling Owen said the shooting was being treated as a hate crime.

Although Hayes said some congregations nationally have become more alert in the wake of the shootings, Sinkford said they remain committed to their causes. "Let me assure you that we will not change our beliefs or compromise our demands for social justice," he said in a statement.

"The start of the healing process has brought together thousands of individuals," Sinkford said, noting that people of different faiths came to the Monday night vigil.

The shots that rang out from the UUA church were heard at the neighboring Second Presbyterian Church. As many as two dozen children fled or were led to the Presbyterian church, which became a refuge and a place for parents to pick up the children, according to Presbyterian News Service.

A 19-year-old woman from another nearby Presbyterian church brought flowers to the UUA church. Carrie Niceley said news of the shooting was announced at First Presbyterian's morning service. She told the *Knoxville News Sentinel* that she took the flowers to the crime scene to let church members know they're "in our thoughts and prayers." Leaders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also made a nationwide appeal to its churches to pray for the traumatized Unitarian congregation.

Expressions of concern also came from John H. Thomas, president of the United Church of Christ, who was in Knoxville attending his denomination's National Youth Event a few blocks away.

Shortly after the shooting, Thomas sent a message of sympathy to the UUA's Sinkford, saying the UCC officials and young people were "aware that this trauma will live with the members of the church for a long time." Thomas said that the 2,100 youth and adult leaders would pray in their closing worship service for all those affected by the violence.

Sinkford, after arriving in Knoxville, said the crime was "the action of one man who clearly must have lost the battle with his person demons." Asked if the assailant would go to hell, Sinkford said, "He must have been living in his own private hell for years."