

Will mass shooting at Texas church prompt 'serious soul-searching'?

The attack may be the deadliest targeting a congregation in U.S. history.

by [Henry Gass](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue



Kenneth and Irene Hernandez on November 6 visit a memorial placed near the scene of a shooting at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, the previous day. AP Photo/Eric Gay.

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) On a normal day in Sutherland Springs, Texas, all there is to fill the country air are the barks of local dogs and the hum of cars passing by.

Sunday, November 5, was not a normal day. A lone gunman shattered the town's tranquility with a hail of bullets that left 26 dead and 20 wounded in the First Baptist Church.

"It's a peaceful town; everyone knows everyone," said Rita Serna, who grew up in Sutherland Springs and sang her first solo at First Baptist. "It's sad, disturbing . . . but possible in today's times."

Church life permeates much of Texas culture: the state has more than 200 megachurches and dozens of evangelical colleges and universities. Churches like First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs still define the daily rhythms of many rural communities, say Texas natives such as Bob Roberts, who pastors the 3,000-member NorthWood Church, an evangelical congregation in Keller.

"It's the kind of little church my dad pastored when I was growing up as a kid," he said. "I think there's going to be some serious questioning, some serious soul searching after this. . . . It's one thing when someone gets killed while hunting. When somebody can come in with a Ruger AR-15, you just can't say, too bad, that's the way things go, there's nothing to be done"

He noted that the assailant was born in that part of Texas.

"There's something in our culture that's really out of control," he said. "We're producing our own bad apples; we can't blame it on ISIS."

According to reports, at the end of the 11 a.m. worship service Devin Patrick Kelley of New Braunfels opened fire on the congregation with a Ruger semiautomatic rifle, before being shot at by a local man and fleeing in his car. He was found dead of a gunshot wound a few miles away. Kelley's in-laws attended the church, and officials said the shooting arose from a "domestic situation."

Kelley, a former member of the Air Force who was court-martialed in 2012 for assaulting his wife and child and later kicked out of the service, was not legally allowed to own a gun, according to both U.S. and Texas law. Gov. Greg Abbott said Kelley was denied a right-to-carry license, but reports say he purchased the Ruger at a San Antonio gun shop.

The shooting has left a gaping hole in this community about 35 miles east of San Antonio. Among the dead were eight people spanning three generations of a single

family. The teenage daughter of the church's pastor was among those killed.

Leslie Ward lost three family members in the shooting, two of them children. Another child in the family was wounded.

"Words can't describe it," Ward said that Sunday night, pacing in front of her house a block away from the church, waiting for news from the hospital. "I feel angry. I feel sad. I would never think this would happen here, in a small community."

The shooting is the deadliest at a place of prayer and worship in U.S. history, and one of a series of recent attacks on churches and temples.

First Baptist Church is at the center of Sutherland Springs, along with a post office, a Dollar General store, and a gas station.

Local mourners were not alone at a vigil for the victims held outside the post office that Sunday night. Residents from surrounding communities such as La Vernia flocked to the town to hold candles and sing.

"Who are we going to be tomorrow? We are going to be the people of Texas, the people of Sutherland Springs, the people of the First Baptist Church," said Stephen A. Curry, pastor of La Vernia United Methodist Church, during the vigil. "We are going to show compassion where compassion needs to be shown."

After the vigil, Katie Metcalf, a stay-at-home mom who lives a mile away on the Sutherland Springs-La Vernia border, stared silently across the road toward the small blue and white sign of the First Baptist Church.

"We pass this church every day, every other day," she said. "These families, through this pain they're just going to grow in ways that they probably never knew. . . . And this community will too."

FOLLOWING UP (Updated July 3, 2018): Family members of victims in the mass shooting at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, in November are suing the U.S. government for negligence, the Associated Press reported. The litigation asserts that the assailant—who had been expelled from the Air Force—should have been reported to a national criminal information database used for background checks before gun purchases.

“The Air Force didn’t do its job,” said Rob Ammons, an attorney for Joe and Claryce Holcombe, whose son was murdered while walking to the pulpit at the church. A third of the 26 people killed in the church shooting belonged to the extended Holcombe family. The Air Force declined AP requests for comments.

A version of this article, which was edited on November 28, appears in the December 6 print edition under the title “Soul searching after Texas church shooting.”