

## Alleged church shooter hated gays

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by Heather Tirado Gilligan

A church shooting in Knoxville, Tennessee that occurred Sunday, July 27 is under investigation as a hate crime after police found a note written by the alleged gunman that states his hatred of liberal groups and gays.

Jim David Adkisson, 58, of Powell, Tennessee, allegedly opened fire in the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church on Sunday. The congregation and members of the public were gathered to watch a stage production based on the children's musical *Annie*. No children were hurt in the shooting, but two adults were killed and seven were injured.

Adkisson meant to do grave harm in the church, said Knoxville police chief Sterling P. Owen IV at a news conference. Officers recovered from the scene 76 shells from a 12-gauge, semi-automatic shotgun, of which three rounds were discharged, according to the *Knoxville News Sentinel*.

One of the murdered church members, Greg McKendry, 58, reportedly used his own body to block the shots from spraying in the church, witnesses told the *News Sentinel*. Other church members tackled and subdued Adkisson, who was arrested by police within six minutes of opening fire, according to the Associated Press.

The FBI joined local police in investigating the incident as a hate crime, according to CBS News. Adkisson is being held in jail on \$1 million bond.

Police found a four-page letter in Adkisson's car attributing his alleged rampage to the political advocacy work of the church. Adkisson described his antipathy for liberal causes and singled out his hatred of gays in this letter, according to the *News Sentinel*.

Unitarian Universalist congregations are known for their progressive stance on social issues. The denomination embraces social tolerance and the authority of reason and conscience, according to the TVUUC Web site.

The TVUUC is also home to Spectrum Cafe, a safe space for LGBT teens to gather.

Adkisson "shouted hateful things" before he opened fire on the congregation, church member and witness Barbara Kemper told the AP, but she declined to repeat what he said.

"It appears that church had received some publicity in the recent past regarding its liberal stance on things," Owen told CBS News on July 28.

The church regularly holds PFLAG meetings and has a "gays welcome" sign on its door, the *News Sentinel* noted.

The Reverend Gregory Stewart, the openly gay senior pastor at First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, expressed his sorrow at the church shooting in an e-mail to the *Bay Area Reporter*.

"We cannot change what happened – that would be a miracle – but we can respond in ways that demonstrate our commitment to non-violence, our belief in the sanctity of all life, and our capacity for forgiveness. In this way, they will know we are Unitarian Universalists by our love," Stewart said.

Local Unitarian Universalists are also currently assessing the best way to offer help to the Tennessee Valley congregation, Stewart added in a phone interview with the *B.A.R.* A member of the TVUUC and witness to the shooting, the Reverend Gordon Gibson, will be a visiting minister at the San Francisco church for the month of August, and they will look to him for guidance, Stewart said.

National LGBT advocacy groups issued statements expressing their sympathy for, and solidarity with, the Tennessee congregation.

"Unitarian Universalists have been spiritual leaders for all of us," said Harry Knox, the religious faith director at the Human Rights Campaign, in a statement Monday.

"They have offered sanctuary for LGBT people when most other denominations wouldn't and have provided space for those shunned and marginalized by a larger culture," Knox added.

**Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, called the attack "tragic, abominable, and senseless."**

**"We condemn any crime motivated by hate or bias," she added.**