

'Everyone Welcome'—Even Now

After a senseless act of violence in our church, we did not give in to anger. We sought a better way.

By CHRIS BUICE

SHALL WE MEET HATE WITH HATE?" THAT HAS BEEN A recurring question throughout history and, recently, a personal one for me. On a Sunday morning last July, a man walked into the sanctuary of my church, took a shotgun out of a guitar case and opened fire on a room of unarmed men, women and children. Two precious people, Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger, lost their lives. Six others were injured. Our entire community was traumatized.

According to a manifesto in his handwriting, the alleged assailant reportedly wrote of his hatred for liberals, whom he believed were soft on terror. He was in for a surprise. Members of our congregation rushed forward and tackled the shooter. Others acted instantly to guide children to safety, call police and emergency assistance, care for the wounded and counsel those in grief and shock.

This misguided man may have picked our congregation because we call ourselves a liberal church. In our church, the word "liberal" is meant to describe whom we include, not whom we exclude. The children in our congregation say these words in chapel services: "Ours is the church of the loving heart, open mind and helping hands." Our understanding of liberalism speaks to a generosity of spirit that transcends partisan politics. Sadly, though, the word "liberal" has become demonized. The man accused of the shootings owned books by popular media personalities who vilify liberals as evil, unpatriotic, godless and treasonous. I think our country needs to reclaim the word from those who defame it. Far from being evil, we liberals aspire to overcome evil with good. If you walk into a liberal church and open fire on its members, we will still defend your right to due process, access to an attorney and a fair trial.

The trial for the man accused of attacking our church is set for March 16. A reporter asked me what results I would like



WORDS OF WISDOM: *The term 'liberal' has been demonized*

to see from our day in court. "Justice," I said. The follow-up question was predictable: "What does justice look like?" "A community," I replied, "where our children are safe." After the incident, everyone in our town felt as if the children of our church were their children. For weeks, people would stop me to ask, "How are the children doing?" Fortunately, none of them was injured in body. We continue to work on healing the spirit, and healing has its own timetable. A miracle story in the Bible is that of Jesus walking on the

water. A miracle in my time has been witnessing the young and the old, the wounded and the whole, walking into our sanctuary without bitterness or resentment.

Of course, the question keeps coming back: "Shall we return hatred for hatred?" Anyone who has endured a brutal act of violence will know the temptation. Our congregation's experience, however, offers a cautionary tale. The man who brought violence to our church hated liberals. But in his desire to defeat terrorism he became a terrorist himself.

I have tried to use the power of the pulpit to advocate for a better way. I have told my congregation, "The man who attacked our church is in prison, but we do not have to remain prisoners of our own anger. Without denying the reality of our feelings in the present, we can be open to the possibility that one day we will be able to lay down our burden and say, in the words of the old African-American spiritual, 'We are free at last.'"

Since that terrible day, people have flooded our church with immeasurable amounts of love. Postcards, letters, banners and artwork have come to us from across the nation and from many other countries. Our little town on the banks of the Tennessee River was once the site for the 1982 World's Fair, and it remains surprisingly diverse today. On the night after the violence there was a gathering in the Presbyterian church next door, where we were hugged and held by our neighbors of all faiths and convictions—Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, rationalists and more. For years, there has been a sign at the entrance of our church that reads EVERYONE WELCOME, and we do

mean everyone. All God's children. The sign is still there.

Members of my congregation have been hurt. But we have also been healed by the feeling that there is a love greater than our theological differences, a compassion that is not limited by the boundaries of any creed. I firmly believe, now more than ever, that love is stronger than death. Love is more powerful than hate.

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