News



Law enforcement vehicles in Colleyville, Texas, are seen Jan. 15 near the area where a man took four people hostage at a synagogue. (CNS/Reuters/Shelby Tauber)

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Colleyville, Texas — January 18, 2022
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As the tense hours of a Jan. 15 hostage standoff situation unfolded at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, so too did a manifestation of faith and community at nearby Good Shepherd Church, according to Franciscan Fr. Zachary Burns.

"Just seeing not only the Good Shepherd community but people from other faiths and the community in general coming together to help one another was so unbelievable," the parish's parochial vicar told North Texas Catholic, the news outlet of the Fort Worth Diocese.

That morning a British citizen later identified as Malik Faisal Akram, 44, entered Congregation Beth Israel armed during the synagogue's Sabbath morning service and took four hostages, including Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, and engaged in an 11-hour standoff with law enforcement officials.

All four were eventually released unharmed though Akram was killed in the incident.

Officials from numerous law enforcement agencies and media outlets made use of Good Shepherd's parking lot and facilities during the standoff.

"We were able to open the parish hall for them and congregants from Congregation Beth Israel so they could get out of the cold, warm up and get coffee," said Mike Short, the diocese's director of security.

Short oversaw the diocesan Guardian ministers' efforts to assist law enforcement officials.

"We had a great response from [Guardian ministers] from throughout the diocese who provided security and help throughout the day," Short said. "It was amazing — the support from staff, parishioners, other faith leaders and members, and the community just pulling together to do everything they could to help."

The diocese's Guardian Ministry is a community-led safety and security volunteer ministry that provides parishes with a peaceful and safe place to worship.

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"I cannot even begin to tell you how thankful we are for our Guardian ministers," Burns said. "So thankful we have these guys willing to be that line of defense and yesterday's response was unbelievable. I couldn't begin to tell you how many Guardians showed up."

Members of Christian, Jewish and Islamic faith backgrounds and a representative from the city attended a prayer vigil in Good Shepherd's chapel.

"It was a late development deal that lasted about 45 minutes," Burns said. "Just a chance for anyone to get up and offer a prayer or reflection, just people trying to support each other."

A marriage ministry event scheduled that night was canceled and food prepared for it was donated to feed those on hand. Parishioners and others arrived throughout the day with food and offers to help.

"We actually got more requests to help than we could take," Short said.

Burns, who came to the parish about two years ago from "up north," joked that he was told beforehand that people in Texas, Catholic and otherwise, tend to live out their faith in everyday life.

"That was very evident today," Burns said.

Fort Worth Bishop Michael Olson agreed.

"Thanks be to God for their safety," Olson tweeted after the hostages' safe release.

Olson also thanked the leaders of Good Shepherd, first responders and members of Congregation Beth Israel.

Burns noted that Cytron-Walker, a proponent of interfaith dialogue, has long been a friend of Good Shepherd.

"My whole time here has been under the pandemic, so I haven't had a chance to meet with many area leaders of other faiths," Burns said.

He noted that he and Good Shepherd's pastor, Franciscan Fr. Michael Higgins, "had lunch with Rabbi Charlie recently and it's ironic that yesterday I saw maybe the largest interfaith gathering I've ever seen out of what was a very hectic and tragic day."

In an interview with Channel 8, the local ABC-TV affiliate, Higgins said: "When our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community were suffering, we suffered with them. It was terrible that they had to go through this. This was a frightening experience for the family."

When the standoff ended, he added, there were "cheers and hugging and praying together" among family members and others in the parish hall. It was "really powerful," the priest said.

Across the country, Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory, who has long been involved in interfaith dialogue and other efforts, expressed relief that the hostages were safe in a Jan. 16 tweet.

"We thank God for the safety of the members of Beth Israel in Texas. Thanks also for the successful work of those public safety officials," he tweeted. "We stand with our Jewish neighbors as they confront violence. May all who suffer hatred in their places of worship know of our prayers."

The Washington Post and other news outlets said the hostage-taker reportedly expressed anger over the imprisonment of a Pakistani woman convicted on terrorism charges in a New York court in 2010 and being held in federal prison in Fort Worth.

The woman, Aafia Siddiqui, was found guilty of attempting to murder American soldiers in Afghanistan.

The FBI and other law enforcement officials were investigating Akram's arrival in the United States at John F. Kennedy International Airport about five weeks ago, his subsequent travel to the Dallas area where he stayed in a homeless shelter for some nights in early January, and how and when he bought the gun he used in taking the hostages.

Two teenagers were arrested Jan. 15 in Manchester, England, as part of the investigation. The teens were later identified as being Akram's sons.

[Contributing to this story was Mark Zimmermann in Washington.]