News



People sit across from a memorial near boarded windows damaged in the Aug. 27 fatal school shooting at Annunciation Catholic Church Aug. 28 in Minneapolis. (AP/Abbie Parr)

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Minneapolis — August 29, 2025
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As the families of the two Catholic school students fatally shot while celebrating Mass at a Minneapolis church continue to wrestle with their grief, the father of the 8-year-old boy killed tearfully urged the community to remember his son for his love of family, fishing and cooking.

"Please remember Fletcher for the person he was and not the act that ended his life," Jesse Merkel said Aug. 28.

Fletcher Merkel and 10-year-old Harper Moyski were killed and more than a dozen of their schoolmates were wounded Aug. 27 when a shooter, identified as 23-year-old Robin Westman, fired 116 rifle rounds through the church's stained-glass windows.

Surveillance video captured the attack during the first week of classes at the Annunciation Catholic School and showed the shooter never entered the church and could not see the children while firing, said Minneapolis police Chief Brian O'Hara.

Harper's parents said they want to see their daughter's memory bring about changes when it comes to gun violence and mental health issues.

"Change is possible, and it is necessary — so that Harper's story does not become yet another in a long line of tragedies," Michael Moyski and Jackie Flavin said in a statement.

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Fifteen children, ages 6 to 15, were injured, along with three parishioners in their 80s, according to city officials. Only one person — a child — was in critical condition.

O'Hara said Westman was armed with a rifle, shotgun and pistol, and died by suicide.

Acting U.S. Attorney Joe Thompson said videos and writings the shooter left behind show that Westman "expressed hate towards almost every group imaginable."

Investigators recovered hundreds of pieces of evidence from the church and three residences, the police chief said. They found more writings from the shooter, but no additional firearms or a clear motive for the attack on the church Westman once attended. Westman had a "deranged fascination" with mass killings, O'Hara said.

FBI Director Kash Patel said on X that the attack was an act of domestic terrorism motivated by hate-filled ideology, citing the shooter's statements against multiple religions and calls for violence against President Donald Trump.



(AP)

Westman, who once attended the school and whose mother worked for the parish before retiring in 2021, left behind several videos and page upon page of writings describing a litany of grievances. One read: "I know this is wrong, but I can't seem to stop myself."

What appears to be a suicide note to family contains a confession of long-held plans to carry out a shooting and talk of being deeply depressed.

Lily Kletter, who graduated from Annunciation, recalled that Westman joined her class at some point in middle school and once hid in the bathroom to avoid going to Mass.

"I remember they had a crazy distaste for school, especially Annunciation, which I always thought was pretty interesting because their mom was on the parish board," she said.



People gather at a vigil at Lynnhurst Park after a fatal shooting at the Annunciation Catholic School Aug. 27 in Minneapolis. Two children were killed and 18 people injured in the attack. (AP/Bruce Kluckhohn)

There were no past arrests or anything in the shooter's background that would have prevented Westman from being able to legally purchase a firearm, investigators said.

In response to a request for any records of police contact with the shooter in the last decade, the Eagan Police Department sent two documents, both heavily redacted. The first from 2018 is listed as a mental health call and welfare check for a child with parents Mary Grace Westman and James Westman. The case was listed as closed and the narrative was redacted after the officer wrote she responded to the woman's address.

A second report from 2016 involving a criminal complaint was entirely redacted.

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The police chief said the first officer ran into the church four minutes after the initial 911 call and that more officers rendered first aid and rescued some of the children.

Tess Rada said her 8-year-old daughter hasn't said much about the shooting so she doesn't know exactly what she saw. Loud noises and sirens have bothered her since the attack, Rada said.

One of the children killed was her daughter's friend.

"It's kind of impossible," Rada said "to wrap your head around how to tell an 8-year-old that her friend has been killed."

This story appears in the **Minneapolis church shooting** feature series. View the full series.