

Knoxville, Tennessee: Unemployed man targets liberals in church shooting

Shannon Jones
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On July 27, Jim Adkisson walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church near Knoxville, Tennessee and opened fire with a semiautomatic shotgun on the audience attending a children's play. Greg McKendry, age 60, and Linda Kraeger, age 61, were killed; another six were seriously wounded.

The gunman, 58 years old and unemployed, harbored a hatred of gays and liberals. The incident was yet another tragic event in America revealing the frustration and disorientation among sections of the population under conditions of massive social polarization. In this case, it reflected as well the relentless onslaught of ideological reaction, both from the political establishment and the popular media.

The tragedy could have claimed even more lives. Victim Greg McKendry died shielding people in the congregation from a shotgun blast. Others were able to tackle and subdue the shooter until police arrived. After the shooting police said they found 76 shotgun shells. The day following the incident 1,000 people attended a memorial service for the victims at a neighboring church.

Jim Adkisson left what he intended to be a suicide note in which he expressed his frustration at not being able to find a job and "stated his hatred for the liberal movement." After his capture, Adkisson told police that he targeted the church "because of its liberal teachings and his belief that all liberals should be killed because they were ruining the country." He said "that because he could not get to the leaders of the liberal movement he would target those who had voted them in office."

Unitarianism is among the most liberal religious denominations in the United States. The Knoxville church reportedly had a "gays welcome" sign and sponsored meetings of the Friends and Families of

Gays and Lesbians. It appears that Adkisson targeted the church for its tolerant and generally liberal orientation.

The shooter had not worked since 2006 and apparently was on the verge of having his food stamps cut. According to reports he had previously worked as a truck driver and also had an associate's degree in mechanical engineering. His former wife had once taken out a restraining order against him after he had threatened to kill her.

A longtime acquaintance described Adkisson as a loner who hated "blacks, gays and anyone different from him."

Another acquaintance described him as a Vietnam veteran who "was not treated well by the VA [Veterans Administration]." Adkisson, he said, told him he "couldn't get a job and he didn't make enough to live on."

At Adkisson's house police said they found books by right-wing media personalities, including Bill O'Reilly of Fox News as well as talk show hosts Michael Savage and Sean Hannity.

Shootings such as this latest one have become a frequent occurrence in the United States. Invariably the shooter is a disturbed, socially alienated individual, who feels a deep bitterness toward society at large. Often the targets of the violence appear to be randomly chosen.

The regularity of such psychopathic outbursts speaks to a diseased and dysfunctional society. The US is the most socially unequal of all the major industrial countries. In 2006, average pay of a CEO in the US was 364 times that of a typical worker.

The pressures facing ordinary working class and middle class people are being compounded by the mortgage crisis, along with soaring food and gasoline

prices. Millions are affected.

Knoxville is home to the University of Tennessee and the headquarters of the Tennessee Valley Authority. However, Eastern Tennessee contains some of the poorest counties in the Appalachian region. According to press reports, Tennessee is dealing with the highest jump in unemployment in 15 years. Knoxville has a 5.6 percent official unemployment rate—low compared to some major cities, but 2 percent higher than one year ago. Older, more experienced workers have been hardest hit by the drop in hiring.

A recent report in the *Knoxville News Sentinel* said that one major Knoxville area food bank set a record for the number of meals distributed last year. The director told the *News*, “I have never been more frightened than now in terms of what’s to come.” Meanwhile, the local Salvation Army said that requests for food assistance are up 14 percent and utility assistance is up 34 percent.

One woman, recently downsized from her job at a Knoxville cosmetics company, told the paper, “We were once middle-class, and now we are living on the edge, we’ve gotten rid of all our luxuries and we live day-to-day with basic necessities.”

The economic pressures that played a role in the decision by Adkisson to attack the church are significant. However, particularly disturbing is the pernicious role played by right-wing political ideology in motivating this horrific act.

In the coverage of the tragedy by the corporate media this element is either ignored, downplayed or dealt with superficially. Among more thoughtful segments of the population, however, the promotion by the establishment media of an atmosphere of intolerance, fear, paranoia and violence is evident.

Television and radio are more and more the mouthpieces of right-wing and chauvinist propaganda—Fox News, CNN’s Lou Dobbs, talk radio—while bigotry is tolerated and even sanctioned by the political establishment as a whole. Witness the eulogies to recently deceased North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, a notorious racist.

Examples abound of what amounts to little more than incitement to violence by right-wing media figures. “Shock jock” Michael Savage recently called autistic children “brats, morons and idiots” and once referred to a caller on his show as a “sodomite” who should “get

AIDS and die.” Fox’s O’Reilly regularly demonizes homosexuals. On one broadcast he reported a bogus epidemic of violent lesbian gangs terrorizing neighborhoods and schools.

Of course, one can only imagine the reaction of the corporate media establishment if police had found copies of the Koran or pictures of Osama Bin Laden among Jim Adkisson’s possessions instead of the writings of O’Reilly & Co.

Under conditions of the domination of official public discourse by right-wing and extreme-right views—coupled with the collapse of the trade unions and the repudiation of social reformism by the Democratic Party—the pent-up anger and frustrations of unstable individuals is susceptible to being directed in a violent and reactionary direction.

Tragically, the absence of any progressive outlet for social discontent within the realm of official politics makes likely more such explosions of misguided rage.



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