

Faith leaders hold ‘service of cleansing, healing’ at site of shooting

TUCSON, Ariz. – Gathering at the site of the Jan. 8 mass shooting outside a Tucson Safeway, a group of community faith leaders performed “a service of cleansing and healing” Jan. 20, sprinkling the area with blessed water “to reverence and reclaim the space.”

Tucson Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas, one of eight who spoke briefly and offered prayers, noted how faith leaders responded to tragedy in other communities, such as the 9/11 attack, the Columbine High School shootings and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

When the Tucson faith leaders met to pray together, Bishop Kicanas said, they reflected on how other communities responded in solidarity “to offer consolation and healing” and they decided to visit the site of the Tucson tragedy together to pray.

It was a bright sunny day, an observer noted, very much like the day the gunman struck. The prayer service was unannounced to the public, to minimize disruption to the shopping center, which was shut down for several days for the investigation.

The faith leaders dipped juniper branches into the holy water and sprinkled the parking lot where a gunman killed six and wounded 13 in a rampage apparently aimed at Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, who was conducting an informal meeting with constituents.

Giffords, struck by a 9 mm bullet that passed through the left hemisphere of her brain, survived and was responding better than doctors had expected for such a critical wound.

She was transferred Jan. 21 to a TIRR Memorial Hermann Hospital, a renowned rehabilitation hospital in Houston, where her husband, an astronaut training to command the next shuttle flight, lives and has family support.

The same day, the local newspaper, the Arizona Daily Star, carried a letter of thanks from Maureen Roll, widow of Judge John Roll, one of the six who were killed.

She commented how her family's spirits had been lifted by the outpouring of sympathy and support – from votive candles left on their front-yard fountain to the card from her husband's hair stylist, calling him "the nicest man she ever knew."

A Pima County Sheriff's spokesman said Jan. 19 that security video from the shopping center parking lot showed Roll, a U.S. District Court judge and chief of Arizona's federal courts, was shot in the back after he shoved Giffords aide Ron Barber under a table and covered him with his own body. Barber, who was friends with Roll, was shot in the leg and neck area and was released from the hospital in time to attend the judge's funeral Jan. 14 at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church.

In her letter, Maureen Roll observed: "We are a caring and resilient people and we will rise above this tragedy, hopefully becoming a kinder and more respectful people."

At the prayer service, the Rev. John C. Dorhauer, Southwest Conference Minister of United Church of Christ, opened the gathering.

"God is, was and will be in this place," he said. "God was and is with us as we grieve. And God is with us today to help us reclaim this space for the good of all."

Bishop Kirk Smith of the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, Rabbi Stephanie Aaron of Congregation Chaverim and the Rev. Jan Olan Flaaten, executive director of the Arizona Ecumenical Council, all offered prayers.

The "Liturgy of Reclamation and Blessing" was recited by the Rev. Sue Westfall, pastor and stated clerk of Presbytery de Cristo, Synod of the Southwest Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Rev. Dennis Williams, regional minister and president of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arizona.

The benediction was given by Phoenix Bishop Minerva G. Carcano of the United Methodist Church's Desert Southwest Conference.

“May the gracious winds of the Spirit blow in this place anew,” she said. “May peace, hope and love flow from person to person to person. And may the world continue to be transformed by acts of kindness and courage.”

Faith leaders also were to collaborate on a “Day of Healing for Tucson’s Children” Jan. 23 at a Congregational church not far from the Safeway shopping center. Activities for children and families were to include an interfaith service, art activities, storytelling, interacting with pets and use of a “peace tent.” Clergy, musicians, counselors, artists and educators were to be on hand.