

Prayers, sympathy shared after Tennessee shootings

By Catholic News Service

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. – An outpouring of sympathy and prayer washed over Tennessee for the victims of the July 16 shootings that left four Marines and the shooter dead.

Bishop Richard F. Stika of Knoxville, whose diocese includes Chattanooga, encouraged all Catholics and people of faith to participate in a community prayer service at the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul in Chattanooga held the afternoon of the shootings at a military recruiting center and a Navy-Marine training center a few miles away.

“Our community is deeply saddened by the tragic loss of four United States Marines in this senseless act of violence,” said a statement from Bishop Stika. “I have two brothers who served in the U.S. Marine Corps and I recognize and appreciate the selfless service all members of the military give to protect us. We ask for your prayers for the souls of those who lost their lives, the recovery of those wounded in these shootings, and for all of their families.”

Bishop Stika also planned to preside at a Mass July 19 at the basilica.

Father David Carter, pastor of the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul, led the prayer service for all the victims of the incident, including Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez, 24, of Hixson, Tennessee, who was identified by law enforcement authorities as the gunman, and three people who were wounded in the attack.

Tennessee news reports identified the four murdered Marines as: Gunnery Sgt. Thomas J. Sullivan, 40; Lance Cpl. Skip Wells, 21; and Staff Sgt. David Wyatt and Sgt. Carson Holmquist, whose ages were not available.

Abdulazeez was shot to death by police, The Associated Press reported.

Father Carter said about 50 people attended the prayer service. He said they were seeking solace and guidance in dealing with the situation.

It was a sobering, somber experience, he said, that changed into one of hope “as we invited God to help us make sense of this situation.”

“We’re all shocked by the shooting. We didn’t expect it to happen in Chattanooga, this close to home. I have parishioners who went to high school with the young man identified as the assailant,” Father Carter told The East Tennessee Catholic, newspaper of the Knoxville Diocese.

“We’re saddened that our city had to experience such violence, but we have a way of

uniquely responding to this situation,” he said. “We’re responding with hope and the belief that we play a part in making the world a better place. There’s far more good we can do to overcome the senseless acts of violence. We’re called to be light in the darkness.”

Another community-wide prayer service was planned for the afternoon of July 17 at Olivet Baptist Church.

In a statement, Bassam Issa, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga, said that in his community, “our hearts are with the families of the brave Marines who died today and with the police officer and two bystanders who were shot and injured in this cowardly act.

“We condemn this act in the strongest possible terms as one of cowardice and hate. At the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga, we don’t see our community center as a ‘Muslim’ community; we are Chattanoogaans first, and we see ourselves as part of the larger community of Tennesseans grieving today’s act.”

He said it is “vital, crucial, and essential that all Muslims in the Greater Chattanooga Community attend this event to express our consolidation, unity, empathy, and compassion. We are part of this great City of Chattanooga and should unite with our neighbors during these tragic times.”

Bill Brewer, editor of The East Tennessee Catholic, contributed to this story.

UPDATE: U.S. Navy Petty Officer Randall Smith, who was wounded in the shooting, died early Saturday morning as a result of his injuries.