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Police officers arrive at the Covenant School on the grounds of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tenn., after reports of a shooting at the school March 27, 2023. At least six were killed -- three adults and three children -- police reported. (OSV News photo/Metropolitan Nashville Police Department handout via Reuters)

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Nashville, Tenn. — March 28, 2023

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Officials of the Nashville Diocese called news of a mass shooting and loss of life at a private Christian school in the city heartbreaking and "deeply sad and shocking."

Six individuals, including three children and school head Katherine Koonce, were fatally shot during the mid-morning hours March 27, at The Covenant School in the Green Hills neighborhood of Nashville. The private, Christian school educates students in preschool through sixth grade and was founded as a ministry of Covenant Presbyterian Church.

The shooter, identified as 28-year-old Audrey E. Hale, carried out the attack armed with a semiautomatic handgun and two short barrel, magazine-fed military-style semiautomatic weapons, including a foldable carbine and an "AR-pistol" with ammunition designed for the close combat needs of the U.S. military's M4 carbine rifle.

Hale died following interactions with officers who had immediately responded to the scene.

According to Metropolitan Nashville Police Department Chief John Drake, the shooter had attended Covenant "at one point." Hale identified as transgender, he said, adding that police had found detailed maps about the school, along with a manifesto, created by Hale prior to the shooting.

"My heart breaks with news of the school shooting at The Covenant School this morning," Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville said in a statement posted to social media. "Let us pray for the victims, their families and the Covenant Presbyterian community."

Representatives from the Diocese of Knoxville responded to the post saying, "Our prayers are with the victims, their families and the people of Nashville."

Spalding celebrated the 5:30 p.m. Mass March 27 at the Cathedral of the Incarnation to pray for the victims of the shooting and the school.

"The news of the shooting and loss of lives at The Covenant School this morning is deeply sad and shocking," Brian Cooper, chancellor and chief operating officer, said in a diocesan statement. "It is a painful reminder that these horrific events can happen at any time. Our own city is not immune to this violence. Across Middle Tennessee, our churches and schools continue to be vigilant as we focus on the safety and security of parishioners, students, faculty, and staff. It is a top priority."

The Nashville school shooting is the latest of many that have plagued schools around the nation in the last several years and is even more reason why the Diocese of Nashville and the Catholic Schools Office remain vigilant to the safety protocols and practices put in place at the 16 diocesan schools and three independent Catholic schools, diocesan officials said.

Cooper said in the diocesan statement that "within the last five years, the diocese has conducted multiple comprehensive security reviews of each school and adjacent parish grounds. We have taken significant steps to continually enhance the security of our facilities in cooperation with parish leaders."

Rebecca Hammel, superintendent of schools for the diocese, added in the statement that the diocese has "in place mandatory training for our faculty, staff, and administration" that "was established several years ago."

"This training accompanies annual site and safety protocol reviews and regular safety drills conducted with staff and students in our schools" she said. "We will look for opportunities to strengthen our safety protocols as we learn from the ongoing police investigation of this sad incident."

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The Covenant School shooting prompted a lockdown at all of the diocese's Catholic schools in Davidson County, Hammel said, noting, "All of our schools work with local authorities on a regular basis and the police departments are very good to our schools in that they will typically call our schools to let them know that something of this magnitude is happening, and then they respond with lockdowns and taking whatever precautions are necessary on campus. That certainly unfolded today."

"This tragic event gives us all pause to reevaluate our own protocols and to ensure that our children's safety remains the top priority for us at all times," she added. "It's the core of our decision-making and the basis of what we do every given day."

Fr. Ed Steiner, pastor of St. Philip the Apostle Church in Franklin, south of Nashville, posted a message to the parish Facebook page as he announced a evening rosary would be prayed for the victims at the church the night of the shooting with a dedicated Mass intention for the victims planned for the 9 a.m. Mass March 28.

In his post, Steiner said a local police captain conducted active shooter training "for our staff, our ushers, our ministry leads and anyone who was interested in the training. We took the training seriously, but there was an element of the training being only for a hypothetical situation. ... 'Now, with another school shooting just a few miles away ... such an event is no longer hypothetical."

"Those who were killed are clearly victims, but their parents and families are victims as well," he continued. "Additionally, all those in the school building and the parents and families of those in the building will suffer trauma for many years to come. Many First Responders will have been traumatized as well. All of these children and adults need our most earnest prayer."

"We will ask many questions in the days to come, especially why this happened," Steiner concluded in the post. "But for now, our hearts, concerns, and prayers are with the victims."

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee released a statement on Twitter assuring citizens he was closely "monitoring the tragic situation at Covenant," and the Tennessee Department of Safety and Tennessee Highway Patrol was assisting local law enforcement and first responders "at the scene."

"As we continue to respond, please join us in praying for the school, congregation, and Nashville community," he said.

Nashville Mayor John Cooper also released a statement on Twitter: "In a tragic morning, Nashville joined the dreaded, long list of communities to experience a school shooting. My heart goes out to the families of the victims. Our entire city stands with you. As facts continue to emerge, I thank our first responders and medical professionals."

The Diocese of Nashville and the Catholic Schools Office encouraged all to keep the victims in their prayers.

"It's so hard to even find the words because it's tragic, it's senseless, it's a loss of innocent life," Hammel said.

"They are our colleagues. We know people there and we're saddened that they're not only experiencing this but that their lives are changed forever because of this senseless act," Hammel said. "We grieve with the community. As a private school in this city, we are engaged with fellow private school leaders and we care for one another, so this hits all of us deeply."

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