

## HATE CRIMES



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 Congregation Beth Israel Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, facing camera, hugs a man after a healing service at White's Chapel United Methodist Church in Southlake, Texas. Cytron-Walker was one of four people held hostage by a gunman at his Colleyville, Texas, synagogue.

## Jewish leaders renew antisemitism fight after hostage case

Although the FBI initially said the man who held four people hostage at a Texas synagogue was focused on an issue "not specifically related to the Jewish community," the captor voiced beliefs that Jews controlled the world and had the power to arrange the release of a prisoner, survivors said after their escape.

The gunman's words were all too familiar to Jewish leaders and terror experts, who saw the attack on Congregation Beth Israel as yet another in the rising number of antisemitic hate crimes, a sign of the continued need of vigilance and interfaith solidarity.

The hostage-taker — identified by authorities as Malik Faisal Akram — "thought he could come into a synagogue, and we could get on the phone with the 'Chief Rabbi of America' and he would get what he needed," Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker told the Forward, a Jewish news site.

The hours-long standoff ended after the last hostage ran out of the Colleyville synagogue and an FBI SWAT team rushed in. Akram was killed, though authorities have declined to say who shot him.

The attack recalled recent deadly assaults on synagogues, including Pittsburgh's Tree of Life in 2018 and California's Chabad of Poway in 2019. Unlike those attacks, when assailants linked to white nationalist motives went on shooting rampages soon after entering, Akram took hostages to have them to use their influence to obtain the release of Aafia Siddiqui.

Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who is suspected of having ties to al-Qaida and was convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan, is serving a lengthy sentence in a prison in nearby Fort Worth.

Jeffrey Cohen, another of the synagogue hostages, said Akram "did not come there to kill Jews" but tried to use them in the belief they could get Siddiqui released.

Akram "had bought into the extremely dangerous, antisemitic trope that Jews control everything, that we could call President (Joe) Biden and have him release her," Mr. Cohen told the Times of Israel.

Lorenzo Vidino, director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, said that while only Akram himself knew his motives, his words reflect "a misguided and conspiratorial mindset."

"The idea that Jews are overwhelmingly, disproportionately powerful and control America is completely mainstream" in some politically Islamist factions, similar to tropes among white nationalists, he said.

And he said Siddiqui's case is a "cause celebre" in those factions. Siddiqui herself voiced "chilling" words at her court proceedings, blaming her conviction on Israel and asking for genetic tests on jurors for possible Jewish connections, he said.

On Jan. 15, the special agent in charge of the FBI's Dallas field office said the hostage-taker was focused on an issue "not specifically related to the Jewish community." But on Jan. 16, the FBI called the ordeal "a terrorism-related matter, in which the Jewish community was targeted."

Akram "was looking for a Jewish target," said Nachman Shai, Israel's Cabinet minister for diaspora affairs.

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# HUMBLLED before God



At top: Bishop Anthony Michaels, right, puts a pectoral cross onto Father Michael Shaheen to signify his new status as archpriest during the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy.

Above: Bishop Anthony holds out his arms for hug with Father Michael after his elevation to archpriest.

At left: Jackie Ansara sits in a beam of sunlight during the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Cathedral.

BLADE PHOTOS/REBECCA BENSON

## St. George's Michael Shaheen elevated to dignity of archpriest

By NICKI GORNY  
 BLADE STAFF WRITER

With the requisite prayer recited, the pectoral cross hung on his shoulders, Bishop Anthony Michaels turned to the congregation of Toledo's St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Cathedral to present the Very Reverend Archpriest Michael Shaheen.

"He is worthy!" he announced.

"He is worthy!" they repeated.

"Mustahek!" he continued, the same phrase in Arabic. They repeated again.

Then: "Axios!" in Greek. Repetition, then applause.

Their pastor had been elevated to the dignity of archpriest, a title that honors him as "first among priests," as the V.R. Archpriest Michael explained it before the ceremony on Jan. 16. Once a de rigeur promotion in the faith tradition that almost always accompanied the 10-year anniversary of a priest's ordination, the elevation to archpriest these days is an honor for which a candidate's merit is considered, too, lending the title a deeper spiritual significance.

To hold the title of archpriest does not affect a minister's day-to-day responsibilities, and the V.R. Archpriest Michael will continue to serve his congregation locally as he has since 2015. The honor is visually symbolized with a gold pectoral cross.

The elevation was a significant moment for the V.R. Archpriest Michael, whose father received the same honor in Toledo in 1970, as well as for his congregation at St. George Cathedral.

"It's an honor," said Nadia

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The Very Reverend Archpriest Michael Shaheen.

## At many churches, pandemic hits collection plates, budgets

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Biltmore United Methodist Church of Asheville, N.C., is for sale.

Already financially strapped because of shrinking membership and a struggling preschool, the congregation was dealt a crushing blow by the coronavirus. Attendance plummeted, with many staying home or switching to other churches that stayed open the whole time. Gone, too, is the revenue the church formerly got from renting its space for events and meetings.

"Our maintenance costs are just exorbitant," said the Rev. Lucy Robins, senior pastor. "And we just don't have the resources financially that we used to have to be able to do the kind of ministry work that we would like."



Biltmore is just one of an untold number of congregations across the country that have struggled to stay afloat financially and minister to their flocks during the pandemic, though others have

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This photo provided by the Rev. Lucy Robins shows a For Sale sign in front of the Biltmore United Methodist Church in Asheville, N.C. in July 2021.

managed to weather the storm, often with help from the federal government's paycheck Protection Program, or PPP, and sustained levels of member donations.

The coronavirus hit at a time

when already fewer Americans were going to worship services — with at least half of the nearly 15,300 congregations surveyed in a 2020 report by Faith Communities Today reporting weekly attendance of 65 or less — and exacerbated the problems at smaller churches where increasingly lean budgets often hindered them from things like hiring full-time clergy.

"The pandemic didn't change those patterns, it only made them a little bit worse," said Scott Thumma, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and co-chair of Faith Communities Today.

Attendance has been a persistent challenge. As faith leaders moved to return to in-person worship, first

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THE BLADE/REBECCA BENSON

Father Michael Shaheen, center, kneels before Bishop Anthony Michaels during the ceremony during the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Cathedral in Toledo on Jan. 16.

## Archpriest

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Swade, a long-time parishioner. "Everybody's been waiting for it."

As chair of the parish council, Ms. Swade signed her name to the letter that the council sent to Bishop Anthony in late October, requesting that their priest be elevated to the dignity of archpriest. Her letter detailed some of the reasons that they felt he was worthy.

The V.R. Archpriest Michael arrived as pastor and dean of the cathedral in 2015, and since then she wrote that they've seen a rejuvenation in the pews; several fully funded improvements to the cathedral campus, including a replacement of the iconostasis; and the re-establishment of relationships across the city's pan-Orthodox communities.

"Father Michael does not rest on his past achievements and laurels, but rather works diligently to keep our parish a



THE BLADE/REBECCA BENSON

Acolytes carry lights during the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Cathedral.

spiritual God-loving community," Ms. Swade wrote on behalf of the parish council. "We feel our cathedral indeed has a bright future."

Evidently Bishop Anthony, who oversees the Diocese of Toledo and the Midwest of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, agreed with her assessment. In short order he had arranged to

visit St. George Cathedral to lead a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy. The much anticipated elevation was a brief ceremony toward the end of the liturgy.

In a reflection that accompanied the scripted prayer, Bishop Anthony reflected on the significance of the honor, emphasizing its counter-intuitive humility: "In the church, the higher the rank in front of

God, the lower we stoop to praise him," he said.

For V.R. Archpriest Michael, the ceremony held significance beyond the spiritual.

The minister is a fourth-generation priest, and in much of his ministry, he has followed in the footsteps of his late father, the Very Reverend Archpriest George Shaheen. He did so again in receiving his own pectoral cross in Toledo, the city where he himself spent formative years as a child, he reflected.

Both father and son were ordained in Montreal, the V.R. Archpriest George in 1960 and the V.R. Archpriest Michael in 2006. Both have now been elevated to the dignity of archpriest in the same city, too, V.R. Archpriest George preceding his son in 1970.

"To be elevated in my hometown and my home church, where I was baptized," the V.R. Archpriest Michael said. "I'm humbled by the honor."

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## Antisemitism

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"If it's not about Jews, why didn't the walk into a church, a mosque, or a supermarket there?"

The attack resonated in Jewish communities across the country, including those that had been attacked before.

"It's upsetting to me whenever Jews are under attack, whenever human beings are under attack," said Beth Kissileff, a Pittsburgh author and member of New Light Congregation. The congregation was one of three meeting in the Tree of Life building that lost members in the Oct. 27, 2018, attack that claimed 11 lives.

She hopes survivors of the Pittsburgh attack — who were conspired in 2018 by Muslim survivors of a deadly mosque attack in Quebec — can offer similar support to those in Colleyville. "People reached out to us, and we want to reach out," she said.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, the denomination with Israel affiliated with, noted that Muslim, Christian and other faith leaders quickly

gathered to support the congregants.

"While the uptick of antisemitism is clear, we've never lived in a community where there's more solidarity," he said.

Anna Eisen, the founding president of Beth Israel, experienced that first-hand, citing support "from neighbors, strangers, churches, the governor" and others.

"I feel safer," she said. "I know now I'm a part of this community and this country."

Some advocacy groups and lawmakers have cited the Texas hostage situation in calling on the Senate to take up President Biden's nomination of Deborah Lipstadt to serve as a special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism.

The Emory University professor's nomination languished last year, forcing President Biden to resubmit her name two weeks ago. The Anti-Defamation League called on the Senate to "act now" to show the urgency of confronting antisemitism.

"We need to treat antisemitism not as an aberration but an everyday reality," said Jonathan Greenblatt, chief executive officer of the ADL.

Rabbi Noah Farkas, the



ASSOCIATED PRESS

People gathering on a street corner hold signs in support of the victims of the 2019 Chabad of Poway synagogue shooting in Poway, Calif. A man opened fire the previous day inside the synagogue near San Diego as worshippers celebrated the last day of a major Jewish holiday.

president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, said he has been speaking with rabbinic colleagues in the wake of the Texas incident and many have trepidations about leading services.

"To be a Jew in America today, to wear Jewish ritual garb like the yarmulke or a Star of David, is an act of courage, and I would say defiance as well," Rabbi Farkas said.

The attack underscores how

"the Jewish community is an affected and targeted group," said Bradley Orsini, senior national security advisor for Secure Community Network, which consults with major Jewish organizations on security.

He took part in a weekend webinar that drew about 1,600 Jewish community leaders to update them on the Colleyville situation. "We really need to keep preparedness in front of us," he said.

## Finances

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the highly transmissible delta variant and now the even faster-spreading omicron have thrown a wrench into such efforts, with some churches going back online and others still open reporting fewer souls in the pews.

At Biltmore, for example, attendance at weekly services are down from around 70 pre-pandemic to just about 25 today, counting both in-person and online worship.

After congregants voted last May to put the church property, a two-building campus perched on a verdant knoll just off Interstate 75 on the market, church leaders are still figuring out what comes next, including where the congregation will call home. But they hope to use some of the proceeds from the property sale to support marginalized communities and causes like affordable housing.

Unlike Biltmore, Franklin Community Church, about 20 miles outside of Nashville, Tenn., doesn't have its own sanctuary, holding services instead at a public school. That turned out to be a blessing during the pandemic, with no need to worry about a mortgage, upkeep, insurance or utilities.

"We wouldn't have survived if we'd had all that," said the Rev. Kevin Riggs, the church's pastor.

Still, it has been a battle. During the 15 months that services at Franklin went online-only, some members left for other congregations or got out of the habit of giving, according to Reverend Riggs. Weekly attendance is down from around 100 to less than 40, and the omicron spike recently forced the church to go virtual again.

The impact is felt in the collection plate. The money coming in now is just about a third of what it was before the pandemic, the pastor said. The church has cut spending where it could, turned to grants to try to make up the difference and worked to raise more money from community members who don't attend but support the church's ministries, such as serving homeless people.

"We're surviving. ... But we have felt the hurt," Reverend Riggs said.

Another struggling congregation, Friendship Baptist Church in Baltimore, is essentially living week to week. The predominantly Black church received a PPP loan of more than \$55,000, but that barely made a dent in expenses. The Rev. Alvin Gwynn Sr. has given up his pastor's salary and for now is living off Social Security checks and his other job in construction.

Slumping attendance has hurt the bottom line there, as elsewhere. Friendship Baptist counts around 900 active members but only about 150 of them are showing up, making their donations especially crucial.

The church is "surviving because of the sacrificial giving of the 150," said Reverend Gwynn, who doesn't intend to start drawing a paycheck again until the church is stable. "They give way, way more than a normal offering each

Sunday individually."

During the pandemic, experts said many congregations embraced online giving, which could boost contributions by \$300 per person annually, according to The Faith Communities Today report.

More broadly, various other surveys and reports show a mixed picture on congregational giving nationwide.

Gifts to religious organizations grew by 1 percent to just over \$131 billion in 2020, a year when Americans also donated a record \$471 billion overall to charity, according to an annual report by GivingUSA. Separately, a September survey of 1,000 protestant pastors by the evangelical firm LifeWay Research found about half of congregations received roughly what they budgeted for last year, with 27 percent getting less than anticipated and 22 percent getting more.

Hope Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, a largely upper-middle-class congregation of about 400, is among those that have enjoyed relative stability despite the pandemic.

The Rev. Josh Robinson had expected contributions to drop off when in-person services paused for more than a year, but they remained steady. So have member pledges for upcoming gifts in 2022. Some in the congregation even donated their government stimulus checks to the church, which used them to set up a fund to provide direct financial assistance to those who lost income due to the pandemic.

It all prompted the pastor to reexamine his own approach to the pandemic.

"I needed to step back and think, what did it mean for me as a spiritual leader to not have the same faith mindset, since I was anticipating a downturn?" Reverend Robinson said. "Here were the members of the church stepping up — I had to learn into that. And rightfully, I was able to do so with great joy."

Even before, the church had embraced frugality in order to pay down its debt, which has fallen from \$2 million in 2013 to less than \$300,000 today.

When services went virtual, savings on utilities and other costs helped keep the budget balanced. PPP loans of some \$290,000 were also key to maintaining employees on the payroll and offsetting lost revenue from renting out space and other services.

At West Harpeth Primitive Baptist Church, another church in Franklin, giving is down but only slightly. Hewitt Sawyers, the pastor, attributes that to the scant turnover among the more than 150-year-old historically Black congregation's members, many of whom are committed to financially supporting the church and work in sectors that were less damaged by the pandemic than others.

"We've just been wonderfully, wonderfully blessed," Pastor Sawyers said.

Budget projections for this year are rosy enough that West Harpeth leaders are hopeful they can tackle a needed building renovation.

"We are extremely optimistic about it," Pastor Sawyers said. "We're planning on trying to do that in '22, and we feel very, very, very comfortable about trying to get that done."

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