

Gay group asks mayor for support

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By Hayes Hickman

Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam is being asked to acknowledge the city's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community after a man reportedly cited hatred of gays as a reason for opening fire Sunday at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church.

The church, which provides GLBT support groups and ministries, was targeted in part because of such advocacy, police said. The FBI is involved in the case and considering federal hate crime charges against Jim David Adkisson, who stands charged with first-degree murder.

In an e-mail to the mayor Monday, local activist Gary Elgin asked Haslam to speak out more than he has in the past.

"This is the time for you to actually and sincerely stand by us, as well as this tragedy's victims, their families and all the citizens of Knoxville who value basic human rights and liberties," writes Elgin, former director of the Rainbow Community Awareness Project. "This is the time for you, when called upon, to answer and step up and be counted as our mayor as well."

Haslam is a member of Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church, generally considered an evangelical congregation. He declined an invitation from Elgin to speak at a local National Coming Out Day rally organized in October 2005, sending the city's director of policy & communications, Bill Lyons, instead.

Elgin said Haslam's response to his e-mail Monday is a "huge step" toward the acknowledgement he has long sought from the city's elected leadership.

Haslam wrote in part, "It is often easy to make these tragic events, which are far too frequent, about the community in which they occur. Knoxville is a caring, compassionate city where diverse viewpoints are shared and respected. Every person, regardless of race, religion, age, sex, or sexual orientation, is a person of human dignity and a valued member of our community."

Elgin said he is grateful for the mayor's "kind and inclusive" words.

"It is he who is the face of our city," Elgin said in a follow-up interview. "Through inclusiveness and acceptance, he leads the city in that direction. With silence, he could be viewed as sharing those views of our detractors."

Todd Cramer, with the Knoxville Human Rights Group and an organizer of last month's Knoxville PrideFest 2008, said he is less concerned with whether a particular group was targeted in the event than how the community should react.

"The Knoxville Human Rights Group does not wish to further cloud an already ugly situation with our own guess as to a motive, based on logic, for such an illogical act," Cramer offered in a

written statement Monday. "Regardless of the personal motivation behind this terrible tragedy, the focus at this time should not be why it was committed, but how we respond as a community."

Also Monday, Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, issued a statement of condolence.

"This attack is tragic, abominable and senseless. We pray and hope for comfort to the families of the victims and to the congregants of this welcoming church. Our deepest sympathies are with everyone affected by this terrible event. We condemn any crime motivated by hate or bias."