

Isle interfaith ceremony encourages community, focus on mental illness

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Vocalist Elaine Losey, left, and the Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kuponu Kwong, second from left, lead the congregation in singing "Peace, Salaam, Shalom" during an interfaith candlelight vigil and prayer service remembering the 26 Sandy Hook shooting victims on Saturday, Dec. 15, 2012 at First Unitarian Church of Honolulu in Nuuanu.

Michelle Guannel was at Washington Middle School on Friday, sharing her insights on the field of marine science for the school's career day, when she first heard the horrific news from her old elementary school in Connecticut.

Guannel, 37, moved to Hawaii from Seattle just two months ago, but grew up in several towns in Connecticut. She spent three years at Sandy Hook Elementary School, where on Friday a gunman identified as Adam Lanza shot and killed 26 people, including 20 children, before killing himself.

"It was a shock," she said. "I understood that a tragedy had taken place, but the fact that it happened (in Sandy Hook) took a while to register. It's still sinking in."

Guannel was one of about 30 people who attended an interfaith vigil at First Unitarian Church of Honolulu Saturday evening in remembrance of the victims of Friday's massacre.

"I was really touched when I found out that this vigil was being organized here in Honolulu because I am so far away from home and family," said Guannel, a member of the Unitarian Church. "I know that people there appreciate the support that is being expressed all over the world. As parents, neighbors, a community and as human beings, I think we can all relate when we hear about a tragedy of this magnitude.

"We're all connected no matter where we are," she said.

The program included songs and chants, prayers and blessings from the Unitarian faith and other religious traditions.

Organizers left small travel packs of facial tissues on the seats, but for the most part the vigil proceeded as a reverent, reflective but clear-eyed show of community in the face of unfathomable loss.

Several speakers broached the subject of enhanced gun control and better care and oversight of those with mental illness or developmental disorders. (Early reports identified Lanza as having a form of autism.)

"The events of (Friday) really affect all of us, and certainly anyone of a religious faith," said Rabbi Peter Schaktman of Temple Emanu-El, one of several representatives from other faiths present at the vigil. "This tragedy reminds us that guns really are a problem, that we have to turn our attention to gun control and accept the realities of mental illness."

The Rev. Jonipher Kwong of the First Unitarian Church said he views such issues as matters of faith and community, not necessarily public policy.

"It's not a political issue for us," Kwong said. "The question is, how do we turn our guns into ploughshares? What can we do to pay better attention to mental illness and to make sure that people who suffer from mental illness do not have access to lethal weapons?"

Toward the end of the vigil, attendees cradled electric candles as the names of 26 of the victims were read.

(Lanza and his mother, Nancy, whom police believe Lanza murdered at a separate location before his rampage at the school, were not included in the reading.)

"Now is the time to put our spiritual values into action," Kwong said. "We can make a statement that we will get to the root causes of violence and address the issue of mental illness in our community."

"As important and moving as it was for us to come together in unity tonight," Kwong said, "we simply don't want to ever have to do this again."

Interfaith vigil held at Nuuanu church for Connecticut shooting victims (KHON)

Hawaii residents are also paying their respects to the victims and trying to make sense of this tragedy.

Earlier Saturday evening an interfaith vigil was held at the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu.

Dozens gathered at the Nuuanu church to remember the victims.

"We must dedicate ourselves to creating a society where differences are resolved without violence," said Jonipher Kuponon Kwong, First Unitarian Church of Honolulu. "Where the mentally unstable do not have ready access to lethal force. Where violence is not glorified and where we can live, love, and work in safe places."