

Black churches debate forms of protection after fires, deaths

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue

The leader of the National Baptist Convention, USA, says churches should “do everything that is humanly possible” to protect themselves—even if it means hiring armed guards.

But the head of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination would rather churches call 911 if necessary.

After nine people were fatally shot at an African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina, and several black churches have burned, officials of mostly black denominations are taking different approaches to safety issues.

More than 1,000 people took part in a Department of Homeland Security webinar July 1 that emphasized measures to prepare for a range of crises.

Barbara Williams-Skinner, cochair of the National African American Clergy Network, tuned in to the webinar and heard advice on how congregations should connect with first responders.

“Some churches are doing that,” she said. “Others had not been, and I think the Charleston church massacre helped people to understand that houses of worship that welcome strangers also have to be ready for strangers that mean harm.”

Leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church said the denomination is preparing congregations to “set up safety watches and take preventative measures to protect human life and physical assets.”

Jerry Young, president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, said he will advise members of his predominantly black denomination to take new measures, from installing interior and exterior video cameras to having office security systems buzz in visitors.

“We are in consultation even now with the experts to assist us in making sure we get to all of our constituent churches instruction, advice, and suggestions as to how they can actually beef up security around the worship centers,” he said.

In his opinion, that can include armed guards. But George Battle Jr., the senior bishop of the AME Zion Church, doesn't think guns should be an option.

"We're not going to have any guns on our property," he said. Referring to a verse from the book of Isaiah that says "no weapon formed against you shall prosper," he added, "we can't preach one thing and do another."

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives is investigating five fires across the South at predominantly black churches in June. ATF's Bomb Arson Tracking System shows there were 127 incidents at houses of worship in 2014, compared to 146 in 2013 and the same number in 2012. Last year, 42 were deliberately set, 26 were ruled accidental, and 54 were labeled "undetermined."

Still, the recent spate of black church fires, which remind many of attacks in the 1960s and 1990s, has prompted widespread concern.

Anthea Butler, a professor of religious and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said the government webinar should be only the beginning of efforts to address the attacks on black houses of worship.

"While this is important, it focuses on prevention—not cure or eradication of racism or religion-based hate crimes," Butler wrote in *Religion Dispatches*. "What needs to happen is a concerted effort by all churches, black and white alike, to confront the issue of racism in America with fervor."

There has been some response across racial lines to the recent incidents. Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis started [a fund-raising campaign to rebuild recently burned churches](#) that were victims of arson with an initial goal of \$25,000.

Surpassing that, the cathedral multiplied the goal tenfold, according to its website. It had raised \$236,857 as of July 21, as more than 200 Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other congregations pledged to hold a special collection.

"The response to this has been incredible, but truly not surprising," said Mike Kinman, dean of the predominantly white Episcopal congregation. "There is so much good in people's hearts." —Religion News Service

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