

Shootings give rise to church security concerns: Balancing hospitality with safety

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The day after a church shooting on a March Sunday that left an Illinois pastor dead, church security consultant Marc Brooks fielded calls from eight congregations eager to get firearms into the hands of worship staff or volunteers.

But keeping a congregation safe from violent outbursts doesn't have to involve guns in the sanctuary, he said.

"If you need firearms training, then we do that," says Brooks, a deputy sheriff and chief instructor for Protective Services Training and Consultants in Thornton, Colorado. But sometimes church security "doesn't require a firearm. It just requires that you're alert and that you're in shape and that you're able to protect your pastor."

Church security issues have become a fresh cause of concern in wake of several deadly incidents, including one March 8 at the 1,000-seat First Baptist Church of Maryville, Illinois, in which pastor Fred Winters, 45, who was preaching at the time, died from a gunshot to the chest. Charged later with first-degree murder was a 27-year-old assailant, who cut himself with a knife he carried as he was tackled by two men in the congregation.

In recent months:

- A man stunned a group of tourists in February when he fatally shot himself at the foot of a cross at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California.
- In November, a man allegedly shot and killed his estranged wife, as well as a worshiper who rushed to her aid, at a church in Clifton, New Jersey.
- Last July, a man with an apparent grudge against liberals opened fire inside a Knoxville, Tennessee, Unitarian Universalist church, killing two and wounding six.

These events, plus others in recent years, have churches large and small wondering what, if anything, they can and should do to ensure safe environments. It can be a tough question to answer, not just because of limited resources but also because most congregations strive to be welcoming, especially to strangers.

"There can be a tension between being an open, inviting church and being a secure one," says Eric Spacek, senior risk manager for GuideOne Insurance, which insures about 40,000 congregations. "It's a challenge that most churches are struggling with."

Recent data on church violence are scarce because agencies generally don't track violent crime by venue, but crime experts say that it remains extremely rare, even as it generates big headlines.

Carnegie Mellon University criminologist Jacqueline Cohen suspects that church violence might even be less prevalent today than in generations past, in part because criminals have more alternatives if they're seeking an audience or a reliable place to locate their victims.

Church violence appears to be increasing, Cohen says, because the location of a church shooting “distinguishes it from other murders, and it makes people afraid to be in a place where they otherwise feel safe, and those are the dynamics that [lead to widespread coverage] in the media.”

Even so, churches are concerned by incidents that capture attention, and a cottage industry has cropped up in recent years to advise them on security issues.

Experts recommend that churches begin their security efforts by learning to spot their vulnerabilities. That means conferring with a security consultant or local law enforcement, according to Rick Anderson, founder of Church Security Solutions in Salem, Oregon.

After that, Anderson suggests assembling a team to look for “preincident indicators,” such as a stranger who appears nervous, avoids eye contact and cuts casual conversation short. Attention to the unordinary, coupled with strategic placement of team members around the sanctuary, can help reduce the risk of an incident by making it harder to pull off.

But such lessons aren’t always easy to learn when churchgoers strive to be accommodating in a house of worship. “If somebody looks at us crossways or we get an uneasy feeling, we tend to forgive them and go on about our business,” Anderson says. “We actually suppress our gut check, [but] we shouldn’t dismiss cues that in our gut tell us something is not right.”

For churches considering whether to have an armed presence, the issues get more complex.

Christopher Ferguson, a psychologist with a specialty in violent criminal behavior at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas, says would-be shooters who feel victimized and want to exact high-profile revenge aren’t going to worry about running afoul of a uniformed officer.

“Most of these shooters aren’t intending to get away. They’re intending to die,” Ferguson said. “If a person thinks he’s going to die, [a uniformed officer] probably isn’t going to act as a deterrent in most of these cases because the shooter is suicidal.”

GuideOne insurance company’s Spaček recommends that churches consult with local police to determine an appropriate level of security. In church, “the existence of a weapon can provide some additional security to deter certain acts or protect individuals,” Spaček said in an e-mail, adding that it doesn’t come without cost. “It can also increase the liability exposure for the organization.” *Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS*