

Government getting involved in congregational safety

Law enforcement is seeking to forge partnerships with faith leaders. It raises a variety of questions about balancing safety with other concerns.

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



Flags marking evidence of the mass shooting at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in November 2017. Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP.

Several months after the deadliest church shooting in U.S. history, federal authorities are spearheading new efforts to help equip local faith leaders.

U.S. attorneys' offices in Colorado, North Carolina, and Massachusetts have been convening security workshops for houses of worship in the wake of the shooting in November that left more than two dozen worshipers dead in Sutherland Springs, Texas. The Colorado initiative builds on past efforts to reach faith leaders, while four regional events across Massachusetts this winter mark a new initiative in that state.

"There was a need for education around how to develop contingency plans for emergencies and what to expect from law enforcement during emergencies," wrote U.S. attorney Andrew E. Lelling in an email.

Congregations nationwide have been taking steps to increase security, according to Cheryl Kryshak, vice president of risk control for Church Mutual Insurance, the country's largest insurer of religious institutions. Security training firms report a surge in demand from faith communities since the Texas attack; congregations now wait as long as a year for private training events. Forging partnerships with law enforcement is often part of heightening vigilance, along with creating church security teams, Kryshak wrote in an email.

At a workshop in Taunton, Massachusetts, in January, more than 300 attendees listened to representatives from federal, state, and local agencies. Outside of the event, which was closed to news media, faith leaders said they were seeking authorities' guidance on security issues that have stymied their communities.

"Our security team is split," said Mark Oliver, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in nearby Brockton. "One group believes they should be bearing weapons. The other half says, 'No, we don't want that. We don't want that message being sent out there.'"

One panelist from the local police advised against having weapons in worship, Oliver said.

Attendees said they received other practical guidance, for example, be alert for unusual behaviors that could be risk indicators, such as an unfamiliar worshiper who arrives on a hot day in a heavy overcoat drenched in sweat.

"I'm not taking a chance on anybody in our congregation getting injured or killed," said workshop attendee Richard Reid, pastor of North Baptist Church in Brockton.

Since November, North Baptist ushers have been locking all doors as soon as worship begins. A laptop in the pulpit enables Reid to monitor locations throughout the building and outside via 15 security cameras. If the doorbell rings during worship, Reid can see who's there and alert security if he spots a threat. Should an attack occur inside the church, the security team would immediately dial 911 and wait for police to arrive, Reid said.

Peter Weinberger, a senior researcher in countering violent extremism who works at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland, sees a new degree of coordination between government and religious institutions.

"With the Obama administration, there was a role for law enforcement, but it certainly wasn't as active as it is today," Weinberger said.

While the Obama administration largely left disaster training to religious organizations and their private consultants, the Trump administration wants law enforcement involved in training as well as incident response. That means faith leaders are coached to focus on what the law requires, including situations in which faith community members are behaving suspiciously.

Weinberger said he has heard concerns suggesting that faith leaders are being compelled to surveil and report on their own communities. He's not persuaded by those arguments or by notions that closer partnerships with law enforcement are inherently problematic.

Faith leaders "want to know, 'What happens if we know that [some in the congregation] are online with extremist groups?'" Weinberger said. "'What do I tell members of my community if they approach me in confidence? What are my obligations legally and ethically?' It's helpful to have law enforcement involved in that." —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on February 12, appears in the print edition under the title "Law enforcement offering crisis response workshops for congregational leaders."