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Many religious institutions get serious about security

Protesters to picket several sites in S.D.

By [Eleanor Yang Su](#)
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Every few months, more than 100 security volunteers at the Rock Church in Point Loma run through drills to prepare for a gunman attack, a kidnapping at the nursery or disorderly outsiders.

That church isn't alone in fearing violence and vandalism.

Once deemed sacred sanctuaries off-limits to



Dayle Malacas, a contract security guard, monitors cameras in the lobby of the Rock Church in Point Loma. (John R. McCutchen / Union-Tribune) -

criminals, religious institutions are becoming vulnerable targets to shootings, thefts and protests because of their low-tech security and open environment.

San Diego religious leaders' reactions have ranged from hiring armed guards to taking extra precaution with collection plates and church offerings.

The measures may sound extreme, but they could be tested today and through the weekend.

Protesters from a Midwestern group called Westboro Baptist Church will picket the Rock Church and more than a dozen other San Diego churches, synagogues and high schools beginning today to spread its anti-gay, anti-Semitic message.

The group has made news nationally with demonstrations outside places of worship, schools and even at military funerals. The group says its protests at funerals are intended to highlight its belief that God is killing U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to punish America for condoning homosexuality.

Many religious leaders say they have been spurred into action by protests and recent violent attacks. An abortion doctor was shot and killed in May while serving as an usher in a Lutheran church in Kansas. Two months before that, a Baptist pastor in Illinois was shot and killed during a service. He used a Bible to shield himself from bullets.

“You'd think it's the most safe place in the world, and yet priests have been shot at the altar,” said the Rev. Wayne Sanders of St. John's Episcopal Church in Fallbrook.

Sanders was one of about 50 people to attend an interfaith security conference in August at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Poway hosted by the Anti-Defamation League.

Leaders from Christian churches, synagogues, Buddhist temples and the Church of Scientology learned about the importance of reporting suspicious behavior and forging relationships with local law enforcement.

Mary Ferro, the faith center liaison for North County-based Interfaith Community Services, helped organize the event.

“One faith center had people stealing out of purses while people were at Communion,” Ferro said. “One had break-ins in automobiles during a series of services. Another one had vandalism and teenagers using drugs or alcohol on the grounds.”

St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Rancho Peñasquitos has been burglarized twice in the past five months. Just two weeks ago, gardening equipment was stolen from an outdoor shed. Before that, a 45-pound bell made of copper and silver was stolen.

“We're vulnerable,” said Rector Wilfredo Crespo, who is buying security cameras for the property. “I think it's the worst thing you can do to a church community. We're here to help those who don't have work and try to support them.”

San Rafael Parish, a 3,000-family Catholic congregation in Rancho Bernardo, invested in a camera system a year ago after teenagers defaced the property with graffiti. Security guards now roam the grounds at night, paid for by the church and neighboring businesses.

Many local institutions say that while they cannot afford to hire security guards or buy sophisticated surveillance systems, they are using common sense and extra vigilance.

The Islamic Center of San Diego requested that police officers drive by more often and park in the center's lot when filling out reports.

“Whenever they get a chance, they pass by the Islamic Center,” said Imam Taha Hassane. “We feel very secure.”

Chabad at La Costa is coordinating with local police to prepare for the Westboro protesters, who are scheduled to picket the temple tonight.

“It's not going to be pleasant,” said Rabbi Yeruchem Eilfort, who alerted his congregation about the protesters a week ago and sent an e-mail reminding them not to engage with the demonstrators.

“Our Sabbath is a time when we're supposed to be engaged with God,” Eilfort said, “not a time to engage with people who hate us.”

Last year, 18 violent attacks took place in U.S. churches, said Vaughn Baker, owner of Strategos International of Grandview, Mo., which provides training for churches and law enforcement. This year, Baker has tallied 31 violent incidents so far based on FBI statistics and news reports.

That number is tiny among the nation's 375,000 churches. But Baker noted there are far greater numbers of burglaries, arsons, embezzlements and other crimes.

Responding with security measures can be prickly when congregants view the actions as a lack of faith.

“Some people say it's God's house and we're circumventing his will by hiring security officers,” said Jeff Hawkins, executive director of the Cincinnati-based Christian Security Network, a company that provides training for Christian churches. Those arguments are flawed, he said, because the Bible has references to be prepared against evil.

Security experts say churches are playing catch-up. A survey by the network last year showed that more than 75 percent of churches do not have security or emergency plans in place.

Hawkins said all religious institutions should be trained to deal with five scenarios: an evacuation, lockdown, medical emergency, shooter and missing children.

Mike Diggs, security director at The Rock Church, said he will beef up the volunteer presence Sunday, when Westboro protesters plan to picket.

Diggs, a retired police officer and detective, created the church's security ministry two years ago after a pastor was stalked and received suspicious packages. When the church took a stand in support of Proposition 8, the state constitutional amendment that banned same-sex marriage, it received about 100 calls, e-mails and letters a day, many of them threatening, Diggs said.

These days, in addition to the rigorous training for volunteers, the church pays for uniformed and armed security guards to patrol the lobby. Several congregants said they appreciate the investment.

“It can't hurt,” said Jaimee Anderson, 42, a caretaker from La Mesa. “It's just what the world is coming to.”

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