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In the wake of church shootings, more religious leaders are taking steps to safety

When it comes to protecting their flock, religious leaders increasingly have been forced to think beyond the spiritual.

Gun violence in recent years has shocked them into the reality of physical danger at places usually associated with peace and holiness. The latest was the shooting death of a Maryville, Ill., pastor during a service earlier this month. In the news last year were deadly shootings in churches in Clifton, N.J., and in Knoxville, Tenn.

"Most attacks that occur are after the service starts because that's when you have the greatest number of victims with limited mobility," said Vaughn Baker, a founder and president of Strategos International, based in Grandview.

Started in 2002, the company conducts training for law enforcement and military professionals throughout the country and abroad. Last year it began to offer church security courses.

"We have seen a pretty drastic increase in church shootings, from eight in 2007 to 18 in 2008," Baker said. "Because of this increase and we already have the expertise, it only made sense to add churches."

Rick Anderson, who co-founded Church Security Solutions in Salem, Ore., in 2007, said: "It used to be that attacks just didn't happen at the church. But as we saw that these attacks were increasing, we had a heart to see the church protected. Unfortunately, it was an emerging market."

For religious leaders, the dilemma is how to provide a safe worship environment without alarming people. A related concern is how much to make public.

The Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee holds workshops on security and does not make security provisions public.

"It is a sad reality that security must be an issue of concern to churches and synagogues today, but it is in nearly every public area," said Marvin Szneler, executive director of the organization. "The good news is we have very professional and competent law enforcement protection in our communities.

"That said, it brings a level of comfort and security to worshipers to know their congregation is dealing with their protection and that someone with bad intentions will be confronted by security and the long arm of the law."

Within the Catholic Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, parish staffs have discussed and developed security plans, said Rebecca Summers of the communications office.

"A major concern has been to balance the spirit of hospitality with a responsibility for the people who come to worship," she said. "While many parishes have taken great care to train ushers and greeters, some also use off-duty officers to be that watchful eye in the immediate area during services."

Also, many Catholic parishes rely on electronic monitoring, she said, as do other places of worship.

Surveillance cameras are used throughout the Islamic Center of Greater Kansas City, and there's an alarm system for the office, said manager Mustafa Hussein. The donation box is emptied every night, and no money is kept in the building, he said, adding, "We don't feel we need to do extra security at this time."

The Rev. Margaret Roberts is pastor of Swope Parkway United Christian Church in the 64130 ZIP code, which reportedly is home to the city's most murderers.

"We are on guard to watch out for each other," she said. "Our doors are secured during the week to protect employees. Only certain doors are open on Sunday, and men walk women to their cars after night events.

"I thought it could happen any place," she said about the Maryville shooting. "I could be killed or kidnapped any number of places. You take the necessary practical precautions, but beyond that it is a matter of faith."

Baker, of Strategos, points to Matthew 10:16 as the biblical basis for church security: "Behold, I send you forth as

sheep in the midst of wolves: Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”

“You pray for the best but be prepared for the worst,” he said.

Among the training his company offers is first aid and also hands-on practice for church greeters, ushers, parking attendants and security volunteers who might encounter intruders.

But even though church shootings make big news and concern church leaders, “We make them aware of other things they need to be concerned about that happen more frequently, such as robberies and sexual allegations,” Baker said. Therefore, broader church security consulting and training are offered.

Also recognizing areas of vulnerability, Anderson, of Church Security Solutions, suggests that congregations have a third party, such as his company, do a security audit.

“Most pastors are afraid if by having uniformed police officers that is going to be distracting and will elevate the anxiety of their people,” said Anderson, who worked in church administration for 18 years.

“Our model is one of flying under the radar,” he said. “Security doesn’t need to be obtrusive. ... There has to be a balance between the security provided and the openness that we have at the church.”

In addition to the security audit, Anderson suggests that congregations develop a volunteer safety and security team and train key staff and volunteers in what to look for in a threat.

“While everybody is in service, they can be the eyes,” he said. “They will be pro-active with people who may be coming in or wandering in during the service.”

He is nervous about parishioners firing weapons during a church incident because it could lead to legal action against the church.

“We would rather see law enforcement people carry their weapons,” he said. “They have the training and the expertise with weapons that will stand up in court.”

A police buddy of the Rev. Barry Young told him about Strategos’ intruder response seminar. Young is associate pastor at Crown Pointe Church (Assemblies of God) in Lee’s Summit and an Independence police department chaplain.

In the church’s quest to share the love of God with everyone, it may attract people who are hurting so badly that they try to hurt others, he said.

“The very word ‘pastor’ means to shepherd, and the shepherd is to protect the flock,” he said. “So I felt that our church needed to be ready for a major emergency.”

He and two church members, one a police officer and the other a former officer, attended the full day of intruder response training in November.

“The vast majority of churches are not ready for an active shooter emergency or a medical emergency,” Young said. “But I believe that if a church has the Strategos intruder plan in place or a plan similar to that, the vast majority of church security issues could be stopped.”

Since November the church has developed its security plan, which involves 12 people, half police officers and half civilians. It went into operation earlier this year.

“The church should be a safe place, and everyone should feel welcome,” Young said. “But if there are those who would come to do us harm, we have to prevent them from doing that.”

STRIKING A BALANCE

Congregational leaders have a new set of questions:

- How can we keep our places of worship safe without turning them into fortresses?
- How can we protect worshipers and staff without armed guards?
- How do we balance security measures with trusting in God?

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