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From the Los Angeles Times

BELIEFS

## Southern California churches prepare in case gun violence shows up at the altar

Made wary by recent events, church leaders are turning to security companies for help and even asking members to carry guns for security reasons.

By Kate Linthicum

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One Sunday in March, a man strode down the aisle of the First Baptist Church in Maryville, Ill., pulled out a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol and fired at the pastor.

The Rev. Fred Winters deflected the first bullet with his Bible, sending bits of it into the air like confetti. But the next three rounds hit Winters, killing him.

It wasn't the first church shooting of 2009 -- in February, a man knelt before a cross at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove and killed himself with a gun -- and it wasn't the last. This month, Dr. George Tiller, a Kansas physician who performed late-term abortions, was shot to death in the foyer of his Wichita church by an anti-abortion protester.

Violence in churches is on the rise, experts say.

As more shootings at houses of worship make headlines, churches around the country are stepping up security, training their staff on how to detect and confront violent assailants, and asking congregants with licenses to carry guns during services.

That's what brought 15 Southern California church leaders to Garden Grove last week to attend an "Interfaith Intruder Response" course.

"I think that we're living in a violent time and we have a duty to ensure the safety of our flock," said Fred Rodriguez, a senior pastor at Elsinore First Assembly in Lake Elsinore.

Rodriguez said he came to the seminar because he worries that church violence will get worse. "The Scripture says we're living the last days," the clergyman said. "A person doesn't have to look too far to see evidence."

"There are practical things we can do," he added, "and we let God take care of the rest."

The class, which met in a nondescript hotel conference room, was led by Vaughn Baker, who owns a security company called Strategos International. Baker is one of several church security consultants who travel the country like itinerant preachers, teaching seminars and writing up security plans for church leaders.

After an opening prayer, Baker offered some grim statistics. In the last decade, he said, 50 people were killed and 30 wounded in 35 church shootings. In 2007, there were six church shootings. In 2008, there were 18.

In most cases, the shooter was someone with a connection to the church.

"You guys know the world's not getting better," said Baker, who, along with many church security consultants, is a churchgoer and has a background in law enforcement. "We've got to protect ourselves. . . . The trick of it and the art of it is protecting the congregation and ministry without compromising their sense of worship and refuge and sanctuary."

Traditional security measures, like metal detectors or pat-downs, might compromise that sense of sanctuary, Baker said. So he proposed other, subtler methods. He suggested that churches organize undercover security teams -- and recommended that some members come armed with concealed weapons.

If violence breaks out at church, it could take minutes for even the fastest police and rescue crews to respond, Baker said, "and there's a whole lot of bad that can happen in two to three minutes."

Baker, like other security consultants, said churchgoers need to fight back instead of hiding if they're being attacked, as many students have been coached to do in the event of a school shooting. "If I'm going to get beat, I'm going to get beat doing something," Baker said. "I'm not going to get beat doing nothing."

Seminar attendees -- all men except for two women -- nodded as Baker spoke.

One attendee, Al Brown, of Abundant Living Family Church in Rancho Cucamonga, said the pastor at his church at first was reluctant to let parishioners carry firearms into services. But with some persuasion from Brown, the former police chief at UC Irvine, the pastor came around. "He saw what was happening around the country," Brown said.

Brown said he had attended three church security seminars. He said he did so in part because he worried that his church might be victimized because of its support for Proposition 8, the constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage.

Some of the churches that have been the scenes of recent shootings appear to have been targeted because of their stances on political issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion. Last year, a gunman who police said had a "stated hatred of the liberal movement" killed two people during a children's performance at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville because the church advocates for gay rights.

Other shootings have been acts of domestic violence that just happened to occur in a church. That was the case last year when a man shot and killed his estranged wife at St. Thomas Syrian Orthodox Knanaya Church in Clifton, N.J.

Synagogues and black churches, frequent targets of racial vandalism and violence, have long had security measures in place. Even so, some are now boosting their efforts in the wake of several high-profile hate crimes, including this month's shooting at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

"For us, it's an old threat that's just lifting its head again," said Paul Goldenberg, the director of the Secure Community Network, which provides security training to Jewish communities. "We have to do all we can."

No matter the shooter's motivation, churches are easy targets, experts say.

"During a church service, you've got a large number of people in a very confined and close space, and an armed gunman can put a lot of lead down the range in a very short amount of time," said Greg Crane, who owns a security consultant firm called Response Options.

"If the devil comes to visit someday," he asked, "how ready are you going to be?"

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