

HELPING TO MAKE A SAFE CHURCH SESSION I

Houses of worship are not immune from the tragedy of violence by a mentally ill person or a fanatical bigot. For example, in 2012, six people were killed and four injured in a shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, and in 2008, two people were killed and seven wounded at a Unitarian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee.

The problem for churches wishing to build a defense against violence is more complex than it is for some other institutions, for by their very nature, most religious organizations are based on the concept of peaceful reconciliation of differences. Christian churches, for example, claim to be devoted to the “Prince of Peace”, Jesus Christ. Jesus called his followers to turn the other cheek when threatened by violence, and epitomized non-violence even when faced by his own death.

For the first 300 years of its existence, the Church taught and practiced non-violence. When Constantine, in the fourth century A.D. became the first Roman Emperor to be converted to Christianity, he did so after a promise before the battle of the Mulvian Bridge – when he faced other pretenders to the throne – to convert if he won. After his victory, he not only claimed to be a Christian but ordered his army to be baptized. Contemporary accounts said that his soldiers entered the river to be baptized by Christian priests, but were careful to keep their weapons arm above water. They believed that if their fighting arm was baptized, they could no longer wage battle.

Of course, it was not long before that understanding changed, as even a nation ruled by a Christian Emperor needed not only an army but also a police force for protection, and protection needed more than prayers, it was thought.

Nonetheless, the notion of Christian non-violence was kept alive in various ways. For one thing, there was a legal protection given to church buildings: the idea of sanctuary. Reaching back to the Old Testament, sanctuary (from the word “sanctus” or “holy”) was a place where no soldier or police officer – even under orders by the king – could enter to arrest a person fleeing the power of government.

Reaching back to that ancient understanding of sanctuary being a holy place, some Christian denominations today – including the United Methodist Church – have declared all their church buildings to be a “gun-free” place. But in the face of a possibility of someone using a weapon in a church building (which might include not only guns by explosives, poison gas, or some other harmful device), churches are beginning to struggle with new questions.

Break into groups of no more than three members and discuss the following questions. Make sure that each person has a chance to express an opinion. Appoint one person to report back to the whole group after 20 minutes of discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Is your church a “holy place”? In what ways?
2. Should church buildings be declared “gun-free”? How would that deter someone determined to wreak violence there?
3. Would such a designation mean that members who were officers of the law could not wear their weapons into the church, even if required to do so by superior officers?
4. Should churches perhaps designate certain members – for instance, ushers – to be trained in the proper use of weapons and given authority to have those weapons available when worship or church school is being done?

After each group has made its report, have the whole group discuss the following question:

5. How should we interpret the teachings of Jesus in order to allow for self-protection or for protection of the weak and innocent? What New Testament passages could be used for answering this?

Close the session with this prayer:

O Lord, our God, whose Son, Jesus, was a victim of violence on a cross, look with compassion upon all folks involved in shootings this week in America and around the world.

Comfort those traumatized by these horrendous events.

Wrap your everlasting arms around those who mourn.

Heal those persons and families whose hearts and minds are terrorized.

Grant wisdom and strength to those medical personnel who minister to the wounded.

Protect law enforcement officers who risk their lives for our safety.

Calm all whose memories of violence are triggered by new reports of shooting.

Bring the gunmen to repentance and redemption, and deal tenderly with their confused families and friends.

Hear our cries of lament as we seek to understand the incomprehensible, and deliver us from the evil of violence in any form.

Through Christ we pray.

Amen.

SESSION II

In 2013, the Annual Conference session of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference of the United Methodist Church passed a comprehensive resolution entitled “ A Christian Response to Violence”. Among other things, it proposed the following:

8. We need a dialogue about the violence-obsessed culture in our nation. Surely the excessive depiction of violence in our mass media (movies, TV, video games, etc.) has an impact on our children and youth.

9. Churches need to initiate dialogue within their own congregation and in their own community about gun safety, violence prevention, and what adults can do to help keep our children safe. It is notable that General Conference in 2008 officially declared all United Methodist congregations as a gun-free zone, but little has been publicized about that declaration, even in those churches.

10. Pastors need to take leadership in their teaching role to help the congregation and community enter a dialogue about a wide-spread ideology in our nation that peace and justice can only be secured by violence (e.g. “guns keep us safe”, “What makes America great is God, Guts, and Guns”, “the only answer for a bad man with a gun is a good man with a gun”, etc.) We need to explore time-tested methods of non-violent resistance to evil advocated by such prophets as Gandhi and M. L. King, Jr., for example, while also discussing the insights of “realism” promoted by such thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr. Let’s also draw on resources from our brothers and sisters in the Friends (Quaker), Mennonite and Brethren traditions.

Most of all, we need to more deeply explore the teachings of the Prince of Peace. It is difficult to imagine that our Lord would have called his followers to load up with weapons in order to face threats. What is the role of prayer and redemptive love in dealing with violence in our nation and world?

11. Churches and educators should come together with law enforcement officials to discuss issues of keeping our children, schools, and churches safe from gun violence. In most communities, the police are already aware of many individuals most likely to be a danger, and they need our support as they risk their lives on our behalf.

12. Churches and health care professionals also need to come together to discuss plans for helping children, families, and communities cope in the wake of publicized mass killings in schools and other public places. We need to avoid traumatizing our children. We can surely reassure them without ignoring the reality of danger in the world.

Break into groups of no more than three members and discuss the following questions. Make sure that each person has a chance to express an opinion. Appoint one person to report back to the whole group after 20 minutes of discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Do the ideas quoted above make sense to you? Are they practical?
2. Americans are blessed with certain basic rights, including the right to own and bear arms under certain defined limits. Do the ideas expressed in the conference resolution interfere with Americans' constitutional rights? If so, how?
3. Which suggestion in the resolution could be implemented in your congregation? If more than one, with which one would you begin?

After each group has reported back to the whole gathering, discuss any suggestions for implementation and identify the proper church committees to approach with these suggestions.

End with the following prayer:

Eternal God, our Rock and our Salvation:

Renew our nation and world in the ways of justice and peace.

Guide those who make and administer our laws so they may lead us to build a society based on trust and respect.

Erase prejudices that oppress others and imprison those who hold them.

Free us from crime and violence, from bullying and prejudice.

Guard our youth from the perils of drugs and materialism, and from the peer pressures that force them into gangs and violent behavior.

Give all our citizens a new vision of a life of harmony and the common good.

Teach us the proper balance between rights and responsibilities.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

For the coming week, assign each member of the class to read the entirety of session three's FEMA guidelines, with an eye to discussing how best to implement its suggestions in the local church.

SESSION III

See the following for practical ideas offered by the Federal Government for churches to develop a plan for protection of their members, children and visitors.

Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship (developed from a document provided by FEMA)

A Closer Look: Active Shooter Situations

Police officers, firefighters, and EMS (i.e., first responders) who come to a house of worship because of a 911 call involving gunfire face a daunting task. Though the objective—protect congregants—remains the same, the threat of an active shooter incident is different from responding to a natural disaster or other emergencies.

Active shooter situations are defined as those where an individual is “actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area.”

The better first responders and those working and visiting a house of worship are able to discern these threats and react swiftly, the more lives can be saved. This is particularly true in an active shooter situation, where law enforcement responds to a 911 call of shots fired. Many innocent lives are at risk in a concentrated area. Working with emergency management officials and community partners, houses of worship can develop a plan to better prepare their staff and congregants in prevention, reaction, and response to an active shooter incident.

Active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. Because of this, individuals must be prepared to deal with an active shooter situation before law enforcement arrives on the scene.

Preparing for an Active Shooter Incident Planning

As with any threat or hazard that is included in a house of worship’s EOP (Emergency Operating Plan), the planning team will establish goals, objectives, and courses of action for an active shooter annex. These plans will be affected by the assessments conducted at the outset of the planning process and updated as ongoing assessments occur. As courses of action are developed, the planning team should consider a number of issues, including, but not limited to:

- How to evacuate or lockdown personnel and visitors. Personnel involved in such planning should pay attention to disability-related accessibility concerns when advising on shelter sites and evacuation routes
- How to evacuate when the primary evacuation routes are unusable - How to select effective shelter-in-place locations (optimal locations have thick walls, solid doors with locks, minimal interior windows, first aid-emergency kits, communication devices and duress alarms)
- How those present in buildings and on the ground will be notified that there is an active shooter incident underway. This could be done using familiar terms, sounds, lights, and electronic communications, such as text messages or emails. Include in the courses of action how to communicate with those who have language barriers or need other accommodations, such as visual signals to communicate with hearing-impaired individuals. Planners should make sure this protocol is readily available and understood by those who may be responsible for sending out or broadcasting an announcement. Rapid notification of a threat can save lives by keeping people out of harm’s way.

The planning team should consider the following when developing their goals, objectives, and courses of action:

- What supplies will be needed to seal the room and to provide for personal needs (e.g., water)
- How shelter-in-place can affect individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs, such as persons who require the regular administration of medication, durable medical equipment, and personal assistant services
- How to move persons when the primary route is unusable
- How to locate and move children who are not with a parent or guardian
- How everyone will know when buildings and grounds are safe.

The planning team may want to include functions in the active shooter annex that are also addressed in other functional annexes. For example, evacuation will be different during an active shooter situation than it would be for a fire.

Additional considerations are included in the “Responding to an Active Shooter Incident” and “After an Active Shooter Incident” sections below.

Sharing Information with First Responders

The planning process is not complete until the house of worship’s EOP is shared with first responders. The planning process should include preparing and making available to first responders an up-to-date and well-documented site assessment as well as any other information that would assist them. These materials should include building schematics and photos of the buildings, both inside and out, and include information about door and window locations, as well as locks and access controls. Emergency responders should also have advance information on where individuals with disabilities are likely to be sheltering or escaping, generally in physically accessible locations or along accessible routes. Building strong partnerships with law enforcement, fire, and EMS includes ensuring they also know the location of available public address systems, two-way communications systems, security cameras, and alarm controls. Equally important is information on access to utility controls, medical supplies, and fire extinguishers.

Providing detailed information to first responders allows them to rapidly move through buildings and the grounds during an emergency; to ensure areas are safe; and to tend to those in need. It is critically important to share this information with law enforcement and other first responders before an emergency occurs so that they have immediate access to the information. Law enforcement agencies have secure Web sites where these items already are stored for many schools, business, public venues, and other locations. All of these can be provided to first responders and viewed in drills, exercises, and walkthroughs.

Technology and tools with the same information (e.g., a portable USB drive that is compatible with computers used by first responders) should be maintained in secured locations in the building where designated staff for the house of worship can immediately provide it to responding officials, or where first responders can directly access it. The locations of these materials should be known by and accessible to a number of individuals to ensure ready access in an emergency. Every house of worship should have more than one individual charged with meeting first responders to provide them with the site assessment, the EOP, and any other details about facility safety or concerns.

Exercises

Evacuation drills for fires and protective measures for tornadoes may be part of routine activities for a house of worship, but far fewer facilities practice for active shooter situations. To

be prepared for an active shooter incident, houses of worship should train their staff and congregation, as appropriate, in what to expect and how to react.

Good planning includes conducting drills that involve first responders. Exercises with these valuable partners are one of the most effective and efficient ways to ensure that everyone knows not only their role, but also the role of others at the scene. These exercises should include walks through buildings to allow law enforcement to provide input on shelter sites as well as familiarize first responders with the location.

Each person carries a responsibility that is three-fold:

1. Learn the signs of a potentially volatile situation and ways to prevent an incident.
2. Learn the best steps for survival when faced with an active shooter situation.
3. Be prepared to work with law enforcement during the response.

Preventing an Active Shooter Incident

Warning Signs

No profile exists for an active shooter; however, research indicates there may be signs or indicators. Leaders and staff in houses of worship counsel congregants on a daily basis as part of their work. Law enforcement can assist in knowing the signs of a potentially volatile situation and help houses of worship proactively seek ways to prevent an incident from escalating.

By highlighting common pre-attack behaviors displayed by past offenders, Federal researchers have sought to enhance the detection and prevention of tragic attacks of violence, including active shooting incidents. Several agencies within the Federal Government continue to explore incidents of targeted violence in the effort to identify these potential “warning signs.” In 2002, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published a monograph on workplace violence, including problematic behaviors of concern that may telegraph violent ideations and plans.

Specialized units in the Federal Government (such as the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit) continue to support behaviorally-based operational assessments of persons of concern in a variety of settings (e.g. schools, workplaces, houses of worship) who appear to be on a trajectory toward a catastrophic violent act. A review of current research, threat assessment literature, and active shooting incidents, combined with the extensive case experience of the Behavioral Analysis Unit, suggest that there are observable pre-attack behaviors which, if recognized, could lead to the disruption of a planned attack.

While checklists of various “warning signs” are often of limited use in isolation, there are some behavioral indicators that should prompt further exploration and attention from law enforcement and/or house of worship officials. These behaviors often include:

- Development of a personal grievance
- Contextually inappropriate and recent acquisitions of multiple weapons
- Contextually inappropriate and recent escalation in target practice and weapons training
- Contextually inappropriate and recent **interest in explosives**
- Contextually inappropriate and intense interest or fascination with previous shootings or **mass attacks**
- Many offenders experienced a significant real or perceived personal loss in the weeks and/or months leading up to the attack, such as a death, breakup, divorce, or loss of a job
- Few offenders had previous arrests for violent crimes.

No research has been conducted on individuals solely engaged in active shooting incidents at houses of worship; however, the behaviors listed above may be useful in identifying some of the behaviors of individuals of potential concern.

Threat Assessment Teams

As described in the previous section, research shows that perpetrators of targeted acts of violence engage in both covert and overt behaviors preceding their attacks. They consider, plan, prepare, share, and, in some cases, move on to action. A useful tool to identify, evaluate, and address these troubling signs is the creation of a multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Team (TAT) for the house of worship.¹⁶ The TAT serves as a central convening body, so that warning signs observed by multiple people are not considered isolated incidents, slipping through the cracks, when they actually may represent escalating behavior that is a serious concern. TATs should keep in mind, however, the importance of relying on facts (including observed behavior) and avoid unfair labeling or stereotyping of individuals to remain in compliance with civil rights laws, when applicable.

Although not as common in private industry or in religious establishments, TATs are increasingly common in college and university settings, pushed to the forefront of concern following the 2007 shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, where 32 individuals were killed. In some cases, state funding mandates that institutions of higher learning create TATs.¹⁷ Houses of worship may also want to create TATs. The Departments offer the following recommendations for the creation and operation of TATs, although they fully recognize that houses of worship may differ in their approaches to certain issues.

For the purposes of consistency and efficiency, a TAT should be developed and implemented in coordination with other policy and practices for the organization. A TAT with diverse representation often will operate more efficiently and effectively. TAT members may include the leaders or administrators of the house of worship, counselors, staff, congregants, and medical and mental health professionals, who may be drawn from the congregation.

TATs review troubling or threatening behavior of persons brought to the attention of the TAT. TATs contemplate a holistic assessment and management strategy that considers the many aspects of the person's life. More than focusing on warning signs or threats alone, a TAT assessment involves a unique overall analysis of changing and relevant behaviors. The TAT takes into consideration, as appropriate, information about behaviors; communications; any threats made; security concerns; family issues; or relationship problems that might involve a troubled individual. The TAT may also identify any potential victims with whom the individual may interact. Once the TAT identifies an individual that may pose a threat, the team will identify a course of action for addressing the situation. The appropriate course of action, whether law enforcement intervention, counseling, or other actions, will depend on the specifics of the situation.

The TAT may wish to seek assistance from law enforcement that can help assess reported threats or troubling behavior and tap available Federal resources (as part of the TAT process or separately). The FBI's behavioral experts in its National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes (NCAVC) at Quantico, Virginia are available on a 24 hours per day, seven days per week basis to join in any threat assessment analysis and develop threat mitigation strategies for persons of concern. Law enforcement working with a TAT from a house of worship should contact the local FBI office for this behavioral analysis assistance.

Each FBI field office has a NCAVC representative available to work with the house of worship TAT and coordinate access to the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit, if the congregation wishes. They focus not on how to respond tactically to an active shooter situation, but rather on how to prevent one. Early intervention can prevent a situation from escalating by identifying, assessing, and managing the threat.

Houses of worship should also work with local law enforcement to gain an understanding of the threats from outside the house of worship community that may affect the facility, so that, in partnership, appropriate security measures can be established.

Generally, active shooter situations are not motivated by other criminal-related concerns such as monetary gain or gang affiliation. Often, violence may be prevented by identifying, assessing, and managing potential threats. Recognizing these pre-attack warning signs and indicators might help disrupt a potentially tragic event.

Responding to an Active Shooter Incident

The house of worship's EOP should include courses of action that will describe how congregants and staff can most effectively respond to an active shooter situation to minimize the loss of life, and teach and train on these practices.

Law enforcement officers may not be present when a shooting begins. Providing information on how congregants and staff can respond to the incident can help prevent and reduce the loss of life.

No single response fits all active shooter situations; however, making sure each individual knows his or her options for response and can react decisively will save valuable time. Depicting scenarios and considering response options in advance will assist individuals and groups in quickly selecting their best course of action. Understandably, this is a sensitive topic. There is no single answer for what to do, but a survival mindset can increase the odds of surviving. As appropriate for the house of worship's congregation, it may be valuable to schedule a time for an open conversation regarding this topic. Though some congregants or staff may find the conversation uncomfortable, they may also find it reassuring to know that as a whole their house of worship is thinking about how best to deal with this situation.

During an active shooter situation, the natural human reaction, even for those who are highly trained, is to be startled; feel fear and anxiety; and even experience initial disbelief and denial. Noise from alarms, gunfire, explosions, and people shouting and screaming should be expected. Training provides the means to regain composure, recall at least some of what has been learned, and commit to action. There are three basic response options: run, hide, or fight. Individuals can run away from the shooter; seek a secure place where they can hide and/or deny the shooter access; or incapacitate the shooter in order to survive and protect others from harm.

As the situation develops, it is possible that congregants and staff will need to use more than one option. During an active shooter situation, these individuals will rarely have all of the information they need to make a fully informed decision about which option is best. While they should follow the plan and any instructions given during an incident, they will often have to rely on their own judgment to decide which option will best protect lives.

Respond Immediately

It is common for people confronted with a threat to first deny the possible danger rather than respond. An investigation by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (2005) into the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001 found that people close to the affected floors waited longer to start evacuating than those on unaffected floors. Similarly, during the Virginia Tech shooting, individuals on campus responded to the shooting with varying degrees of urgency. These studies support this delayed response or denial. For example, some people report hearing firecrackers, when in fact they heard gunfire. Train congregants and staff to skip denial and to respond immediately.

For example, train congregants to recognize the sounds of danger, act, and forcefully communicate the danger and necessary action (e.g., "Gun! Get out!"). In addition, those closest to a communications system should communicate the danger and necessary action. Repetition in training and preparedness shortens the time it takes to orient, observe, and act. Upon recognizing the danger, as soon as it is safe to do so staff or others should alert responders by contacting 911 with as clear and accurate information as possible.

Run

If it is safe to do so, the first course of action that should be taken is to run out of the building and far away until in a safe location. Congregants and staff should be trained to:

- Leave personal belongings behind
- Visualize possible escape routes, including physically accessible routes for individuals with disabilities
- Avoid escalators and elevators
- Take others with them, but do not stay behind because others will not go
- Call 911 when safe to do so
- Let a responsible adult know where they are.

Hide

If running is not a safe option, hide in as safe a place as possible. Congregants and staff should be trained to hide in a location where the walls might be thicker and have fewer windows. In addition:

- Lock the doors
- Barricade the doors with heavy furniture
- Close and lock windows and close blinds or cover windows
- Turn off lights
- Silence all electronic devices
- Remain silent
- If possible, use strategies to silently communicate with first responders; for example, in rooms with exterior windows, make signs to silently signal law enforcement and emergency responders to indicate the status of the room's occupants
- Hide along the wall closest to the exit but out of the view from the hallway (allowing for an ambush of the shooter and for possible escape if the shooter enters the room)
- Remain in place until given an all clear by identifiable law enforcement.

Fight

If neither running nor hiding is a safe option, as a last resort, when confronted by the shooter, adults in immediate danger should consider trying to disrupt or incapacitate the shooter by using aggressive force and items in their environment, such as fire extinguishers or chairs. In a study of 41 active shooter events that ended before law enforcement arrived, the potential victims stopped the attacker themselves in 16 instances. In 13 of those cases, they physically subdued the attacker.

While talking to the congregation and staff about confronting a shooter may be daunting and upsetting for some, they should know that they might be able to successfully take action to save lives. How each individual chooses to respond if directly confronted by an active shooter is up to him or her. Each house of worship should determine, as part of its planning process, policies on the control and presence of weapons, as permitted by law.

Interacting with First Responders

If a shooting occurs, congregants and staff should be trained to understand and expect that law enforcement's first priority must be to locate and stop the person or persons believed to be the shooter(s); all other actions are secondary. One comprehensive study found that in more than half of mass shooting incidents where a solo officer arrived on the scene (57 percent) shooting was still underway when the officer arrived. In 75 percent of those instances, that solo officer had to confront the perpetrator to end the threat. In those cases, the officer was shot one-third of the time.

Congregants and staff should be trained to cooperate and not to interfere with first responders. They should display empty hands with open palms and anticipate that law enforcement may instruct everyone to place their hands on their heads or get on the ground.

After an Active Shooter Incident

Once the scene is secured, first responders will work with house of worship staff and victims on a variety of matters. This will include transporting the injured, interviewing witnesses, and initiating the investigation.

The house of worship's EOP should identify trained personnel who will provide assistance to victims and their families. This should include establishing an incident response team (including community partners) that is trained to appropriately assess and triage an active shooter situation (as well as other emergencies), and provide emergency intervention services and victim assistance beginning immediately after the incident and throughout the recovery efforts. This team will integrate with local, state, and Federal resources when an emergency occurs.

Within an ongoing and/or evolving emergency, where the immediate reunification of loved ones is not possible, providing family members with timely, accurate, and relevant information is paramount. Having family members wait for long periods for information about their loved ones not only adds to their stress and frustration, but can also escalate the emotions of the entire group. When families are reunited, it is critical that there are child release processes in place where minors might be involved (e.g., childcare, religious classes) to assure that no child is released to an unauthorized person, even if that person well meaning.

Essential steps to help establish trust and provide family members with a sense of control can be accomplished by:

- Identifying a safe location separate from distractions and/or media and the general public, but close enough to allow family members to feel connected in proximity to their children/loved ones
- Scheduling periodic updates even if no additional information is available
- Being prepared to speak with family members about what to expect when reunified with their child/loved ones

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Are these suggestions from FEMA practical for your church?
2. Should a Christian try to physically restrain a threatening person as suggested in the section above entitled “fight”? How far should he or she use force in doing so?
3. Should your church have a plan for dealing with the possibility of one or more persons threatening your church with violence?
4. How should your church get started on such a plan? Who should be involved in the decision-making?

End with this prayer:

O God, you love justice and you establish peace on earth.

We bring before you the disunity of our nation and world today:

the absurd violence depicted in so many of our popular games and media; the many wars which are breaking the courage of the peoples of the world; militarism and the armaments race, which are threatening life on the planet; and human greed and injustice, which breed hatred and strife.

We lift before you our concern for the young people of our community and nation; save them from following the wrong influences, from despair and loneliness, and from the temptation to end their own lives or to wreak violence on others.

Send your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.

Teach us to be compassionate toward the whole human family;

Strengthen the will of all those who fight for justice and for peace;

Lead all nations into the path of peace, and give us that peace which the world cannot give. For it's in the name of the Prince of Peace we ask it all:

Amen.