

Churches and gun violence: 7 practical preparation tips

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Gunshots rocked yet another church over the weekend. Sunday services in Sutherland Springs, Texas turned into a bloodbath, with at least 27 dead. Before that horrifying incident, the folks of this small town felt protected by their rural setting. But as we're discovering, even those things don't prevent gun violence from unfolding.

What's a church to do? I want to share with you seven practical tips from Rev. Derrek Belase, a former certified police officer turned pastor, with two degrees in criminology. He is now the Director of Discipleship of the Oklahoma Annual Conference. His current portfolio includes coordinating the Safe Sanctuary Training.

Derrek believes that you can't completely prevent gun violence from erupting. Even with the best laid plans or the best legislation. Then what? How can a church adequately protect itself? Here are seven practical tips that can help any church prepare for the unexpected.

1. Establish relationships with the first responders and other key people in your community. Get to know the sheriff, chief of police, chief of the fire department as well as the mayor and county commissioners. Let them get to know you and exchange cell phone numbers. That way, they'll know if they get a call from you on a Sunday morning, it's a bonafide emergency. That doesn't mean you shouldn't call 911 if violence or threats of violence break out in your sanctuary. But also call them.
2. Invite them to come tour the church buildings. Let them see the lay of the land, and the way your buildings are set up. If they have a mental picture of your facilities, they'll be able to respond with foreknowledge, if the need should arise.
3. Be sure to have ushers, as well as greeters. Greeters can keep an eye out for folks who may look troubled. They can alert the pastor, or if need be, the authorities. Once worship begins, greeters are seated. That's when ushers take over. Once ushers are done seating people, they can serve as a vital link between the worshipping congregation in the sanctuary with its closed doors and the outside world. They can walk down the hall to the nursery and make sure everything's okay there. They can keep an eye out for stragglers, suspicious looking folks or someone with a gun. Make sure they can access the church office and a landline phone if need be.
4. Consider the layout of the building and the property, and what might happen if... How far is the nursery from the sanctuary? Do they have a landline where they could make phone calls out? Do you have a landline in the sanctuary? Do cell phones work in the sanctuary? Do you have a lot of doors that are unnecessarily open during worship? Are there places outside that people could hide? Your first responders can give you helpful feedback on that.
5. Does your church building have an accurate sign on it so first responders can respond quickly? You may be known as First Church to your own people, the Methodist church to the larger community and the downtown community church with the big spire to the neighborhood locals. Make sure your sign matches your website, Facebook page and bulletin. Also, make sure you have your street address handy. That's how ambulances will find you.
6. Resist bringing in a security expert. They'll suggest things most churches can't afford, whether that's a security guard or metal detectors, which will ratchet up expectations and fears. Instead, make these practical moves.
7. Focus on what you're there to do: preach the gospel, build the Kingdom, help people grow spiritually, connect with the community and with God, give hope, share love, pray and practice the presence of Christ.

For more solutions, check out [FEMA's resource](#) for protecting your house of worship. As in football where offense is the best defense, there are additional ways churches and other communities of faith can respond. Next week we'll

look at how to shift our larger culture which gives rise to lone, aggressive shooters.

In the meantime, let's do more than send our thoughts and prayers. Let's make sure our own houses are in order.