

## Violence in Places of Worship

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The ink on my paper has barely dried and already another mass tragedy, another mass shooting has rocked the nation and claimed the lives of 26 and injured at least 20 more in a church in Texas:

Twenty-six people are confirmed dead in what is now being called the deadliest mass shooting in Texas history, after a gunman opened fire at a Baptist church Sunday afternoon.

At least 20 others were injured in the shooting at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs outside San Antonio, Texas Department of Public Safety Regional Commander Freeman Martin said. They range in age from 5 to 72 years and are being treated at several San Antonio area hospitals for minor and critical injuries, Freeman said.

<http://www.statesman.com/news/local/breaking-dead-mass-shooting-texas-church-comal-county-resident-named-gunman/6gcfUv96HO2AUzvTpNGR6O/>

Preliminary info about the shooter, Devin Kelley:

Officials said Kelley lived in a suburb of San Antonio. Authorities are investigating Kelley's social media posts possibly made in the days prior to the attack on the church, including one that appeared to feature a weapon. He does not appear to be linked to organized terrorist groups. Authorities said it was unclear whether he was part of any militia groups.

<http://time.com/5010945/devin-kelley/>

He had served in the Air Force at a base in New Mexico, but was court-martialed in 2012 on charges of assaulting his wife and child. He was sentenced to 12 months' confinement and received a "bad conduct" discharge in 2014, according to Ann Stefanek, the chief of Air Force media operations.

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/mobile.nytimes.com/2017/11/05/us/church-shooting-texas.amp.html>

Violent incidents in places of worship have been a source of concern for quite some time in the U.S. See *An American History of Violence in Places of Worship*:

- <http://www.myajc.com/news/church-violence/>

The violence in Charlottesville occurred less than three months ago, and many religious leaders reacted to the violence. The ramming incident in which a car plowed into a crowd of people killed one counter-protester, 32-year-old Heather Heyer, and injured at least 19 other people who were sent to the hospital.

- <https://www.google.com/amp/6abc.com/amp/a-timeline-of-events-in-charlottesville-virginia/2305769/>

The incident took place only 200 feet from a synagogue:

Alan Zimmerman, president of the Congregation Beth Israel in the Virginia town, wrote a blog post published on Monday evening following the violent scenes on Saturday that resulted in a car-ramming attack that took place just 200 feet from the place of worship.

He described the fear he felt in the presence of white supremacists, who rallied around anti-Semitic slogans, as 40 members of the community prayed in the synagogue, without support from the local authorities.

<https://www.google.com/amp/www.newsweek.com/charlottesville-police-refused-protect-synagogue-nazis-so-it-hired-armed-651260%3famp=1>

What to do with the natural ensuing fear after a crime of such magnitude? In a place of worship, where people go to celebrate their religious beliefs and expect to feel secure and be embraced by the love and friendship of other worshippers? Should parents send their children to religious services or religious education? Should the family stop going to their religious institutions? How much avoidance will we see? What will the ensuing emotional trauma be like for survivors, families of victims, the community, and, indeed, the nation? For how long? And what derivative fears and behavioral changes will we see (e.g. polyphobic reactions; PTSD & co-occurring disorders; other anxiety disorders)?

What can be done to enhance security? Places of worship tend to be more vulnerable because they are more open and accessible to the public. One doesn't expect to see security guards posted at entrances and have to go through metal detectors.

There are things to consider, for instance:

- Set up a watch program
- Create a safety and security team
- Monitor, document, and communicate issues of concern

- Establish contact with local authorities and request surveillance on special occasions (holiday celebrations & high volume worship events) and to help provide safety training
- Install a panic button
- Lock doors not in use and when the facility is closed
- Limit number of accessible entrances
- As with other businesses, stay on top of and monitor internal, perimeter, and external security needs
- Know floor plans
- Know location of emergency and first aid equipment
- Evacuation plan
- Alarm system
- Limited cash on premises
- Valuables locked (use decorative gates; etc.)
- Safeguard resources (computers; instruments; etc.)
- Smoke detectors
- Sprinkler system
- Motion activated light sensors
- Protect windows
- Fencing: good condition; inspected routinely
- Area around religious establishment well maintained, free of debris
- Night lights (inside and outside)
- Shrubs/trees trimmed
- If possible, have worshippers greeted
- Consider using unobtrusive cameras
- Have guidelines for usage of the religious facility
- Routinely inspect the premises (inside & outside)

Risk management is a highly complex field and specialized industry and there are many companies that specialize in security.

See the training model implemented by a security firm employed by the First Church of Nazarene:

Workplace violence continues to push organizations and businesses around the country to step up their security but for places of worship, security can pose different challenges.

"It does not matter where or the size of your town or the denomination. It happens everywhere," said Galen Womack, the chief security officer at First Church of the Nazarene.

The guidelines are based off a presidential secret service three-ring model, Womack said.

The first ring starts with a focus outside the building, making sure anyone who shouldn't be allowed in gets in.

The second ring focuses immediately inside the front door and around the hallways.

Finally, the third ring involves keeping the sanctuary safe, specifically the worship leader and children.

Getting organized is the first step, Womack said. Being prepared can cost little to no money.

"Big bulky coat in August. That's a big no no. Big backpacks, people that we don't know; they're not allowed to just walk down to the front of the church in the middle of the service," Womack said. "We keep seats open in the back row, 'tell 'em we're glad you're here but we prefer that you not interrupt the service and we've got a seat right here for you."

There's also a specific program used to keep children safe during services, called Kid Safe.

Kid Safe is a check-in system used when kids are dropped off in the classrooms during church.

Each child has an account set up with a list of names of people who can check them in and out. A bar code sticker that is only good for that morning is printed.

One sticker goes on the child's back and the other is given to a guardian. That guardian is the only person allowed to pick the child up after the service is over.

<https://www.google.com/amp/ksn.com/2017/03/03/local-churches-train-to-combat-violence-in-places-of-worship/amp/>

What kind of person can do something like this? Predicting who can become violent is so very difficult. In this particular instance, the shooter, as was the case with the Las Vegas mass shooting, is dead. Authorities already have launched a painstaking investigation looking for answers. Looking now towards prevention, threat assessment including needs assessment and implementing risk management tools and strategies in places of worship and educating the public is something that leaders of religious institutions can learn about and work on to help safeguard their worshippers.