

Texas church massacre a wake-up call for houses of worship

BY [JOEL GRIFFIN](#) ON NOV 7, 2017



The sheer carnage of the mass shooting at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, with victims ranging in age from 18 months to 77 years, combined with the relatively small size of the church itself, may be enough to spur all faith-based organizations – churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. – to implement a comprehensive security program.

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Following [Sunday's shooting at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas](#), that left 26 people dead and 20 others wounded, questions immediately began to swirl – as they typically do following active shooter events – about what houses of worship need to do to mitigate similar incidents moving forward. After all, mass shootings at churches are not unprecedented. Just two years ago, nine people were shot to death by a white supremacist during a bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Unfortunately, experts say that after the memories of these events begin to fade from the limelight, so does the resolve of church leaders to address security vulnerabilities and attitudes of , “it can’t happen here,” start to creep back in to the consciousness of pastors and congregations alike. However, the sheer carnage of the Sutherland shooting with victims ranging in age from 18 months to 77 years combined with the relatively small size of the church itself, may be enough to spur all faith-based organizations – churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. – to implement a comprehensive security program.

“I think this shooting will have a major impact. The last (church) shooting was in Charleston and that had a major impact and it got people interested in security but people tend to fall back into old habits,” says Jim McGuffey, owner of A.C.E. Security Consultants and the chairman of ASIS International's Houses of Worship committee, which is a part of the organization's Cultural Properties Council. “This time, I really think this has got to capture everyone’s attention and I think you’re going to see more churches and faith-based organizations that are going to become much more interested in safety and security for their places of worship.”

Doug Meacham, the incoming chairman of the aforementioned Houses of Worship committee for 2018 and a former CSO for several megachurches, says his thoughts and prayers are with all of those who have been impacted by this tragedy and he hopes the incident serves as a wake-up call for churches of all sizes moving forward that they need to have some kind of safety and security team and plan in place.

“This type of violence can happen anywhere in America within thousands of houses of worship,” he says. “The issue is that a lot of times houses of worship look to law enforcement to handle this type of situation but the unfortunately reality is that law enforcement arrives after the damage has been done, so they really need to come to an understanding that they bear the responsibility of protecting their congregants and they are the first line of defense against acts of violence.”

Risk Assessments Are Paramount

The first and most important step that McGuffey says houses of worship need to take is to conduct a comprehensive security risk assessment of their facilities to evaluate the security program and protection systems that are currently in place or not in place, along with the various vulnerabilities, threats and hazards that could impact their assets – people, processes, information, property, equipment, etc. After that is completed, McGuffey says they will have a better idea of what cost-effective countermeasures they can implement to mitigate their risks.

Meacham says that houses of worship need to get buy-in from their executive and/or leadership teams regarding the need for creating a safety and security plan and to reach out to either industry professionals or consult the numerous free resources available online to help them conduct a risk assessment and develop a plan that adequately addresses their risks.

“They need to develop, enact and review the plan on a regular basis. Specifically as it relates to active shooter, the first thing they can do is communicate potential threats to houses of worship safety and security team members and law enforcement. That would be a good first step,” Meacham adds. “Fostering a relationship with a local police department to maybe do drive-bys at their house or worship or stop in during service for coffee or maybe attend service would be something they could do immediately.”

Meacham says that limiting entrance points to a single area where security can better concentrate their efforts is also a good idea along with leveraging concentric rings of security, which could entail having security personnel or parking attendants outside a facility who could interact with colleagues inside via radio communications. This would enable them to more easily implement lockdown procedures in the event of an emergency.

Patrick Fiel, founder of PVF Security Consulting, also encourages houses of worship not to take a “cookie-cutter” approach to securing their facilities as every campus is unique and presents its own set of challenges. In addition to conducting a risk assessment, Fiel encourages faith-based organizations to; initiate a safety and security committee of congregation members; evaluate their current emergency crisis plans and make changes that reflect changes in the threat environment; look into deploying various security technologies where they make sense; and, if possible, enter into a written agreement with local law enforcement to have a full-time, uniformed deputy or officer assigned to them during all service hours or even hire off-duty officers to work a security detail. “It takes the entire community to really make a difference,” Fiel says.

Balancing Openness with Security

As with many other soft targets, churches and houses of worship have a need to be open while also trying to protect themselves, not only against active shooters but other criminal acts as well. This is perhaps the greatest challenge in faith-based organizations which want to be seen as welcoming to all people.

“There’s that real challenge there of having a safety and security team in place and also coming off as not warm and welcoming because it can raise fears or maybe they feel like it might make congregants worried to attend there,” explains Meacham. “My thought is that they protect their congregants against fire and burglary and they should also be prepared to protect congregants against acts of violence.”

Aside from the financial resources that are required to implement more robust security programs and technology, McGuffey says faith-based organizations must also deal with the perception that they’re not trusting in God enough when it comes to their security. “Faith-based organizations are concerned, I think, with what their parishioners will think of them because they are not relying on God for protection,” he says.

Emerging Threats

Although the threats presented to houses of worship by active shooters have been well demonstrated, McGuffey believes that leaders of all of faiths and Christian churches, in particular, need to be prepared for attacks by potential ISIS sympathizers, such as the various self-radicalized individuals who have carried out vehicle ramming attacks and other shootings/stabbings in recent months, and even actual terrorists operatives within the U.S.

“We know ISIS is here. Former FBI Director James Comey said a couple of years ago that [ISIS is here in all 50 states](#)... and open source information makes it obvious that ISIS and al Qaida are looking to attack and focus on Christians,” McGuffey says. “And then you look at the lone wolf indicators. ISIS and other terror groups have said, ‘hey, go out and don’t wait for an organized effort from ISIS or al Qaida, go out and do your own thing. Kill them with a knife, truck or whatever you can.’ And you are starting to see that globally.”

McGuffey says the fact that the Sutherland Springs shooting occurred at such a small church will likely change the mindset of clergy members across the country who have mistakenly thought that a massacre of this magnitude could only occur at megachurches or a facility of similar scale. “Because this happened in a small, rural church, I think this is another reason it is going to capture everyone’s attention because quite honestly, the small towns and small churches just figure it’s not going to happen at their location,” he says.

Editor’s note: As part of an effort to better educate houses of worship about active shooters and various other threats, McGuffey will be presenting during a symposium on, “Protecting Faith-Based Assets against Current and Emerging Threats,” which is being hosted by the ASIS Greater Fayetteville Chapter in North Carolina on Nov. 17. During this free event, which will take place at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. ET, McGuffey will provide information to attendees on how to protect their congregations and physical assets.

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