



# Staying safe in church

By Robert C. Blezard

Security-trained greeters took note when the disheveled white man in a trench coat arrived for worship at Christ Mission, a mostly African-American congregation in Columbia, S.C. Suspicion turned to alarm when they perceived something bulky under his coat. A weapon?

With the painful memory still fresh of the 2015 hate-crime when a white visitor murdered nine African-Americans at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Christ Mission team members followed their playbook, positioning themselves around the visitor while someone greeted him warmly and invited him in.

Once at his seat, the visitor took off his jacket and revealed what he was carrying.

"He had Bibles!" said Leroy Cannon, pastor of Christ Mission. "We started saying, 'Hallelujah.'"

That incident was a false alarm, but Cannon's congregation was on its toes and prepared for the worst. After the Emanuel murders and last fall's shooting at First Baptist Church outside San Antonio that left 26 people dead, congregations know they can't take anything for granted.

"We've got to be vigilant in all aspects and we

cannot relax," said Cannon, who lost two friends in the Emanuel shooting.

Cannon helped organize a program in the South Carolina Synod for leaders to talk about the difficult issue of church safety.

"We can't give simple answers to a complex question, but we can bring people together and host a conversation," said Herman Yoos, the synod's bishop.

Program participants shared their experiences, fears and solutions. Then they heard tips from a sheriff's deputy. They also paused regularly to pray and study Scripture passages that speak of "God's love and grace upholding us in scary and shaky times," Yoos said. Included were Jesus' emphatic message of peace in John 14:27 and Psalm 46's declaration that "God is our refuge and strength."

The approach—trust in God but be prepared—balances the faithful with the practical and provides a wise middle ground for congregations that struggle with sometimes-conflicting goals. On the one hand, they have to be friendly and welcoming to visitors. On the other hand, they have to be wary of people who could cause them harm.



Herman Yoos, bishop of the South Carolina Synod, spoke to synod leaders during a program on church safety.

Program participants shared individual experiences and fears, and discussed possible solutions to church safety concerns.

“We have an ethical, moral and biblical imperative to care for the flock *and* care for those who come to worship,” said Glenn Beard, director of the Lower Susquehanna Synod’s Lutheran Disaster Response Task Force.

Beard works with congregations on church safety and encourages them to see security as a ministry that is essential in our culture. Many congregations naively think “it can’t happen here, or God will protect us,” he said. The “Ostrich Approach” is not helpful, but neither is the “Chicken Little Approach.”

“It’s a balance that needs to be drawn between being panicked about security and being oblivious to the idea of security,” Beard said.

A road-raging driver who followed her into the church parking lot helped open the eyes of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hummelstown, Pa., said Martha Boyd, its pastor. The driver sped off when she entered the church, but it raised a question for the small, country church: how safe were they really?

The congregation installed cameras and sturdy locks and called on Beard to help them explore ways to live into a 21st-century mindset that embraces both security and hospitality. It’s not always easy.

“While they lament that they have to think about locking their doors or taking precautions or having training, it’s the reality of the day,” Boyd said. “We can’t take for granted that whoever’s walking in our doors has good intentions.”

Church safety preparedness and training is important, but especially for leaders, said Chelle Huth, director of lifelong learning at United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia and Gettysburg, Pa.

“When a situation occurs, everybody is going to


look to the church leader for direction,” said Huth, who organizes safety training sessions for future and current congregational leaders.

Common sense, awareness, thinking through the issues and taking even simple steps can help keep people safer, Huth said.

Developing plans and scenarios can start with asking: What are our vulnerabilities? When and where do we need to have people watching for trouble? Are they trained in what to look for and what to do? What do we do when someone suspicious comes to church?

For congregations that want to be safer, calling the local police or sheriff’s department is a good first step. Officers can point out security weaknesses, provide training, and help develop protocols and procedures. And, as the sheriff’s deputy who spoke at the South Carolina Synod event said, safety measures need not be expensive or complicated.

“One of the best suggestions was simply having greeters at the front door,” Yoos said. Trained greeters could welcome strangers and sit with them at worship. It would not only keep the church safer but also extend hospitality.

“It would be amazing if we actually became more friendly because we’re concerned about safety,” Yoos said. 

Go to [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) to see an extended version of this article that includes resources and tips for safety preparedness in your congregation.



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