offering CHRIST in a CULTURE OF FEAR

By Dan R. Dick

Terror and tragedy gripped the churchgoing population of Knoxville, Tennessee and rippled across the country on July 27, 2008 as reports spread of a violent shotgun attack at a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Two people died and six others were injured, raising serious questions about safety and the need for modern day churches to protect congregants. News wire services jumped on the story and unearthed dozens of similar stories, injecting a tone of urgency with phrases like 'epidemic of violence,' 'alarming trend,' and 'out of control,' to imply that churches are no longer safe places and that there is a grave problem that needs to be addressed. Is there a real problem, or is the culture of fear blinding people of faith to the truth?

Christian congregations are caught on the horns of a dilemma—how to welcome and receive both member and visitor alike in a society fraught with violence, danger, and rage? How can we find a balance where our facilities are safe and secure while remaining open to the world? How do we protect people we know while welcoming the stranger we do not?

There are no simple answers to any of these questions, but it is well to remember that they are not new questions. Churches since the first century have been public gathering places, and throughout history they have been the location of acts of violence. Wherever human beings interact, bad (even destructive) behavior is inevitable. The sensationalism of news media today makes the situation appear to be more dire than it actually is. It is imperative that the Christian community apply the very best critical thinking skills to this issue so that faith prevails over fear.

Keep Things in Perspective

What occurred in Knoxville, Tennessee and in other locations across the United States (and world) is indeed a tragedy and should not be discounted or dismissed. However, the story is less than complete. The gunman was discovered to be a deeply troubled man consumed by hatred for homosexuals and liberals. He confessed that he wasn't attacking the church, as such, but he was venting his fury at what they believed and practiced. His was a hate crime that had little to do with Christianity.

Members, not visitors or strangers, perpetrate most violence that occurs in the church. Most violence is of a personal nature, aimed at specific individuals; random violence is extremely rare. Property damage, vandalism, and theft are much more common than bodily violence, and ironically, pastors are most frequently the target of personal attack. To date, there is no evidence that churches are specially targeted or suffer more violence than other public spaces. Regardless of what news, television, and movies might lead us to believe, we are not in greater danger today than we used to be.

Know Your Context

Churches in high crime areas are most susceptible to violent crime. Rural churches where hunting is popular are also at higher risk. Generally, crimes against a church—be it vandalism to the physical building or violence against members of the congregation—match the criminal activity of the surrounding environment. As populations increase, bad behavior increases.

Churches in high traffic areas with open visibility are usually safer. Poorly lit build-

Crown of Thorns Illustration by ©iStockphoto.com / Ryan Burke

ings and parking lots invite problems. Fencing and locks do much more harm than good, doing little to dissuade determined assailants, but sending a very negative message to the community. Paradoxically, elaborate security systems make people more anxious, rather than less. Fencing, locks, security cameras, and guards all indicate that there is a *need* to be worried.

Be Prepared

The best that most churches can do is to simply use good common sense and take normal precautions. Preparation does not indicate a lack of faith, but good stewardship. No one is ever truly prepared for a sudden, unexpected, and unpredictable crime, but there are some basic precautions that any congregation can take that to be more response-ready.

- Don't leave doors unlocked when the church is empty or if only a few people are in the building. Make sure that more than one person is present in the church office at all times.
- Make certain that entrances and parking lots are well lit. Don't let people go to their cars alone in the evening.
- Train ushers and greeters to be able to identify danger signs and erratic behavior. Make sure that the congregation's leadership is aware of any conflicts, controversies, or threats that could lead to violence.
- Train ushers to help get people out of the building in an orderly and safe manner in case of emergency. Quick thinking and alert ushers can head off potential problems as well as respond quickly when they are paying attention to situations as they unfold. There is evidence that ushers are even more effective than hired security staff at shepherding crowds of people.
- Provide an usher or trustee with a cell phone with emergency numbers preprogrammed into speed dial. This is useful for medical emergencies or accidents, as well as in the rare case of violence or another crime.
- Offer staff and members training in first aid and emergency medical care. Having trained church members—and the necessary equipment and supplies—allows a church to respond quickly in times of crisis. Training in conflict mediation, crisis care, and identifying distress signals can also be helpful.
- Designate a staff person or church member to be the point of contact in an emergency situation. In one church situation that escalated toward violence and tragedy, one woman commented, "I could see what was coming, but had no idea who to tell that trouble was coming."

Faith, Not Fear

Following the horrendous shooting spree at the Amish school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in October of 2006, parents and other members of the spiritual community gathered together to pray for the victims, but also for the gunman (who committed suicide) and his family as well. They knew that their strength and healing depended on being able to ground themselves in God's grace, and herein lies our greatest challenge—not letting our fear or anger overcome our commitment to reach out in faith.

One of the central tenets of the Christian faith is that this world is a broken, sick, and sorry place that needs redemption and healing. The prevalence of sin, death, violence, and hatred are reasons the Christ came into this world in the first place, and it is the power of the Holy Spirit that raises us up and transforms us from fearful followers into faith-filled leaders. We cannot control the future. We cannot insulate ourselves from tragedy and misfortune. And we cannot close our doors to the very broken people who need God's healing love the most.

Jesus told his followers and friends that they would be persecuted, and that to faithfully follow him meant to hazard mistreatment and even death. Some things never change. Thankfully, what also doesn't change is the incredible love of God. Our God is greater than our fear, and when we move forward in faith God will grant us the courage, the conviction, and the confidence to open our hearts, minds, and doors without fear. ❑

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