

Security worries hit sense of sanctuary

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Religious leaders are struggling to find ways of protecting their sanctuaries without sacrificing their sacred settings amid a 2,500% increase in deadly attacks at houses of worship since 1999.

Several factors have led to the surge in violence, church security consultants say. An overall increase in mass shootings, a rise in hate crimes targeting religions, domestic disputes that spill over into houses of worship and increased secularism are all cited as reasons.

"Houses of worship don't have the same respect they did a generation ago," said Steve Padin, head of the Watchman's Academy, which trains church security teams. "I think it is very fair to say the secularization of society has something to do with these attacks."

The trend appears set to continue.

"I don't see a light at the end

of the tunnel," Mr. Padin said.

Calls for increased security follow each attack at a church, synagogue or mosque, as they did with two high-profile attacks last weekend.

On Saturday, five people were stabbed at a Hanukkah celebration at a rabbi's home in New York. A gunman killed two people at a church in Texas the next day.

U.S. houses of worship experienced 262 deadly force incidents in 2017, according to the most recent data compiled by Carl Chinn, a church security consultant who has been tracking the phenomenon. That represents a 2,500% increase from 10 in 1999, when Mr. Chinn began recording the data.

"Houses of worship are the new soft target," said Peter Harper, a security consultant with Option3 Risk Solutions. "We have hardened targets like schools, but there is no less evil in the world. It just needs a new place to go, and it will go to the new soft target."

The most effective way to combat violence at houses of worship is for the congregation to develop a security team, consultants say. Such teams usually consist of volunteers who undergo rigorous training and psychological evaluation to handle dangerous situations.

Training costs \$500 to \$800 per person. Mr. Padin estimates that 75% of religious organizations have no security protocols whatsoever.

The gunman in the Texas attack was fatally shot by a member of that church's volunteer security team.

Jack Wilson, who heads the security team at the West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement, told local news outlets that he had eyes on the shooter as soon as he entered the building.

Mr. Wilson shot the gunman just seconds after the gunman killed two other members of the security team.

The actions of Mr. Wilson have renewed the debate over whether security guards should be armed in houses of worship.

Texas Republicans, including Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Attorney General Ken Paxton, credited a 2017 law that allows licensed gun owners to carry weapons into houses of worship that do not explicitly ban them.

Gun control groups say the law will lead to a proliferation of weapons and more shootings.

President Trump applauded the volunteer security guards and said the attack would have been worse if not for an armed citizenry.

“Armed congregants quickly stopped a crazed church shooter in Texas. If it were not for the fact that there were people inside of the church that were both armed, and highly proficient in using their weapon, the end result would have been catastrophic,” Mr. Trump tweeted. “A big THANK YOU to them!”

Mr. Trump is a proponent of arming and training ushers in churches and teachers in schools to prevent attacks in those vulnerable settings.

Chuck Chadwick, president of Gatekeepers Security, which also trains volunteers in church security, said Mr. Wilson’s response is proof that responsible gun owners can save lives.

“It’s the old cliché: Have a good guy with a gun,” he said. “By the time the police get there, the incident is already done. You need initial responders who are already there and willing to do the job of protecting people.”

Mr. Harper praised Mr. Wilson’s quick action but warned that overaggressive volunteers could be a problem. He encouraged religious leaders to balance safety with caution.

“There is more to this than people with guns responding to other people with guns,” he said. “You still have to justify the level of force you are using. In some cases, excessive force could cause as much damage to the ministry as a deadly shooting.”

Consultants have called on worshippers to stay alert during services and keep an eye out for anyone who looks suspicious, such as someone wearing a long trench coat in hot weather.

But several faiths teach worshippers to focus on the service and to keep their eyes closed and head down in prayer.

“It is a sacrifice,” Mr. Chadwick said. “For someone not to be fully participating in worship is a sacrifice these guys and gals must make.”

Politicians have begun calling for an increase in nonprofit security grants to beef up security.

“Our houses of worship are targets, and they’re defenseless,” Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, said during a news conference. “So bad people, hateful people, terrorists, angry people choose houses of worship over and over again.”

Mr. Harper said churches need to view security as an extension of their mission.

“Churches need to step back and view this as an opportunity to love people even better,” he said. “We are going to love our staff and watch out for our staff by making sure they are safe and secure.”

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