

Changing security measures at places of worship

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St. Louis, MO (KSDK) - By their very nature, churches and other places of worship are welcoming places that feed the spirit. But are they increasingly becoming soft targets for crime? A Missouri security specialist thinks so. He says crimes at churches have increased 500 percent in the last couple of years.

Crowded pews, fussy babies and inspiring words; typical sights and sounds you'd expect at countless churches. But you have to look a little closer here to notice guys wearing earpieces, keeping watch, some of them armed.

This church, First Baptist of Maryville, has heavy security. Just over two years ago, the church's beloved pastor, Fred Winters, was gunned down while he preached during service.

Eyewitness Keith Melton will never forget

that day.

"Pastor Fred stepped across right here, leaned out toward him and said, 'Good morning brother, can I help you?' And that's when the first shot was fired," Melton said.

Melton was one of the men who jumped the suspect, Terry Sedlacek.

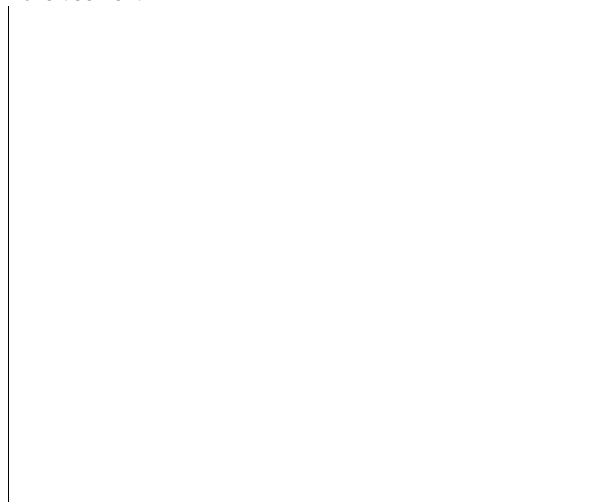
"At some point he had dropped the gun because it was jammed, that's what we learned later and then he drew a knife and at some point in that struggle, he stabbed me," Melton said.

While the grief-stricken congregation turned to God for healing, its leaders also turned to Vaughn Baker, a former law officer, for security.

Baker runs a Kansas City-based company called Strategos International. Increasingly, he's teaching security techniques to churches.

Baker's company keeps track of cases of

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violent crimes committed at places of worship across the country. He says they're on a dramatic rise.

"We've seen from 2008 to 2010, we've seen a 500 percent increase," Baker said.

Baker and his team teach the physical aspects of securing a property like locks, cameras and such.

But the number one thing he says he teaches church staff - awareness. Paying attention to who's walking through the door. One trick he used: a simple hand shake to find out if somebody's armed. With an elbow pat, Vaughn reads body language. A drop in the elbow could mean a person is protecting a hidden gun. A friendly tap on the side of the torso acts as a quick pat down.

The technique is just one of several being taught to train church greeters, ushers and parking personnel. While Baker does not want to publicize too many of his strategies, he does want to share the importance of vigilance.

"If you've caught yourself saying it can't happen here, we would encourage you to accept the fact that it can happen and it can happen anywhere," he said.

In the middle of a work day in March, police said a 26-year-old, hallucinating on synthetic pot, barged into a St. Peters church and assaulted some people.

In response, the St. Peters Police Department will host a seminar this

summer to teach its churches safety techniques.

Two years later, First Baptist of Maryville continues to thrive despite the tragedy, but now with a better balance of openness and preparedness.

"We do have people on sight that can react to the situation on a full-time basis," said Melton, who is a member of the church's new security team.

Baker said he lets the churches he trains decide if they want to have armed personnel. If they do, he teaches them how to effectively use a weapon in that setting.

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