

# Star-Telegram

## Churches face tricky balance of welcoming and protecting

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Last month, a pastor pointed his gun at two burglars at his Beaumont church after one threatened to hit him with a two-by-four, the local newspaper reported.

Last year, an elderly woman in Arkansas interrupted a burglary at church and was beaten to death with a cross. The year before, robbers in Illinois beat two women while ransacking a church.

Once, churches were sanctuaries where respect, fear of the Almighty or even superstition kept lawbreakers at bay. Now, violent crimes seem to be increasingly common at churches large and small. This week's attack at an Arlington church, where the pastor was slain and his assistant severely beaten, is yet another example.

A church's work requires a delicate balance: protecting churchgoers but also keeping the doors open to the troubled and hurting. That can leave churches vulnerable.

Pastor Al Meredith of Wedgwood Baptist Church, who led his congregation through the 1999 shootings that left seven dead and seven wounded, said security has been a hot topic for congregations, especially in the past several years. Wedgwood recently installed cameras at the entrance, but it added few security measures immediately after the shootings.

"How far do you go? Do you stand at the door and check IDs?" Meredith said. "I've got enough trouble getting people who want to come to our church, much less throwing up obstacles in front of them to keep them from getting through the doors."

He blames secularized society for stripping culture of its "fear of the Lord."

"I don't know if we're any more targets than the local 7-Eleven," he said. "But it seems as though our culture has lost the idea of sanctuary."

In recent years, though, hundreds of churches have taken steps to become less vulnerable, and one Missouri company trains church staff to deal with armed intruders through increased awareness and firepower.

Strategos International, based in Kansas City, Mo., teaches church personnel how to spot abnormal behavior and instructs "church protectors" in the defensive use of firearms. The company has trained 3,000 people from 400 churches in 24 states.

President Vaughn Baker said churches want to provide an atmosphere of comfort, worship and learning. The trick is to create a safe and secure place without compromising the core mission.

"If somebody says, 'Well, we need to do pat-downs and body scans at the door,' then we say, 'No, that's not the answer,'" Baker said.

He said one of the biggest hurdles for churches is the "'Big D,' which is *denial* that it can't happen."

Through training, staff are taught to be aware of unusual behavior. For small churches, just having a controlled access point is useful, he said; many still keep their doors unlocked after hours.

Strategos stresses planning to have ushers, greeters, parking personnel or teachers lock down a church in the case of an armed intruder.

"The other part of that approach is an armed response capability to de-escalate the situation," he said.

Even with the best security, not every situation can be anticipated.

In 1991, an estranged couple met at College Hills Church of Christ in North Richland Hills for a counseling session. After the hourlong session, the husband pulled a gun and shot his wife in front of Minister Robert Waller.

Waller, who was out of town Friday, had nightmares after the shooting and sought counseling, said his wife, Sue. She said the office now has more security.

"I guess [the Arlington attack] brought up my worry about him, thinking about him being in the office," she said. "It can happen anytime, anyplace."

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