

Local Church Security Resources

In November 2017, a heartrending mass shooting at a small church in central Texas raised again the specter of threats against the safety of worshippers in our Virginia Conference churches.

At the 2015 session of the Virginia Conference, a concern was expressed regarding congregational safety in the wake of the murders at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston SC. Ultimately the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Virginia Conference concluded this was a topic for the Cabinet to address. The Cabinet in turn has compiled the following resources to help address matters of congregational safety.

Although the risk of armed violence at any given church is extraordinarily small, it is appropriate for local church Trustees to recommend to their Church Council a plan for remediating risks, to identify a person or team to identify and evaluate risks, and to provide training to de-escalate persons who may be mentally-ill.

A variety of resources to equip your local church for a conversation around security may be found below. However, it is important that our pastors and key lay leadership understand: **the possession of firearms by congregants, clergy and/or church staff as a defensive measure at church is contrary to the pronouncements of our United Methodist denomination.**

In addition to the fact that no national law enforcement organization or risk-management company advocates for civilians in churches to carry guns (because the presence of multiple armed civilians actually escalates the likelihood of tragedy), the intention to use lethal force in self-defense is inconsistent with our Church's position on the use of firearms. The 2016 General Conference adopted the following statement regarding gun violence: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/gun-violence>.

The language of this Resolution is consistent with our prior statement that since the Church's traditional role has been one of sanctuary, each United Methodist Church is called to be a weapon-free zone. This resolution would *not* be directed toward law enforcement and other professional civil servants whose vocational responsibility requires the carrying of a weapon in the performance of their duties.

Thus we urge all United Methodists to exercise sound judgment, to take only wise measures to protect congregants, and prayerfully to respect our denomination's stance against the presence of weapons in our houses of worship.

Comprehensive approaches to assessing risks and identifying remedies can be found here: <https://www.churchmutual.com/123/Risk-Reporter-for-Religious-Institutions>.

An article by Church Mutual about questions that might help churches considering armed security may be found at:

<https://www.churchmutual.com/index.cfm?pid=2257&pageTitle=Risk-Alerts&riskalertid=84>.

Useful guidelines from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for mitigating risk can also be found at: www.fema.gov/protecting-houses-worship.

In addition to these resources you may wish to check with your local police and sheriffs' departments for counsel regarding matters of congregational safety. For example, some departments offer to provide a free safety/security survey for religious gathering places.

In conclusion, while we do well to have a plan to protect the well-being of our fellow church members, we also have a responsibility to Christ to bear witness to the Gospel, and not to put our trust in the idolatry of righteous violence. Those who lead the local church are encouraged to become informed, understand the nature of risk remediation, and act according to our denomination's biblical ethic of opposing violence against all the persons whom God has made.

Cabinet Document: created December 2016

Updated: November 2017