

The Public Media and Social Media are alive with reports of mass shootings. This reality makes it appear that there is a rash of shootings occurring every day with an increasing trend of occurrence and increasing body count. A survey of various statistical reports reveals that the interpretation of the collected data is not consistent or uniform. One report reveals more than 350 mass shootings in 2015 alone to another report indicating 114 over a 10-year period. Clearly the definition of mass shooting is not consistent and the collected data varies according to political leaning and the collection purpose. However, the reality is people are being shot and many are dying at the hands of others via firearms in both criminal actions and terrorist's activity. We today have greater access to news through TV, Radio and the internet. We no longer need to wait for the morning newspaper or evening news. We now have access 24/7 to the news on our smartphones, tablets, computers, tvs and other devices. This availability certainly gives us the impression that there are more violent events occurring.

With being more aware of the issue comes the increased awareness of our responsibility to protect our people while they worship, minister and study God's Word in our church buildings and church gatherings. Many local Police Chiefs, Sheriffs and Prosecutors have gone on record advocating civilians with legal firearms and concealed carry permits actively carry their firearms and be prepared to defend themselves and others around them from these mass shootings. The president of the world's largest Christian university, Liberty University, Rev. Jerry Falwell, Jr. recently urged students, staff and faculty to carry concealed weapons for their protection and the protection of those around. Many local gun ranges are offering free range time and training to school teachers and pastors who want to carry concealed weapons to protect students and worshipers.

As a retired Law Enforcement Officer with more than 30 years with a gun on my side I understand the sentiment and heart of those advocating that more people carry concealed firearms and stand ready to intervene. But I have some concerns and cautions. Carrying a firearm is very large responsibility that many fail to appreciate beforehand. Not everyone is suited to carry the responsibility of the use of deadly force or even the threat of deadly force.

My first concern is sensitivity to our Brethren heritage of observing a traditional "non-resistance" doctrine. For many in our churches this includes not resorting to resistance in the face of physical violence based upon the words of Jesus in Matt 5:39. While my own understanding of Scripture does not support this position we must be sensitive to the reality that many do understand Scripture this way. Any church seeking to implement concealed carry of firearms by its members should at least have this conversation and study the relative Biblical passages together.

My second concern stems from the reality that firearms proficiency requires training, frequent practice and repetition. Merely possessing a State issued concealed carry permit does not mean that the person has the physical ability to shoot properly, accurately and appropriately or a suitable attitude or emotional stability to use deadly force. In my home state of Florida, a concealed carry permit holder is only required to fire one round down range without requirement that the target be struck to obtain the permit, simply pulling the trigger in the proper direction is sufficient. Weapon handling and tactical training is not required. Prior to commissioning church members to carry firearms for protection of the church and worshipers the ability of the people being requested to carry must be assessed. This includes their physical ability to shoot a firearm and their mental ability to shoot if necessary. Physical ability can be assessed at a local range by a qualified instructor. Nearly every community has them. Mental ability is

more difficult to determine. It may require pastoral staff and/or leadership getting to know the concealed carry parishioners at a deeper level and to know their heart. It has been my experience that those who have a boisterous vocal bravado frequently do not make great candidates for the protection of others but they will be the first in line to take such a position.

Another concern I have is with the liability that attaches to the church when church officials request members arm themselves. In our litigious society it would seem the request for members to arm themselves would attach to the church a liability for any actions those members may take. This liability may be less than the liability of not protecting worshipers but it needs to be considered. Church administration should also review their insurance policy to insure they are not violating their liability insurance or their property insurance by requesting members be armed.

Arming of parishioners is not the only thing that congregations can do to offer protection. There are many other things churches can do to provide security for their congregations without asking the congregation to arm themselves.

The first thing is take down any sign that would indicate "Gun Free Zone". That will not stop a criminal or terrorist but it might stop a good guy from being prepared. The majority of mass shootings occur in "gun free zones". The sign provides no protection; in fact, it may prevent protection.

Insure that you have immediate communication to Law Enforcement and other Emergency Services through land line or cell phone. Should something occur do not be afraid to dial 911 even if you cannot speak. The protocol for most 911 systems is to send Law Enforcement to investigate a no contact 911 call. Have an Elder, Deacon or Usher or even several assigned to make a call(s) should it be necessary. Don't waste time during an emergency to determine who should call, determine that beforehand.

Prepare in advance an emergency evacuation plan for your facility. Make sure the congregation is aware of the plan and practice it from time to time. Insure that your leadership is aware of the plan and can lead the congregation in carrying it out. Insure exits are well marked and not blocked. Insure that aisles are free and wide enough for people to move through rapidly.

Consider the utilization of video cameras inside and outside of your facility with a DVR to record activity. While this will not prevent most incidents it may very well make it easier to determine what happened and possibly who the perpetrators are. Another good investment is a security system that includes the cameras.

Pastors, Elders, Deacons and others in leadership should also be aware of what is going on in the immediate vicinity of the church meeting location. Has violence increased around the facility? Has the neighborhood changed and crime increased? Pay attention to the local news and understand the dynamics of your community. The first person to arrive at the facility to open it for services should observe the facility from the outside prior to entering. They should observe anything that looks out of place or disturbed. The last person to leave should insure that the facility is locked securely and properly as well as any alarms are activated. A physical check of all doors and windows should be completed prior to exiting the building.

While the threat of violence or terrorism can cause many people anxiety and fear we must always remember we serve a great and awesome God. Nothing is a surprise to Him or is outside of His control.

Trust God to care for you and your congregation. Have faith in His care for you and know that the potential for you to be involved in a mass shooting or terrorist act is very low and by being prepared, by being observant, and having faith in God to care for you, you will honor and glorify Him, no matter what happens.

For members of churches in the early church age there was a real danger that someone would show up at a service to arrest and execute them. For more than 300 years the church was illegal and subject to persecution from the government and other religious systems. While going to church and being a follower of Jesus is not illegal here in the west it is in some areas of the world. Followers of Jesus are subject to arrest, prosecution and even death for simply saying they are Christian. We need to pray for those churches and praise God for our freedom to worship here in the West. We must not allow our increased awareness of terrorism and violence to hinder our worship, fellowship and ministry. Do not turn your worship center into an armed camp. Take practical and unobtrusive steps to protect your people while worshiping and ministering. For some churches this will mean some people are armed with concealed weapons. For others it will mean increased awareness and other security measures in our facilities. For all of us it will mean we trust God and His plan for us all.

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