News



Emergency personnel respond to a fatal shooting at a Baptist church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, Sunday, Nov. 5, 2017. (KSAT/AP)



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In 2007, the unthinkable happened at New Life Church in Colorado Springs.

A gunman opened fire outside the church, just as its midday service had dismissed. His bullets hit several members of the same family as they left, wounding David Works and killing his two teenage daughters, Rachel and Stephanie.

More than 600 people were on the church campus when Matthew Murray — a 24-year-old man armed with an assault rifle, two pistols and enough ammunition to kill 100 people — made his way inside the building, church pastor Brady Boyd remembered.

"I know there's a great theological debate about what Jesus would do," he told RNS. "I just know firsthand for me, on the day the shooting happened on our campus, we lost two very good, sweet, young teenage girls, and that was awful and horrific, but we could have very well lost 100 people that day."

Boyd believes that didn't happen because Murray ran into Jeanne Assam, a former police officer and member of the church security team who was legally carrying a pistol. Assam returned fire, ending the attack that had started 12 hours earlier, when the gunman had shot and killed several others at a nearby mission center.

The memories of that day came flooding back for Boyd when he learned of the mass shooting Sunday (Nov. 5) that left 26 people dead and tens more wounded at First

Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, described as the deadliest attack on a church in modern American history.

Boyd said he had just moderated a discussion with Kay Warren of Saddleback Church about mental health during this weekend's services. He was showing Warren the church's memorial — a space for healing and reflection that includes a park bench and two spruce trees — when someone approached with the news from Texas.

"We stopped and mourned and were so sad yesterday to hear the news. It was devastating to us. It brings back a lot of painful memories for us," he said.

Reflecting the attack on his church 10 years ago in a blog post on Monday morning, the pastor wrote, "The sad reality is that every church should have a strategy to protect its members when they gather."

Across the country, many churches and other places of worship are considering security measures as mass shootings have become a tragically familiar narrative in the United States. In the last five years alone, gunmen have taken lives not only at churches such as New Life, First Baptist and Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., but also a mosque, Jewish center and Sikh temple.

On Sunday, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton suggested on Fox News that churchgoers carry concealed weapons.

He was echoed by Rev. Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church of Dallas, also on Fox News, who insisted that if a gunman opened fire at his church, "they may get one shot off or two shots off, but that's it, and that's the last thing they'll ever do in this life." That's because as many as half his church members carry concealed weapons into church with them on a given Sunday, Jeffress estimated.

"This is the world we're living in. We need to do everything we can to keep our parishioners safe," he said.

Also in the Lone Star State, Rev. Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, tweeted that his church was planning security training for church leaders.

In Texas, a licensed gun owner can take a gun to church unless the church has said otherwise, according to the National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative

Action.

But gun laws vary from state to state, as does guidance on guns in churches from denomination to denomination and church to church.

And few Americans were in favor of guns in churches in a 2012 PRRI survey: More than three-quarters of respondents (76 percent) said concealed weapons should not be allowed in houses of worship.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations has compiled resources about mosque safety and the Sikh Coalition recently launched a security initiative. In the past few years, the Anti-Defamation League, founded to combat anti-Semitism and other bigotries, has been sharing what it has learned with other religious and community groups, according to Elise Jarvis, the ADL’s associate director, law enforcement outreach and communal security.

"Unfortunately, the reality of the Jewish community is we are targets, " Jarvis said. "It’s something we’ve been dealing with for decades."

Jarvis suggested places of worship build relationships with law enforcement so their first call to police isn’t a 911 call, and officers understand the community. She also suggested they pay close attention to who attends their services and other events, something that can be as simple as greeting people at the door, and having plans in place for different emergencies.

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Boyd, the pastor at New Life, said he knows not all are comfortable with the idea of guns in church. Most crimes can be deterred by a uniformed police presence — hiring an off-duty police officer or recruiting a volunteer officer who attends the church, he said.

Quickly after the shooting on its campus, Boyd said, New Life made the decision to talk openly about what had happened, something he encourages for other churches facing tragedy, like in Sutherland Springs. The church brought in counselors to talk with church members. Even a decade later, he says he talks about it from the pulpit.

It's going to take a long time for members of First Baptist Church to feel "normal" again, he said.

But, he added, "our faith tells us when the enemy means us harm, our God can turn it for good, and so we've seen that happen at New Life."