

‘We’re Not Going to Turn the Other Cheek While You Shoot Us’

The Sunday service was winding down, but before it ended, Bishop Ira Combs led the congregation of 300 at the Greater Bible Way Temple in prayer. The shootings that killed nine people in a Charleston church could not happen here, he reassured his flock.

“If they had security, the assailant would not have been able to reload,” Combs declared. “All of us here are not going to turn the other cheek while you shoot us.”

As he preached, Combs was flanked by a man on each side of the pulpit, each armed with handguns beneath their suit coats. Other members of the church’s security team were scattered among the crowd. Congregants did not know who was armed and who was not – an undercover approach that is part of the security plan.

“We aren’t looking to engage people in violence, but we are going to practice law enforcement,” Combs told Reuters before the service. “And we are going to interdict if someone comes in with a weapon.”

The June 17 church shootings in Charleston, South Carolina, have ignited fierce debates across the country over hate crimes, the Confederate flag, and gun control.

They also have laid bare an uncomfortable truth for religious leaders: churches and other houses of worship, among the most open and welcoming of American institutions, can also be among the most vulnerable.

In 2013, a gunman shot Ronald Harris, a pastor in Lake

Charles, Louisiana, while he preached a sermon. A year earlier, a gunman at a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killed six people. In 2009, another small-town pastor, Fred Winters, was shot in the pulpit during a morning service in Maryville, Illinois.

Many churches do not take security seriously enough, said John Ojeisekhoba, who runs a security consulting firm in California that works with churches, schools, and camps.

"Church is supposed to be a sacred place. Telling your congregation that we need to have armed security during the service, it's not something that is easy to do," he said.

Theron Wiggins, a pastor in Flint, Michigan, and a former police detective, is one of the preachers trying to change the mindset.

"They believe the angels will protect us," Wiggins said about his congregation. "Well, I'm one of the angels."

Armed and Undercover

Churches in Michigan have ample reason to take the message seriously. A year ago at the Citadel of Praise church in Detroit, a man wielding an ax was shot by an off-duty police officer. In 2012, Pastor Marvin Winans, a member of the famous gospel singing group, was carjacked and robbed at a Detroit intersection, an event that some local pastors cite as a reason they have become security conscious.

"Nobody should have to worship in fear or be looking over their shoulder," said Charles Ellis, pastor of the Greater Grace Temple, a Pentecostal megachurch in Detroit with 6,000 members.

Ellis' church has a trained, armed, 25-man security force, nicknamed "The Ministers of Defense." Many have backgrounds in law enforcement. Some are stationed conspicuously on the

stage, while others blend in with the crowd.

Not everyone supports the presence of guns in sanctuaries that are supposed to be devoted to peace and reflection.

In April, church leaders criticized a Catholic priest in Ann Arbor, Michigan, after he advised worshipers to arm themselves for protection and offered a class in obtaining a concealed carry permit. The priest, Edward Fride, canceled the class after the local diocese said it had no place on church property.

In North Carolina, the CrossPointe Church in Fayetteville is reconsidering its use of armed security guards after a news story on them prompted angry emails from across the country.

"The criticism came from people who thought guns, even concealed by church security, were a mockery of people who claimed faith in God to meet all their needs in life," said Franklin Pounders, a minister at the church.

"My philosophy is a bit different. The Bible says, 'In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.'"

"God Is My Gun"

At Greater Bible Way, security is a particular concern as Combs' outspoken opposition to same-sex marriage has brought protesters to his doors. Active in politics, he is part of a Republican National Committee effort to improve African-American outreach. He is also a local deputy sheriff.

While Combs preaches, the church's security coordinator, Calvin Williams, keeps watch. Williams listens to chatter from other security members on a Secret Service-style earpiece and totes a Taurus .45 caliber pistol tucked under his jacket.

Eighteen cameras scattered on the grounds of the small church monitor people as they come and go. The church sits in a

hardscrabble section of Jackson, so the security measures are aimed also at carjackings, property theft, and attempts to steal the church's collection box.

"People think churches have money," Williams said. Moments after the pastor blesses proceeds from the collection, one of the armed ushers escorts the box into a locked office for the remainder of the service.

One challenge is to put security into place without alienating visitors. Since the Charleston shootings, Greater Bible Way has begun considering installing a magnetometer, though Williams is hesitant because of the image such a device might project.

Congregants have mixed reactions to the security presence in church.

"In the times we live in today, it's necessary," said Joshua Webb, a church member from nearby Lansing.

Rose Phillips, of Jackson, said the armed security detail made her feel no safer. "God is my gun," she said.

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