

Colorado shootings reflect big threats at megachurches: Overflowing offerings, well-known preachers

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With megachurches come megacrowds, megamoney and, increasingly, mega-security concerns.

The crowds—anywhere from 2,000 to 20,000 worshipers each weekend—can be an attractive target for a deranged shooter. Overflowing offering plates are tempting to thieves, and well-known preachers can become high-profile targets.

The shootings December 9 at New Life Church in Colorado Springs and a Youth With a Mission training facility in the Denver suburb of Arvada—which left five people dead, including the assailant—reflect the security nightmares facing some of the country's largest churches. Many of those churches now employ armed guards to protect human, financial and physical "assets."

Brady Boyd, the senior pastor at New Life Church, said a volunteer armed guard "probably saved over 100 lives" when she shot and wounded the assailant just inside the doors of the Colorado Springs church. Police said the shooter, Matthew Murray, 24, then took his own life. "That's the reality of our world," Boyd told reporters. "I don't think any of us grew up in churches where that was a reality, but today it is."

Murray, who attended the YWAM training school in 2002 but was not given an assignment, had written threatening letters to the school. Twelve hours after the shootings in Arvada, Murray showed up at New Life Church, which has a YWAM branch office.

The guard, former police officer Jeanne Assam, was working her regular shift that Sunday. The last morning service had just ended, at which guest Jack Hayford, president of the Foursquare Gospel Church, had preached. Hayford was in a second-floor office.

The church has about 15 or 20 guards, some armed, and Assam used her personal weapon, Boyd said. "I prayed to the Holy Spirit to guide me," she told a news conference. "I give the credit to God."

Violent crimes remain extremely rare at U.S. churches. Eric Spacek, a senior church risk manager for the GuideOne Center for Risk Management in West Des Moines, Iowa, said crime accounts for just 5 percent of all claims filed by the 40,000 churches insured by GuideOne.

Still, the growth of megachurches has spawned an entire industry devoted to protecting and securing crowds that can be larger than those at shopping malls.

Scott Thumma, a megachurch expert at Hartford Seminary and author of *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, said financial security is just one concern at a typical megachurch, where offerings can reach an annual average of \$6 million.

"Think about it," he said. "That's \$115,000 a week in income. Are you going to trust moving that much money around to folks without guns?"

At the Potter's House in Dallas, where Bishop T. D. Jakes draws an average 15,000 worshipers on Sundays, the church employs plainclothes and uniformed security guards, said Sean Smith, director of Classic Security, which contracts with the church.

"We're not trying to get an army of men out there armed with guns," Smith said, "but we want to take practical and measured responses for any threats that may come to our doorstep."

Increasingly, that means packing heat, if necessary, said John Ross, who directs security at Dallas's Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, which draws nearly 8,000 every Sunday. "You can use your hands, you can go tactical, but these days, that's not the way people roll," said Ross, a former ATF agent. "You have to match force with force."

Some church crime is relatively routine—thefts, vandalism and, unfortunately, child abuse. Sometimes warring parents will take their domestic disputes to church playgrounds, or thieves will eye parked cars for opportunities to break in.

Some churches try to take it in stride. Rick Warren, a California megachurch pastor and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, has an all-volunteer security team headed by a former Secret Service agent.

“We don’t worry about that,” he said December 10. “We do have security volunteers in our church. We don’t have any paid [security], but every one of them are off-duty law enforcement.”

In most random shootings (in which a deranged assailant is looking to make a statement), some observers said, there is only so much a church can do.

Commented Dave Travis, the managing director of Leadership Network, a Dallas-based think tank: “The security threat of a crazed person—there’s just no way to totally prepare for that.”

The celebrity status of some megachurch pastors is another concern. (New Life Church is known for its founder-pastor Ted Haggard, who resigned in 2006 amid a drug and gay sex scandal, though it was not known if that link mattered to Murray.) “Religion is one of the things to which unstable people are attracted,” said Hartford’s Thumma. —Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*