

**OPEN ARMS,  
SAFE  
COMMUNITIES**

*The Theology of Church Security*

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## INTRODUCTION

When I set out to write this book, I found myself asking, “How did we get to this point?” By “this point” I mean, how did we get to the place where thousands of people walk into places of worship each week and wonder if their congregation will be the next one to appear on the evening news? Religious spaces are by their nature soft targets. We go to church to worship and pray; fears and concerns are usually checked at the door, and weapons are often prohibited. By design, we feel emotionally and physically safe. Unfortunately, these reasons make our sacred spaces ideal for someone wanting to do tremendous damage in a short amount of time. When we learn of the latest shooting at a house of worship, so many questions race through our mind. What religion or denomination was targeted? What kind of gun was it, and how did that person obtain it? Mostly, though, I think we ask ourselves, why did this happen?

In my search for answers, I didn’t expect the facts to so quickly and undeniably point to the rise of white supremacy in our country. While it’s not the *only* factor, I do believe it is by far the biggest one and must be part of the discussion of mass shootings in our places of worship.

Speaking on the 2019 panel “Targeting the Sacred: When Houses of Worship Come Under Attack,” Yolanda Pierce, dean of the Howard University School of Divinity, said:

This is about power. It’s about who is on the under-side of history. You attack where people are most vulnerable because you’re sending the message that

no matter how long you've been in this country, no matter what gains you have made in this country, we will always make you feel vulnerable, and we will always enforce a kind of second-class citizenship because you're always in danger, and so you attack at the churches because they are the sacred spaces of most people's identity.<sup>1</sup>

Brette Steele, who is the director of prevention and national security at the McCain Institute for International Leadership in Arizona and former deputy director of the US Countering Violent Extremism Task Force, also appeared on this panel. Steele says that unlike the days of clandestine meetings of Ku Klux Klan members who planned their attacks on Black churches in person, the explosion of the internet has allowed lone actors to find online communities that either support the ideology they already have or introduce them to a new one. This was certainly the case for Dylann Roof, the twenty-one-year-old who killed nine people during a Bible study at the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. According to Arno Michaelis, a former skinhead who speaks openly about his conversion away from white supremacy, these kind of websites intentionally make outcasts like Roof feel valued and important while indoctrinating them with anti-Christian messages and beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Roof, who posted under the screen name Lil Aryan on the neo-Nazi site Stormfront,<sup>3</sup> self-radicalized from the privacy and comfort of his home. According to Steele,

Historically there were password protected Al Qaida sites, and you had to know someone to get into them. It's simply not true anymore. . . . It is much easier for people to find violent extremist content now than it was twenty years ago. No question. Lone actors may be very much a part of a community in participating in a broader conversation online. It's just that their attack planning is more

to themselves. In terms of group coordinated and directed action, you almost never see that anymore.<sup>4</sup>

On its website, the Anti-Defamation League lists more than two hundred groups, symbols, and logos that represent white supremacy in the United States. Following the 2017 Unite the Right rally at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, when hundreds of white supremacists marched in the streets and twenty-year-old James Alex Fields Jr. rammed his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others, the increase in incidents and threats of white supremacy became something the Department of Homeland Security could no longer turn a blind eye to. In the fall of 2019, then acting secretary of homeland security Kevin McAleenan described white nationalism as one of the most dangerous threats to the United States, despite a report ten years earlier from his own department warning that the election of an African American president could fuel white supremacy extremism.<sup>5</sup>

McAleenan's assertion came as the Committee on Oversight and Reform concluded a three-part hearing before the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties that same year. The hearings were aimed at and titled "Confronting Violent White Supremacy," and they brought many troubling concerns to light. Most of the committee members and witnesses who testified agreed that white supremacy had risen to an alarming level. Chairman Jamie Raskin (D-MD), who would later lead the House impeachment trial against former president Donald Trump following the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, called it "the most significant threat of domestic terror in the United States" today.<sup>6</sup> He was not alone in this assertion. Chairman Stephen Lynch (D-MA) noted in his opening statement at the third hearing, "In recent years we've seen white supremacists increasingly resorting to the use of violence to achieve their ideological objectives. And today, for the first time since September 11, 2001, more people have been killed in racially motivated or right-wing terrorist incidents in the United States than in attacks perpetrated by Islamic extremists."<sup>7</sup> As early as

2010, local law enforcement agencies were pushing aside government-driven reports on ISIS and Al Qaeda and asking the FBI and Homeland Security how to deal with the skinhead groups surfacing in their communities.<sup>8</sup> With cases on the rise, problems with the classification and reporting of incidents became obvious. The term “domestic terrorism” was often used when describing such attacks; however, the FBI did not call the mass shootings at the Mother Emanuel AME Church, the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, or the murder of Heather Heyer domestic terrorism. Why not? Could it be because those perpetrators were white?<sup>9</sup>

Omar Ricci was one of many witnesses who testified before the Committee on Oversight and Reform during these hearings. Ricci is the chairman of the Islamic Center of Southern California and past chairman of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. He is also a reserve officer with the Los Angeles Police Department. In written testimony submitted May 15, 2019, Ricci discussed his own experience with white supremacy threats, including feces-smearred pages of the Quran mailed to him after President Trump was inaugurated. Ricci explained how mosques, synagogues, and churches, feeling particularly vulnerable to an attack, are being forced to reallocate the little money they have to security measures: “It has forced a culture of a mosque being an open space for those seeking community and spirituality to adapt a tactical mindsight and have active shooter trainings.”<sup>10</sup> The monetary cost of protecting its members to ensure a safe place to gather, pray, and worship most certainly pales in comparison to the emotional price of constantly worrying that loved ones are not safe.

In the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement forced many of us to take a deeper look at systemic racism within our culture as well as within some police departments, including the very departments we call on to protect our churches. Just days into 2021, the world watched as thousands of insurgents, some of them carrying Confederate flags, pushed their way past police and took over the US Capitol, one of our nation’s *most* sacred spaces. These events continued to answer my question, “How did we get here?” which I

felt was essential to knowing before fully understanding how we can move toward a safer future.

In the coming chapters, we will focus on topics and conversations that are imperative to formulating a plan that is right for your faith community. We will unpack our fears—both bad and good kinds—and examine how places of worship are making decisions around guns. We will take an intimate look at the effects that mass tragedy has on congregations and how to move forward in the wake of these shootings as we seek to balance the tensions between our call to protect and our call to welcome. I will then walk you through a step-by-step process of creating a sensible security plan (and the pitfalls to avoid!) that reflects our shared commitment to God, our faith, and our congregations. Lastly, we will take a hard look at the communities outside our church walls and assess how we can stand up and speak out to create a safer place for all of God's children.