

Murderous nation needs ‘grace and mercy’ from church

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Murderous rampages have become so common, crime trackers disagree over proper terminology to describe the carnage.

“Active shooter” incidents the FBI tracked at 30 in 2017 marked a 50 percent increase over the previous year. But that category is not as expansive as “mass shootings” the crowd-sourced database Mass Shooting Tracker tallied at 427 in the same period.

In the midst of increasing violence, churches face the challenge of continuing to show God’s love, grace and mercy in the midst of Satan’s prolific work, pastors affected by such violence said in a series of interviews.

First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, east of San Antonio, suffered the deadliest church shooting in U.S. history Nov. 5, 2017, with 26 dead and 20 injured. The fatalities included Annabelle Pomeroy, the 14-year-old daughter of Pastor Frank Pomeroy.

“The church should respond to such tragedy as it would any other tragedy and that is with grace and mercy,” said Pomeroy, whose church broke ground on a new building in May. “Whether dealing with survivors or with perpetrators, we have been called to be emissaries of Christ in all situations. We are to extend a hand of forgiveness and then counsel with wisdom to whomever will listen, so as to lead others to Christ.”

Daily homicides in urban centers

Baltimore suffered the highest homicide rate in 2017 among U.S. cities with more than 500,000 people, according to FBI figures released Sept. 24. The city's 342 homicides the FBI tabulated yielded a rate of 56 per 100,000 people.

"These are 342 people made in the image of God. This has become normal—no outcry, no march, no national media attention," said Tally Wilgis, who founded Captivate Christian Church, a Southern Baptist church in urban Baltimore.

"While mass shootings draw media coverage, the loss of life is happening in our urban centers at an astronomical rate."

Wilgis, executive director of Baltimore Baptist Association, believes society has become desensitized by the rapidity of such occurrences, including lone killings and mass murders.

Among the murders with the highest casualties are the killing of 58 and wounding of 489 during an outdoor Las Vegas concert in October 2017, and the murder of 49 and wounding of 53 at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in June 2016. In that same two-year period, the FBI ranks the Sutherland Springs murders as the third highest.

"The contrast between heaven and earth cannot be clearly known unless the people of God are vocal ambassadors of heaven," said Wilgis, warning against complacency. "Sin, death and destruction are not acceptable conditions for the Christian. The lost world around us must know that violence, death, and destruction are not to be expected. Our hope rests in Jesus' making all things new."

In the nation's most recent mass shooting, a temporary employee at an

Aberdeen Rite Aid distribution center north of Baltimore began firing a handgun Sept. 20, killing three workers and injuring three others before killing herself, police said.

“We should be concerned with mass public shootings,” Wilgis said. “But the main reason we draw our attention to these events at the expense of what is happening in our inner cities is because we have accepted as a society the murder of people who do not look like us and do not live near us.”

‘God’s grace covered a whole city’

Marshall Blalock, pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, S.C., has sought to help the city heal from the 2015 mass murder of nine members of Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, killed by a visitor to their evening Bible study and prayer meeting.

“All mass shootings are horrible evils with devastating effects on families and entire communities,” Blalock said. “The real story, however, is how the church protected the city. Emanuel Church members showed grace in the face of a hate crime intended to cause a race war. The churches of the city took the lead to protect the city from the rage and hatred that could have destroyed it. The power of God’s grace covered a whole city in the midst of our worst nightmare.”

In 2016 and 2017 combined, the FBI tracked 50 cases of active shooters, resulting in 221 deaths and 722 wounded, excluding the killers. The two-year period held a stark increase from the period of 2000-2015, when 200 active shooter incidents yielded 578 deaths and 696 wounded victims, according to FBI reports.

The FBI defines an active shooter “as one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.” Mass killings, in FBI jargon, “include three or more killings in a single incident.”

Mass Shooting Tracker, which defines mass shootings as single outbursts of violence in which four or more people are shot, has counted 332 incidents which killed 383 and injured 1240, according to massshootingtracker.org.

Pomeroy recommends God's grace for a murderous society, and he said Christ must be the driving force in recovery.

"Christ has to be in the lead of all discussions. I believe that where many churches fail is by allowing committees and personalities (to) lead in the discussions and decisions in the aftermath and forget about God," he said. "As long as Christ is first in all conversations, I believe the community and the church both prosper."

Wilgis, Pomeroy and Blalock recommend churches take steps to make their property a safe haven from crime.

"I do not think we have seen the last of the persecution, therefore I would warn churches to set up a safety response team and have them adequately trained for all emergencies, from heart attacks to fire to active shooters," Pomeroy said. "Shun complacency and be proactive about making your church a safe refuge from the storm."