

Charleston Shooting Adds to Security Fears in Places of Worship

As Bishop Ernest C. Morris Sr. greeted worshipers arriving for services on Sunday at Mount Airy Church of God in Christ, a woman hurried over and asked a question on the minds of many parishioners at the large black church in Philadelphia: “Bishop, Bishop, are we safe this morning?”

The [massacre last week](#) at a Bible study in Charleston, S.C., has heightened anxiety among clergy members and the faithful alike, forcing black churches in particular to grapple again with their vulnerability to violent intruders.

But even as ministers around the country report that they are fielding more questions about security, for now at least, there is no rush among churches to follow the path of airports, schools and government buildings that have added metal detectors and armed security guards in the wake of violent attacks.

Many pastors, in Sunday’s sermons and in interviews, instead emphasized that churches kept their doors open to the public and were supposed to be sanctuaries for lost souls, welcoming to all.



“You can’t search people when they come into your church,” said Bishop Morris, the founding pastor of Mount Airy and a prelate who [oversees about 30 churches](#) affiliated with the Church of God in Christ in Pennsylvania. “I come to church and look 4,000 people in the face. I don’t know who’s in that crowd because there are always visitors. The best you can do is rely on your prayers.”

A security camera was installed in 2009 at Mount Airy Church of God in Christ in Philadelphia.

The Department of Homeland Security offers grants to congregations of all faiths in urban areas to bolster security measures under a program created by Congress in 2005, primarily at the urging of Jewish organizations concerned about anti-Semitic threats after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

But several African-American ministers interviewed this week said they were unaware of that pool of money to help protect against attacks.

Even as Charleston prepares for funerals for the nine shooting victims, which may include additional protection, security is a delicate issue. Religious leaders said that they wanted their congregants to be safe, but that grieving for the victims in Charleston was foremost in their minds. They are just beginning to think about whether they need to increase security at their churches, they said, and are reluctant to put in place security measures that they fear would make their churches less inviting, and that could be expensive.

Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, the presiding prelate in the Texas region of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to which the church in the Charleston attack belongs, said, “My prayer is that we don’t get to the point where there’s going to be somebody searching your bag coming in and you have to go through metal detectors, because church has always been a sacred place, a safe place, a sanctuary where you could come in freely.”

Bishop McKenzie, who will join other A.M.E. bishops at the funeral on Friday of the Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, who was killed in the Charleston shooting, added that she would prefer to focus on the deeper spiritual and societal causes of that attack.