

# Peace & Justice SUPPORT NETWORK

## A question of safety

by Jason Boone



**I**n this issue of *DoveTales* I'm glad to introduce a new effort designed to help you and your congregation as you wrestle with the question of safety.

The epidemic of mass shootings in our country has the topic of safety on all of our minds. How do we best keep schools, children and neighborhoods

safe? And the horrific incident of a shooting at a church in Texas last year has many of us asking how can we keep our churches safe?

That's a question made more urgent for us because of our beliefs. As followers of Jesus who believe in his message of nonviolence, taking arms to defend against such an event isn't an option. (The effectiveness of that approach is another discussion.)

Talking through these issues with people from across our church made me realize there isn't an easy answer to this question. But the inquiry led to interesting conversations. One of which was with Anna Groff of Dove's Nest. Many of us know and appreciate the work of Dove's Nest in helping faith communities keep children and youth safe.

Anna and I talked about how Mennonite churches might address the potential of gun violence and church safety in general. We found a lot of agreement in our hopes and approaches to these questions. We decided that Dove's Nest and PJSN should offer our thoughts, together,

on how to keep our churches safe.

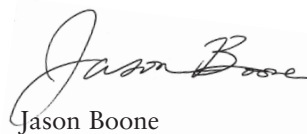
Please read the piece co-written by Anna and me. We don't claim to have all the answers, but I hope our thoughts can help you prioritize and take next steps.

I'm grateful to work with Anna and Dove's Nest on this important issue. The "network" function of PJSN encourages us to seek knowledge and forge partnerships with like-minded people and organizations. We are stronger when we do so.

You'll also read in this issue about the Spread the Peace grants we awarded this year. Being able to support local peace initiatives is one of the most important things we do. The creativity and dedication to peacemaking found in our churches is inspiring!

Of course, it is our partnership with you that ultimately allows PJSN to support, encourage and strengthen peace and justice efforts across Mennonite Church USA. Thank you for allowing us to do our work. Your prayers, your encouragement, and your financial support make it all possible!

Peace!



Jason Boone  
Coordinating Minister  
Peace and Justice Support Network



Photo by Isaac Fast

# How do we keep our church safe?

By Anna Groff and Jason Boone

**H**ow do we keep our church safe in a world that feels more dangerous than ever?

This question has been posed frequently to both Dove's Nest and the Peace and Justice Support Network, especially after 26 people were killed last year at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. It is asked of Dove's Nest because of its work with preventing child abuse and keeping kids safe. And of PJSN because of its work of offering practical peacemaking resources.

It's a complicated question, but some churches across the county have adopted a simple answer: Arm themselves via ushers or other forms of security and be ready to use deadly force if needed.

As Mennonites, we can't prescribe that. A central tenet of our tradition is that we don't take life, even in self-defense. We don't believe that the Jesus who told Peter to put down his sword would advise us to pick up a weapon.

That still leaves us with the practical question: How do we keep our churches safe? The question of safety assumes the existence of danger.

## Two categories of danger

We see two categories of danger that churches need to be aware of. There is the danger that arrives suddenly and loudly, with little or no warning and results in catastrophic damage. Mass shootings fall into this category.

The other danger is hidden and can go on for decades undetected. It, too, can cause catastrophic damage, though not the type that typically draws news cameras and media attention. Sexual abuse falls into this category. The forms of child abuse include physical, emotional, sexual and neglect. Sexual abuse is common in church settings.

The challenge for us is to keep these in proper perspective. Of the two, the danger of sexual abuse is much, much more likely to occur in a church setting than a shooting is. According to the 2006 Church Member Profile, more than one in five women in Mennonite Church USA congregations have experienced sexual abuse or violation, most while they were children or teens. For men, the incidence of abuse experienced before the age of 20 is 5.5 percent. The abuse didn't necessarily take place in a church setting, but

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for many Mennonites, the relationships in our family lives, community lives, school lives, and church lives are interconnected. (For society at large, the figures range from 17–25 percent for women and 3–16 percent for men, depending on the study and how people define sexual abuse or assault.)

In the clear majority of abuse cases, the offender is known by the child—either a family member, friend, teacher, etc. In a similar vein, the most common active shooter scenarios in a church setting involve a spillover of domestic violence. It's important that we don't subscribe to the myth of stranger danger.

Of course, to the victims and their families of a shooting incident, the pain and damage is real, no matter what statistics may say about how unlikely it may have been. And the desire to prevent this from happening in our churches is logical and healthy.

But whatever may be done to protect ourselves from the risk of sudden, unexpected danger of things like mass shootings, if we haven't properly taken steps to protect against the tragically common danger of sexual abuse, we haven't seriously addressed safety or followed our mandate as Christians to protect children and the vulnerable (Matthew 18:6, 19:14).

## Steps to take

If your church is wrestling with the question of safety, our recommendation is first to implement a child and youth protection policy. Many churches in Mennonite Church USA have such a policy. A recent survey of MC USA churches done by Dove's Nest discovered the good news that 75 percent of MC USA churches have a child protection policy. In 2010, 50 percent did. Does your church have a protection policy? If you have one in place, do you periodically revisit it as a church, updating as needed?

These are safety questions we need to ask ourselves. And not just once. They need to be an integral part of how we plan and tend to the lives of our church communities.

If you've already taken these steps and now are feeling the need to address the possibility of large-scale instances of violence in your church, we believe many of the same foundations of a successful child protection policy can be useful.

Know your community's space well. What are all the

ways someone could enter your space? Do you know all the ways to exit your church? Are there places in your building that someone could easily be alone with a child? Do you have windows on internal doors? Where is your first-aid kit? Do you know who has keys to the buildings?

What are the communication channels you'd use if you needed to respond to an incident? Who would be responsible for those channels?

Reviewing things that we assume are known might seem basic. We'd say instead that they are essential. Brushing your teeth seems basic, but you do it because it is essential to health. Knowing your church space and how you communicate internally is essential to safety.

These kinds of essential questions and intentional awareness can be applied to all churches—large or small spaces, rural or urban, 500 members or 20 members. The final plan you put together will be made in the unique context of your community.

We can't offer a simple answer on how to protect your church from a shooting incident or other forms of sudden violence. This will take prayer, discernment, and planning in your church community to arrive at a plan that reflects your values and meets your needs.

We've put together a resource page that can be found on both of our websites that includes articles about church safety and plans on how to deal with disruptive incidents. These may not answer all your questions, but are a great place to begin. You can visit that page at [PJSN.org](https://www.pjsn.org).

We hope more churches make similar plans. If your church has such a plan, would you consider sharing it on this resource page? If your congregation has developed plans to deal with disruptive or violent incidents, please e-mail them to [JasonB@Mennoniteusa.org](mailto:JasonB@Mennoniteusa.org) and we will post them.

We aren't called to live in fear, as individuals or as church communities, and we can take steps to minimize the risks that come with living in a world where evil does exist. We encourage your church to do all it can to keep its members safe. We believe that starts with addressing the most likely dangers first, then exploring how you would respond to less likely events, doing both in ways that reflect the words and teachings of Jesus.

## Spread the Peace grants

PJSN is thrilled to award Spread the Peace grants to five Mennonite churches to support their peace work!

- **New Foundation United in Christ**, Elkhart Indiana. Supporting their work with those in poverty or experiencing crisis.
- **Nueva Vida Norristown New Life Mennonite Church**, Norristown, Pennsylvania. Helping people obtain state mandated photo IDs.
- **Faith Mennonite Church**, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Neighborhood-based trainings teach restorative justice strategies to transform psychological trauma into nonviolent power.
- **Western District Conference**, North Newton, Kansas. Healing and empowerment through the arts.
- **Anabaptist Fellowship of Alamosa** (Colorado). Assisting local immigrant communities in areas such as Know Your Rights education, meetings with law enforcement regarding immigrant-related protocols, family assistance funds for processing immigration applications, and more.



**DoveTales**

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## Did you see our Facebook campaign against war taxes in April?

PJSN is glad to help bring attention to the absurdity of how our government uses our tax dollars! We will continue engaging in this important issue year-round through our partners at the National Campaign for a "peace tax fund."

Visit [PJSN.org](http://PJSN.org) to see all the graphics we used in the campaign. Feel free to circulate them to your family and friends to help raise awareness of where our tax money goes.



Peace and Justice Support Network is a partnership with Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Mission Network.