



# CRISIS OF FAITH

**A fatal shooting at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.  
Another one at a Lutheran church in Kansas two weeks later.  
Have these incidents prompted organizers of religious  
meetings to consider the potential for violence  
at faith-based venues?**



BY CHRISTOPHER DURSO

# Ask Lori M. Ionnitiu if the killings

of a physician during Sunday services at his church and a security guard on duty at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum within two weeks of each other this spring gave her pause about her job — as director of conventions and meetings for the National Offices for the Episcopal Church — and she chuckles. But there's not much humor when she does.

"I've done this for 26 years, and as long as I've worked for the Episcopal Church, the potential for that happening has always been there," Ionnitiu said. "We've had threats against people for as long as I've been here. We tend to be in the news a lot. Our leadership tends to be a focal point."

The two incidents don't seem to have been rooted in religious motives per se — but both occurred in faith-based ven-

ues. On May 31, George Tiller, a doctor who performed late-term abortions, was shot dead as he served as an usher at the Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, allegedly by an anti-abortion activist. Tiller had been the subject of protests and death threats for years, and in 1993 survived a shooting by another activist. Two weeks after Tiller was killed, on June 10, an 88-year-old white supremacist and Holocaust denier walked into the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and allegedly killed security guard Stephen Johns before being stopped by two other guards.

the Religious Conference Management Association (RCMA). "This heightens the need for planners to assess the nature of their assemblies and the possibility for incidents to arise."

## Murder in the Cathedral

When Terri Crovato, CMP, first heard about Tiller's slaying, she thought immediately of Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran Roman Catholic archbishop who was assassinated while saying Mass in 1980. "I was thinking, oh my gosh, it certainly has happened before," said Crovato, manager of meetings and events for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

Chuck Chadwick, the president of the National Organization of Church Security and Safety Management (NOCSSM),

**"Some people can get very upset about issues related to religion. We find that with the kinds of issues that we have to deal with, people do not become violent, they become loud."**

"It's sad but true, as the world becomes more turbulent, there are more and more zealots and fractional organizations that are increasing the threat level to denominations and their events," said DeWayne Woodring, CMP, CEM, executive director and CEO of

said the two shootings this spring have some relevance for religious conference managers — but only up to a point. "It's something to look at, but not really, because the motives don't ring to religion," Chadwick said. "They weren't after the people because they were religious."

Indeed, while the parallels between Romero's and Tiller's deaths were obvious to Crovato, she didn't make any direct connection to what she does for living. Nor did she when Johns was killed at the Holocaust museum. She said: "I guess I compartmentalize." But still, Crovato noted, "It does concern me that there would be the potential of someone who is attending our meeting being subjected to violence, and it's certainly because with a gathering of so many of these men, we cannot protect them from the moment they get on the plane."

While USCCB is no stranger to controversy, its protesters have never crossed the line. The organization holds two meetings a year — in June and November — for the 400 or so Catholic bishops in the United States. The June meeting rotates around the country and is attended by about 260 bishops; the November meeting is always held in Baltimore, and draws nearly 300 bishops. At both events, protesters are common. "Some people can get very upset about issues related to religion," Crovato said. "We find that [with] the kinds of issues that we have to deal with, people do not become violent, they

## On\_the\_Web

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become loud. For instance, any issue related to the gay community may draw protesters from both sides of the issue. Abortion is another issue that draws a lot of people from both sides to our meetings. And [the sexual-abuse scandal involving Catholic priests] was very big.”

The Episcopal Church’s annual meeting is much larger — a 10-day event that draws 8,000 to 10,000 people, takes up about 450,000 square feet, and doesn’t shy away from hard-hitting issues. “As long as I’ve worked for the church, there’ve been issues of sexuality,” Ionnitiu said. “When I got here, it was women being priests and bishops. Now, it’s homosexuality. We’ve been in the news since our convention in 2003” — when the church confirmed its first openly gay bishop.

The media coverage has brought plenty of protesters, Ionnitiu said, and “we’ve had some verbally crazy people show up. But I used to work in hotels, and we had that happen all the time, too.” The Holocaust museum and Lutheran church shootings didn’t give Ionnitiu pause, nor does the prospect of some other pre-planned attack. “What I have always been concerned about is, somebody gets up in the morning, hears that your convention’s in town, hears the issues you’re dealing with, and decides they don’t like it,” Ionnitiu said. “They could be the nicest person in the world, and they snap because they hear about some issue we’re dealing with during the two weeks that we’re in the city.”

The possibility of violence is also something that the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) has considered for years. “We’re a very mainstream organization,” said Edina Lekovic, MPAC’s communications director. “People who attend our events are about as American as you can get. But since Sept. 11, we have been very vigilant about providing adequate security

at all of our events.” MPAC has never had any “real substantial threats,” Lekovic said — just assorted protesters outside its 1,500-attendee annual convention in Long Beach who seem to be “right-wing Christians who make a life out of attending other people’s events. It’s the usual ‘you’re going to hell’ crowd. More than anything, it’s a nuisance.”

### **Safe and Secure**

Church services aren’t religious meetings — but some of the churches where NOCSSM’s members provide security consulting are big enough that their weekly programs could be considered a recurring conference, with thousands of people worshipping in an auditorium, an arena, or even a stadium. They share something else with religious conferences as well: They’re a place where the delicate, the sensitive, and the deeply personal are often dragged into the light.

“The church is sometimes called the hospital for the soul,” Chadwick said. “When there’s hurting people, they take out or act out their frustration with the world on the church. That’s what we see in most of these types of shootings — these are domestic-disturbance-type shootings. Most of the time we never find out what their motives were, because most of the time they commit suicide.”

Through years of organizing and safeguarding faith-based events, both Chadwick and religious conference professionals have developed strategies for ensuring public safety:

**Do your homework.** Three to four months before a meeting, Crovato visits the host city and talks to the local Catholic diocese about “issues that might spill over to our meeting.” And, Crovato said, “we have a lot of advance contact with the local security people — the local police, and the hotel and

their security force. They can tell us in advance if they have heard of any potential protesters or concerns.”

**Know the law — and use it.** Each venue is located in a municipality that has its own laws about public access. “That’s part of our site-vetting process — when we get protesters, where do they have to be?” Ionnitiu said. “Never assume that protesters have to be in a particular place.” Added Chadwick: “You need to deal with them legally. You’re in a facility. If you want them not on your convention grounds, you need to call the police, and the police will enforce what they see to be reasonable.”

**Be respectful.** Most of the people who show up to picket your meeting — even the ones shouting until they’re red in the face — don’t present a danger to anything more than your eardrums. And they have every right to be there. “Protesting is part of the American way,” Crovato said, “so our policy is to treat them respectfully, listen to their concerns, and respond as best we can.”

**Show yourself.** “We want to have a visible security presence, but not an intrusive security presence,” Lekovic said. “We want people to know that we take their security and the overall logistical flow of the event very seriously, but it is certainly not intended to be front and center. It’s intended to be in the background.”

**Limit access.** Managing protesters is important, but it’s only the most visual aspect of maintaining security. You can’t ignore what’s going on behind the scenes — starting with who gets to go behind the scenes. Said RCMA’s Woodring: “So often, anyone can wander into religious events with no control of their wanderings.”

USCCB’s meetings take place in a single hotel and are “really not open to the general public,” Crovato said. “We have official observers, so everyone who does attend the meetings is credentialed in one form or another, and that includes the media.” Some

protesters will go so far as to check into the meeting hotel, “because they realized they can get better access,” Crovato said. To help control that, USCCB gets the hotel to prohibit cameras in the lobby during the meeting, which prevents the media from “rushing in with a camera so when it’s on the news [a protest] will look much bigger than it is.”

**Assign duties.** “It is critical to develop a quality crisis-management plan,” Woodring said. “Central in the plan is the hard-core training of the staff — not just the reading of instructions. Each person needs to know precisely what their role is in the plan and how to professionally respond should a problem arise.”

According to Chadwick, that means asking, “Who are the people who are going to carry out the policies and procedures you’ve put down?” He added: “You may have your greeters who are on the outside. When you come in, you have your ushers. Those types of people are what we call non-intervention-capable people. We don’t want them laying hands on anybody. And then we have the intervention-capable people — your active law enforcement.”

Along those lines, Ionnitiu delegates security responsibilities to several groups of volunteers during the Episcopal Church’s annual meeting. First, there’s “a whole team of people” who help with crowd control. Then there’s a higher level of volunteers — priests and laypersons — “who are pretty savvy in the world of public safety.” And finally, Ionnitiu said, “my other core volunteers that aren’t necessarily in the public-safety area — they’re all trained in medical emergencies and to keep their eyes and ears open for anything. We’ve got eyes and ears all over.” ■

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