Parishes seek to ramp up security after recent crimes

Along with security issues some parishes regularly face, the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris have given them another reason to consider whether their security plans are comprehensive.

While local experts identify risks and stress the need to be alert and take steps to increase security, they also say heightened awareness can enhance a parish's ability to welcome and serve parishioners and guests.

Serious incidents at churches are rare, but trending upward. In 2014, 74 violent deaths occurred at U.S. faith-based organizations, compared to 22 in 1999, according to Carl Chinn, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, who speaks to faith-based operators and law-enforcement groups about ministry security. Since 1999, he has compiled data about criminal incidents at religious institutions from major news outlets, law enforcement press releases and public court records.

In Minneapolis, two recent incidents at St. Olaf have led the downtown parish to evaluate its security.

"We want to make sure people feel safe when they come here," said Don Grant, parish operations director.

That's why St. Olaf hired the Minneapolis security firm Archway Defense to assess parish security, including better management of its skyway and other entrances.

Peter Johnson, who founded Archway Defense in 2014, said churches can defend themselves. He noted that the Catechism of the Catholic Church approves the legitimate defense of persons and societies (No. 2263).

Getting parishioners together to talk about security is the first step, Johnson said. Archway Defense offers a six-hour course for parish leaders and volunteers covering issues including specific church needs, legal considerations and how to assess behavior.

"Just being more aware of what to look for, and how to approach safety and security, will naturally lend itself to help protecting the people along with the property," Johnson said.

Mary Bosscher, an administration consultant and parishioner of St. Pius X in White Bear Lake, has advised many archdiocesan parishes for nearly 25 years. She said parishioners need to be involved, alert and accept personal responsibility, seeking to care for each other as a faith family, welcome visitors and value their church facilities and property.

That awareness should also enhance hospitality as staff and

parishioners try to see and recognize each person who comes in, Bosscher said.

Setting up a hospitality desk at the entrance and asking people to sign in for faith formation and other events are ways to welcome while seeing parishioners and guests.

Along with welcoming guests, ushers and greeters can be trained to speak with them and recognize non-standard behavior, Johnson said.

"You're still going to have the same open doors," he said. "Everything is going to be the same. The only difference is you're going to have people who know what to look for and are empowered to respond if something negative happens."

Archway also performs parish security assessments, Johnson said. He recommends that parishes partner with local police, fire and nearby churches in developing their security plan.

Protecting parishes from theft is another security concern. Pieces of the solid bronze tabernacle stolen from St. Pascal Baylon in St. Paul Sept. 4 have surfaced in pawn shops, but police haven't identified a suspect, said Mike Lentz, parish administrator. The parish has added security and is working to increase awareness, he said.

St. Charles Borromeo pastor Father Troy Przybilla said he is

also interested in security programs. Although the St. Anthony parish doesn't face the challenges of inner-city parishes, it does have security issues. Following several thefts in and around the parish this summer, the staff developed safety guidelines for parishioners.

Father Przybilla said he wants the parish to be welcoming, but he recognizes the need to protect the church and parishioners.

"Are we going to sit back and just keep our fingers crossed and hope nothing happens," he asked, "or are we going to say, 'What's happening in the world?'" and respond.