

Guns, Construction of Threat, and Lived Ecclesiologies

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COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN THE US CURRENTLY FACE MANY threats—threats to the very existence of religious bodies. The decline in religious participation, noted by researchers and religious leaders alike, is a trend church members experience firsthand, as they see fewer people in the pews with each passing year. Other existential threats lurk as well: a growing economic crisis that exposes just how vulnerable many are to poverty, an undeniably changing climate that brings more extreme weather patterns, contentious political dynamics that divide families and disrupt social cohesion, the exposure of racial injustice which enflames conflict and, of course, a global pandemic that has ravaged through our local communities. These are threats experienced throughout society, as well as by congregations already aware of their own decline.

However, the threat that has particularly galvanized faith communities and shaped their sense of identity—their *lived ecclesiologies*—is violence. In recent years, high-profile shootings in faith communities as people gathered for worship have challenged, if not shattered, a sense of invulnerability. At Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015; First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in 2017; and the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018—sanctuaries were violated as people of faith were murdered while they prayed. This trend stretches back in time. In 2002, there were shootings at Our Lady of Peace Catholic Church in Lynbrook, New York, and a Benedictine monastery in Conception, Missouri; in 2012, a mass shooting occurred at a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin; and in 2019, two deadly attacks took place in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. And there were others in between. No religious tradition or region, it seems, is immune to the threat of gun violence in their sacred spaces. A sense of threat and vulnerability has rippled throughout all religious communities.

Make no mistake: gun violence in houses of worship is still very rare. About 39% of congregations reported experiencing any kind of

crime in a single year (2014). These were primarily property crimes, including vandalism and theft. Less than 4% of congregations reported violent crimes with only .44% of responding congregations specifying that they were sites of homicides.¹ Even so, mass shootings in religious spaces have increased. While most were not fatal, in the span of twenty-five years, from 1980 to 2005, there were 139 such shootings—an average of 5.56 per year. In a much shorter period of time—the ten years between 2006 and 2016—there were 147 church shootings at a rate of almost 15 per year, more of which were deadly.² With an estimated 350,000+ congregations in the US,³ gun violence in communities of faith is still a statistical trace element. But it does have a disproportionate impact on the social imaginary. Statistician and essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls such phenomena “Black Swan events.”⁴ These are seemingly random events, outliers in our experience, but they have an extreme impact on our collective consciousness and push us into constructing explanations.

Religion is in the business of cultivating narratives and making sense of what is going on in the world. Infused with understandings of God as a “rock,” “refuge,” and “protector,” the Abrahamic religions center notions of safety and security in God’s relationship to God’s people. We gather in “sanctuaries,” apart from the noise of the world. The Greek word for church, *ἐκκλησία*, is a compound word meaning, literally, “called out.” In the context of an ecclesiology that emphasizes being set apart and protected, the threats to the social fabric and the planet can seem remote, outside of the sanctuary of faith.

For faith communities, the shock of high-profile shootings in religious contexts has created an acute cognitive dissonance with lived theologies that center an all-powerful deity. Those in the Abrahamic faiths are familiar with the many promises of God’s protection in the Psalms: “The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life” (Psalm 121:7), and “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). How, then, should congregations

¹ Christopher Scheitle, “Religious Congregations’ Experiences with, Fears of, and Preparations for Crime: Results from a National Survey,” *Review of Religious Research* 60, no. 1 (March 2018): 104, journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1007/s13644-017-0316-3.

² “Church Shootings,” *Center for Homicide Research*, www.homicidecenter.org/research/church-shootings/; Francie Diep, “Church Shootings are Becoming Much More Common,” *Pacific Standard*, November 6, 2017, www.psmag.com/news/church-shootings-are-becoming-much-more-common.

³ “Fast Facts about American Religion,” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, www.hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html.

⁴ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

understand their vulnerability in the face of danger? How might this affect how they see God, as well as themselves in the world?

The challenge confronting lived ecclesiologies has been further complicated by evolving considerations congregations must now address regarding their identity in relation to “the other.” All the traditions represented in the grim list of atrocities above teach that “the stranger” and “the alien” should be welcomed. The welcome of the stranger by Mother Emanuel’s Bible study hit a nerve with faith communities who understand hospitality as a core value in their mission and identity. This has been new territory for both clergy and lay people alike. Preparing for and responding to the threat of an active shooter is not part of the theological education that forms leaders, nor is it a staple of the theological canon. Violence in the sanctuary is incomprehensible; there exists no language capable of formulating an adequate response. How then might we speak of security in God, and how might we relate this to physical safety?

In this paper, I argue that the manner in which ecclesial communities construct threat—particularly concerning gun violence—exerts a profound influence on their lived ecclesiologies, actively shaping theological self-reflection in real time. After considering the nature of ecclesiology, I will draw on the life and work of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who focused deeply on the meaning of the Church in his own violent context of Nazi Germany. As will be seen, the young theologian was writing and teaching whilst he, his students, and his colleagues were in the crosshairs of the Nazis, from 1932 to 1945. The constant threat of violence shaped how Bonhoeffer understood the church in the world. His theological evolution in this circumstance provides insight into the relationship of threat to ecclesiology. After describing some of the specific threats Bonhoeffer encountered, I will show that this led to his understanding of the church that was at once in resistance as well as being radically the “one for others.” As communities of faith in the US become conscious of the threat of violence in their contexts, their own ecclesiologies are impacted. I will consider current social research, including my own, that examines how communities are conceptualizing and responding to threat in ways that reflect emerging understandings of themselves. As with the church in Nazi Germany, threat can lead to very different lived ecclesiologies.

WHAT IS ECCLESIOLOGY?

Within systematic theology, ecclesiology is that subdiscipline which reflects on the church itself. Here, theologians engage a number of questions: What, in fact, is the church? What are the marks of the church? That is, what makes the church *the church*? What are its necessary, definitive activities and sacraments? How does it relate to

Christ and salvation? How is the church present in history and society? In what sense is the church holy in relation to sin? Is there an essential and invisible church apart from its institutional manifestations? Can we speak of the unity of the church in the context of such organizational splintering? Theological questions about the church are myriad. Theologians, like the early Bonhoeffer, often write normatively about such questions; that is, in ideal forms of what the church should be.

But finally, ecclesiology is the theological understanding of the church's identity. This identity, however, is not formed within an academic bubble but rather in historical context. The Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng frames his work on ecclesiology (called simply *The Church*) in terms of a tension between "essence and form" that allows for changing expressions of the church:

This constant factor in the history of the Church and of its understanding of itself is only revealed in change; its identity exists only in variability, its continuity only in changing circumstances, its permanence only in varying outward appearances. In short, the "essence" of the Church is not a matter of metaphysical stasis but exists only in constantly changing historical "forms."⁵

Ecclesiology as the identity of the church is a *lived* theological expression constructed from a number of sources, such as tradition and history (which contribute continuity), but also cultural context and experience. This is what Bonhoeffer would call "the concrete." As such, lived ecclesiology changes and adapts through complex social processes which construct and continually reconstruct it.

Lived ecclesiology provides a framework that enables ecclesial communities to locate themselves in their social and historical contexts—who they are in relation to the world. Part of the function of ecclesial identity is to generate and nurture narratives which serve to create social coherence and facilitate meaning-making. A church's sense of its identity, its lived ecclesiology, contributes to the worldview of its members and supplies a lens for meaning-making—so that life, in fact, *makes sense*. In doing so, lived ecclesiologies interpret that which is good and of God, interpret and account for crises, and move the ecclesial community through framing narratives toward the good. The lived ecclesiology of a faith community also provides an understanding of its authority which enables it to differentiate between that which is good, that which threatens it, and how to respond to the perceived threat.

⁵ Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 4.

BONHOEFFER AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THREAT

Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was remarkable for many reasons. His decision to join a conspiracy against Hitler and eventual execution just days before the end of World War II are often the first things that come to mind. Also impressive are the volume and quality of the writing he completed during his thirty-nine years, especially considering his voluminous pastoral and ecumenical work, travel, and the Nazi reign of terror from 1933 to 1945. These were not ideal working conditions for a theologian, yet Bonhoeffer was able to write works that have endured even as he was banned from publishing and speaking and then imprisoned for the last two years of his life.⁶

The core questions he wrestled with throughout his work were Christological and ecclesiological: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” and “What is the church?” For Bonhoeffer, the two were related and became inseparable as his work developed. His first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, was published in 1927, when he was only twenty-one years old.⁷ The formidable Protestant theologian Karl Barth (who would later become a close colleague) called this ecclesiology a “theological miracle.”⁸ This was followed two years later by a second dissertation, *Act and Being*.⁹ The arguments in each are complex and beyond this short treatment to summarize. But they introduce Bonhoeffer’s theological approach to understanding Christ and the church as being in dynamic interaction. Both here and throughout his later work, his theology is marked by *sociality*: God, Christ, persons, and church-community cannot be understood apart from their being-in-relationship.¹⁰ His ecclesiology does not present an invisible or abstract understanding of the church, nor a transcendent Christ who is pure being apart from acting. Rather the church, for Bonhoeffer, is how Christ is present and knowable in the world (“in the concrete” was a recurring phrase in his work). Christ is in

⁶ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945*, trans. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, trans. Reinhold Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998).

⁸ This is an oft-cited quote by Barth, who was generous in his praise of Bonhoeffer (see *Church Dogmatics* 4.2, 533 and 3.4, 4). This particular quotation is believed to have originated in a private conversation. See Matthew Puffer, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Christ College Faculty Publications* 52 (2014), n. 33, scholar.valpo.edu/cc_fac_pub/52.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996).

¹⁰ Clifford Green, “Human Sociality and Christian Community,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 113–133.

relationship with us, and we are in the church-community with each other in ways at once human and tangible, divine and demonstrable.

As sophisticated as this early ecclesiology of the young theologian was, it came from a rich theological imagination rather than lived experience. Bonhoeffer was not so active in the state-supported Lutheran church growing up. As he matured, his understanding of the church was challenged by experiences that pushed him to refine his ecclesiology. Although the basic concepts presented in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* remained defining themes throughout his work—namely, the intimate dynamic of Christ and church in concrete historic context—his ecclesiology changed as it was confronted by the human realities he encountered and the cognitive dissonance it created.

ECCLESIOLOGY AND THREAT

The old community organizing axiom asserts that in order to successfully mobilize people, you need a *villain* and a *victim*. A threat (represented by a villain) must exist to clarify that which is good (represented by an innocent victim) and where the boundaries of the community lie. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology evolved in relationship to, and was enlivened by, threats encountered by the church to its integrity and existence in the context of Nazism. Despite the well-argued ecclesiology presented in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer's tone was decidedly academic; he was in dialogue with philosophy, theology, and the social and psychological theories prevalent in the academy of his day. His early appropriation of the "concrete" notwithstanding, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church was not drawn from experience. It was only when he came to Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1930–1931, where he encountered the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem (led by the venerable Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.) that Bonhoeffer's ideas evolved. As he participated in this prominent African American congregation his ecclesiology matured. Here was a congregation threatened by poverty, racism, and violence, yet empowered and joyful in lively worship. Their hope and identity was grounded in their reliance on God. Their "Black Jesus" permeated their sense of identity and agency in the world. The suffering precipitated by external threats animated by white supremacy, from hunger to lynching, did not drain this congregation but defined them as a people of Jesus, who shared in their suffering and gave them life.¹¹

Other critical experiences of threat in Bonhoeffer's life contributed to the evolution of his thinking regarding the questions, "Who is Christ

¹¹ Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

for us today?” and “What is the church?” When he returned to Germany in 1931, fascism was on the rise. Shortly after Hitler became Chancellor on January 30, 1933, the totalitarian Nazi regime moved to dominate every aspect of society, including the church.¹² Within the Protestant church, a group called the German Christians developed nazified ecclesiology and theology and sought to infiltrate and dominate churches so that they would align themselves with Nazi ideology. Their efforts generated a backlash within the German Protestant Church, leading to the formation of the Confessing Church, in which the young Bonhoeffer became a central figure. In the spring of 1934, church leaders who opposed the German Christians unanimously approved the Barmen Declaration, a document which became central to the Confessing Church. The Barmen Declaration vehemently and unequivocally denounced the false teachings of the German Christians and asserted the true nature of the church, which owed allegiance only to Jesus Christ, not the *Fuhrer*. The German Christian threat to the very identity and independence of German Protestantism led the Confessing Church movement to establish its boundaries and identity in the Barmen Declaration.¹³ Both groups, it should be noted, remained within the German Protestant Church institutionally, but responded to the threat of the state very differently—that is, in terms of compliance or resistance.

In the early years of Nazism, there was an ongoing and contentious battle between the German Christians (who after 1933 held prominent leadership posts in the German Protestant Church) and the Confessing Church. As Nazism tightened its hold on German society, the Confessing Church movement came under growing state pressure. During this period Bonhoeffer became director of one of five underground seminaries of the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde (these seminaries were not recognized by the official Protestant leadership; after 1937 they were banned by the state). Here he was able to move his ecclesiology from the thought experiments of his earlier publications to a social experiment in Christian community: how could “Christ existing as community” be embodied in practice? Ever aware of the looming threats of war and compromise with the German Christian leadership of the church, Finkenwalde was formed as a disciplined community, organized around the daily rhythms of prayer, work, play, and breaking bread, with an intentional balance of solitude and togetherness. Although it drew on monastic models, the purpose of the community was not to be a fortress against the threat of

¹² Hitler had signed a Concordat with the Roman Catholic Church on July 20, 1933, ensuring the rights of the Church and its non-engagement with the government.

¹³ Victoria J. Barnett, “Transcending Barmen: Confessing in Word and Deed,” *Christian Century* 111, no. 16 (May 11, 1994): 495–498.

Nazism that withdrew and isolated itself from the surrounding evil; rather, it sought to prepare seminarians to resist the forces assaulting the church, their country, and those in other countries. Bonhoeffer was intent on forming faithful and courageous Christian pastors who could serve even in the context of Nazism.

The Gestapo closed the seminary in 1937. The following year the Confessing Church unraveled, as half of its clergy took the oath of allegiance to Hitler that Protestant church leadership demanded of all clergy. A number of Bonhoeffer's seminarians were imprisoned during this period for various offenses. In 1939 the vast majority of German clergy and seminarians, including those in the Confessing Church, enlisted to fight in the German army (seeking conscientious objector status was not an option). Of the 181 Finkenwalde students, fifty-two were killed in battle. Bonhoeffer tried to stay in touch with members of the Confessing Church in this diaspora to encourage them in the faith. He also chronicled the experience of Finkenwalde in one of his most beloved books, *Life Together*, a lived ecclesiology.¹⁴

As any semblance of corporate church-community life became increasingly impossible, and Bonhoeffer's resistance to the morally inverse reality led him into the conspiracy, he did not abandon his core questions. In a letter to his co-conspirators at the end of 1942 he wrote despairingly about what they had lost:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds. We have become cunning and learned the arts of obfuscation and equivocal speech. Experience has rendered us suspicious of human beings, and often we have failed to speak to them a true and open word. Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical. *Are we still of any use?*¹⁵

Shortly after writing this, he was arrested in April 1943 and spent the next two years in prison. As discouraged as he was, he wrote prolifically in prison, particularly in correspondence with his best friend and muse, Eberhard Bethge. He remained realistic about the threat of destruction of human life, including his, which deepened his questions and reflections about the future of the church, as shall be seen. To him, the church-community, as Christ in the world, does not exist in and for itself, but exists for the other—otherwise it is not the church. Bonhoeffer developed this kenotic view of the church in many of his writings. In fact, while in prison in 1944, he continued to wrestle with the nature and meaning of the church, even as the latter was

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtress (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996).

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years": *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 30.

threatened on all sides by violence, coercion, and complicity. If anything, his realistic assessment of threat sharpened and shaped his ecclesiology. Decades later, in a different time and place, contemporary congregations do not feel threatened by the guns of the state, but by those of individuals who are motivated not by a desire for political dominance, but by various types of hatred—racial, religious, sexual, or social. Still, faith communities must adjust their identities and formulate a response.

THE THREAT OF VIOLENCE AND PRACTICE OF SECURITY

This highly selective look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is offered as an invitation to consider the role the sense of threat plays in shaping our own lived ecclesiologies. The ways Christians understand the church impacts their agency in engaging the world. As noted earlier, threat is not the only source of lived ecclesiologies, but it is playing an increasingly definitive role.

Working with fellow sociologist David Yamane, I have spent the last several years (2018–2022; paused in 2020 because of the pandemic and resumed in 2022) studying how congregations have responded to the growing sense of threat posed by gun violence, how congregations are conceptualizing safety and security, and how these factors might be contributing to changes in the lived ecclesiologies of congregations.¹⁶ We have conducted ethnographic research in congregations, participated in national training programs for church security teams, and conducted in-depth interviews with clergy in Texas, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina, representing a diversity of religious traditions, contexts, and racial/ethnic identities.

Our studies have revealed a variety of responses among congregations.¹⁷ Many congregations have increased their security systems, although locking doors during worship has been seen as problematic in light of commitments to hospitality. Some have engaged in active shooter training, although others have felt this heightens anxiety and introduces distrust of newcomers. Many have encouraged members to carry guns to worship, usually “concealed,” but in some cases open carry; for other congregations, this is antithetical to their mission of peace. Some have organized “security teams,” which can participate in the growing number of trainings for volunteer teams. Others have

¹⁶ We are grateful to the Louisville Institute for a Collaborative Inquiry Team Grant for our study, “The Body Armor of Christ: Constructing Safety and Security in Communities of Faith,” and our two clergy teammates who assisted in our regional research, Rev. Mark Tyler in Philadelphia, PA, and Rev. Kyle Childress in Nacogdoches, TX.

¹⁷ Katie Day and David Yamane, “Body Armor: Constructing Safety and Security in Communities of Faith,” presented at Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Las Vegas, NV, October 26, 2018.

hired professional security teams. Often these steps were the result of congregational discernment or conflict. The particular strategies adopted were impacted by a number of variables, including the congregation's size and resources, its denomination or tradition (and attachment to it), whether it is independent or part of a connectional system, and its demographic makeup (especially racial and socio-economic), regional location, and cultural context.

These ethnographic findings beg for quantitative data, of which relatively little has been collected. There are few published quantitative studies on security in communities of faith, and the ones that exist do not necessarily pose parallel questions, so comparison and corroboration prove to be difficult. Here, I will primarily draw on three recent studies: a phone survey of 1,000 Protestant clergy and 1,002 Protestant churchgoers conducted in September 2019 by Lifeway Research;¹⁸ a multi religious web and mail survey of 1,380 congregations in the spring of 2015 (Scheitle);¹⁹ and finally the 2020 survey of Faith Communities Today (FACT) that received over 15,000 responses from congregations from eighty denominations and four religious traditions.²⁰ The FACT study also has responses from before and after the March 13, 2020 pandemic shutdown, which had a dramatic impact on religious communities.

Just prior to the shutdown in March 2020, about five out of ten of FACT respondents reported that they were concerned (somewhat or very) about "personal safety and security when you gather."²¹ For megachurches in the sample, there was a marked increase in security measures taken pre- and post-2015. This is not surprising given the recent high-profile church shootings. The terror of these atrocities has impacted communities of faith across theological and geographical spectrums. "Church shootings" has joined our lexicon, along with "school shootings," "mall shootings," and "theater shootings"—shocking because these were violations of spaces the public had considered safe.

Still not all congregations responded in the same way or to the same degree. The FACT study reports that only 16% of congregations

¹⁸ Aaron Earls, "Most Churches Plan for Potential Gunman, Divided over Armed Congregants," *Lifeway Research*, January 28, 2020, research.lifeway.com/2020/0128/most-churches-plan-for-potential-gunman-divided-over-armed-congregants/.

¹⁹ Scheitle, "Religious Congregations' Experiences."

²⁰ "FACT 2020 Survey Results," *Faith Communities Today*, faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/; see especially "FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire," 7–8, faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FACT-2020-Common-Questionnaire-Frequencies.pdf.

²¹ This breakdown of the data pre-and post-pandemic shutdown was provided by the Principal Investigator, Scott Thumma, in an email to the author July 31, 2023, and cannot be viewed in the FACT 2020 survey results.

are not at all concerned about safety and security,²² a proportion also reflected in the Lifeway Research data. These we described as the “do nothing” response. The unimaginable was kept at a distance in the congregational narrative: “It could never happen here.” Whether this came out of a belief in the absolute protection of God’s people by God, or an exceptionalist rationale that the victims were of a different race, religion, denomination, or from a different region of the country, it served to insulate the congregation from a sense of threat and fear. Hence this group did not take any precautionary measures. For example, one Mainline Protestant minister in Texas reported that his congregation was “completely unaffected” by the horrific shooting in Sutherland Springs, only fifteen months earlier and just four hours away. On the other hand, they did have their historic building evaluated by the Red Cross for tornado-readiness, which was a bigger concern.²³

Other congregations did take actions in response to a growing concern about safety, but not uniformly so. Scheitle found a correlation between fear levels and experience. That is, those groups more likely to have been victimized by violent crimes, hate crimes (including vandalism), and threats communicated by mail, email, or phone had an understandable fear of future crime. Jews, Muslims, and African American Protestants were much more likely to have been victims of violence, have higher levels of fear than other Christian and nontraditional groups, and take action to prepare against future threats.²⁴ Interestingly, the “liberal nontraditional” category which included Unitarian Universalists, for example, also reported higher incidents of threats and religious violence. Scheitle suggests that this could be the result of controversial public stands, such as on LGBTQ issues.²⁵ It should be kept in mind that this research was conducted prior to the high-profile shootings in Charleston and Sutherland Springs, which heightened a sense of vulnerability, especially in Christian communities.

Congregations have taken a range of preventative security measures, from the simplest to the most complex (and expensive) technologies and those involving armed protection. In Scheitle’s data, respondents were asked about eighteen possible security measures. More than 40% indicated they took four or more of these measures. Again, percentages were higher for Black Protestants (46%), Muslim (66%), and Jewish (72%) respondents than for Protestants as a whole

²² “FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 7.

²³ Interview, Nacogdoches, Texas (2/24/19).

²⁴ Scheitle, “Religious Congregations’ Experiences,” 108.

²⁵ Scheitle, “Religious Congregations’ Experiences,” 105.

(33%) and the overall sample (40%).²⁶ And again, this was before the wave of high-profile church shootings that began with Mother Emanuel in June 2015.

As concerns began to rise after Mother Emanuel, local law enforcement began consulting with religious groups in their community. In our research, Yamane and I found that often the first thing law enforcement recommended was to lock the doors of the sanctuary during worship. However, for many congregations this simple action presents a theological challenge to the core value of hospitality. One rabbi described to us the elaborate security system in place in his synagogue. On Shabbat, they allowed themselves to be guided by rabbinic teachings prohibiting any sort of barrier for anyone wanting to come to worship. He concluded, “During the week, we are like Fort Knox. But on Shabbat, we are an open book.” A critical point in their religious identity conflicted with the very real sense of threat borne out by experience.

In a Protestant congregation we visited, the suggestion to lock doors during worship had provoked a conflict between members who were parents of young children and the growing number of single (and childfree) adults. After prolonged debate and hurt feelings, the parents prevailed, and the doors were locked. The FACT study found that over 60% of houses of worship are not locked during their sabbath services. For those that are, there has been a shift in the last five years. Only 9% locked their doors prior to 2015; that number has more than tripled by 2020 to accounting for 30%.²⁷ In taking this seemingly simple step, communities of faith have had to negotiate dimensions of their identity and how they understand themselves within their social contexts. Will they “welcome the stranger” or direct their attention to their own security? Küng’s statement that the church’s “identity exists only in variability, its continuity only in changing circumstances”²⁸ resonates.

For those with resources, there exist any number of ways to secure buildings, including alarms, security cameras, and centrally controlled window blinds and locks. Data from Scheitle and FACT show that over a third of houses of worship have installed alarm systems. Again, this number has risen significantly post-2015 according to the FACT study. Scheitle’s data show that groups more vulnerable to crime have higher proportion of alarms (African American Protestants: 65%; synagogues: 71%). Prior to 2015, about one in five respondents in Scheitle’s study utilized security cameras (23% outside, 19% inside, again with higher rates for Jewish and Muslim communities).²⁹ This

²⁶ Scheitle, “Religious Congregations’ Experiences,” 110.

²⁷ “FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 8.

²⁸ Küng, *The Church*, 4.

²⁹ Scheitle, “Religious Congregations’ Experiences,” 110.

aligns with the findings of the FACT study: 13% of all-sized congregations had cameras before 2015. After the media coverage of the massacre at Mother Emanuel in June 2015, 25% more installed security cameras, bringing the total proportion of churches having video surveillance to almost 40%.³⁰ Increasing security measures is an indicator of a growing sense of threat and concern for safety among people of faith. But here the size of the congregation matters. When broken down by the number of worship attendees, the concern grew with size. Only 44% of small congregations (fewer than 50 attendees) expressed safety concerns but as the number of gathered increased, so did concern for safety and security. Over 67% of largest congregations (with over 1,800 in worship) were worried about safety and concern. They also had more resources for security measures.³¹

Technological security strategies can be incorporated unobtrusively in sacred spaces, invisible to those gathered for worship, and do not therefore challenge ecclesial identification with the value of hospitality. They are precautionary responses, but other strategies draw more on human agency, engaging members at a more conscious level. These include active shooter training, having volunteer or professional security guards, and the introduction of guns into the worship space. The worst-case scenario these strategies anticipate is the possibility of an assailant in the sanctuary. In the Lifeway Research survey, 62% of its responding clergy indicated that they have “an intentional plan for an active shooter situation,” which could include any one (or more) of these more agentive strategies.³² Similarly, 57% of the FACT respondents reported that their congregations did have “training on general safety and security.”³³ There are a variety of ways an “intentional plan” or “training” could be understood. It could mean that there is an informational sheet in the hymn rack in each pew (much like the safety sheet on airplanes). Some congregations provide training for ushers to be able to respond in case of an emergency. Some have had law enforcement officers do presentations to the entire congregation, or experiential sessions where congregation members walk through how they might respond in such a situation—how to escape, where to hide, when and how to confront a shooter. However, as the plan and training are implemented, there is increased engagement of congregants with their own vulnerability and confrontation with the possibility that the worship space might not be safe.

³⁰ “FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 8.

³¹ “FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 8.

³² Earls, “Most Churches Plan for Potential Gunman.”

³³ “FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 8.

A bigger step is the introduction of armed protection, either by professional guards, volunteer security teams composed of congregation members, or the presence of members carrying their weapons during worship. Many congregations have hired professional security personnel or off-duty police officers—6% according to the FACT study, 16% in the Scheitle study, but 29% in the Lifeway Research data (6% police officers, 23% armed private security).³⁴ Again, the more vulnerable groups were more likely to turn to security guards—African American, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities (Scheitle). The introduction of armed personnel into the worship space to protect attendees might be unsettling, yet the Lifeway Research survey of congregants found that overwhelmingly *armed* security made them feel safer (“slightly more safe,” 35%; “much more safe,” 37%). There were demographic differences here with non-white respondents feeling less safe but white evangelicals feeling safer. This reflects findings in a growing body of research which show that white evangelicals are more comfortable with guns than other racial and religious groups, as reflected in higher rates of gun ownership and stronger opposition to gun control policies. There are a variety of correlations with their pro-gun orientation, including region of country, worship attendance, economic distress, and understandings of gender and authoritarianism.³⁵

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of congregations with volunteer security teams—only 13% had them before 2015 but between 2015 and 2020 the proportion grew to 40%.³⁶ This trend was no doubt abetted by a proliferation of training programs for church security teams. The Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, and the Department of Justice have developed programs for faith communities in the wake of the Charleston church shooting. In the private sector church security training companies have flourished since 2015. A brief Google search identifies dozens of these organizations, with names such as Sheepdog Church Security, Full Armor Church Safety, Ground Operations Development (G.O.D.), Warrior Poet Society, National Organization for Church Security and Safety Management (NOCSSM), and so on. Through conferences and

³⁴ FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 8; Scheitle, “Religious Congregations’ Experiences,” 110; Earls, “Most Churches Plan for Potential Gunman.”

³⁵ See, for example, Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, “Slim Majority of Americans Support Passing Stricter Gun Control Laws,” *Public Religion Research Institute*, August 15, 2012, www.prrri.org/research/august-2012-prrri-rns-survey/; F. Carson Mencken and Paul Froese, “Gun Culture in Action,” *Social Problems* 66, no. 1 (February 2019): 3–27, doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spx040; Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁶ “FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire,” 8.

courses in which members of church security teams may receive certification, the training aims to “harden” houses of worship, considered “soft” targets. One such conference of the NOCSSM held in 2019 (which Yamane and I attended) typified many of the characteristics of these trainings. Participants were overwhelmingly white men, and many (especially the trainers) came from military and law enforcement backgrounds. This lent a paramilitary feel to the training of congregational security teams: discipline was emphasized, and the language used was militaristic. Meetings are “briefings,” information is “intelligence,” people are “deployed,” and so on. Although preparation is supposedly for all types of threats, including weather events, it was the threat of an active shooter that served as the central focus. Conversations about guns permeated the sidebar conversations at the conference, as weapon training sits at the heart of many of these programs. Since the pandemic, many of the organizations have shifted to selling courses online; a few began advertising in-person conferences in 2021, and by 2023 they were back to in-person training conferences.

Theologically, these organizations reflect evangelical leanings, and “protecting the flock” is framed as a *calling*, with speakers referencing biblical characters and images. In fact, the “shepherd” metaphor is commonly used, including referring to protectors as “sheepdogs” who patrol the fold. The “shepherd knows his flock” and needs to be able to identify those who might threaten it. At NOCSSM, church security teams are taught to pick out suspicious persons, those who “Don’t Look Right,” or “DLRs.” Here a particular ecclesiology is being acted out: one in which a sense of threat is reinforced, which leads to an inward focus. This hermeneutic of suspicion toward strangers cultivates fear. “Security” is the result of human agency, aided by weapons.

Besides the security teams, guns are also present in sanctuaries concealed under the jackets and shirt tails (or in purses) of members. In interviews with people of faith, those who said they bring guns to worship also reported that they are used to carrying them throughout the week for protection. This is not seen as in conflict with but rather as an extension of one’s personal faith. For example, one lay leader in a large affluent church told me: “God has given me life and he means for me to protect it.” His sense of responsibility extended to his family and congregation. When asked if he thought others carried in his church, he said, “God, I hope so!” It is hard to know how many people are “packing in the pews.” Most of the clergy Yamane and I spoke with were ambivalent and did not want to know who was carrying. There were of course exceptions: some clergy encourage their members to carry guns as part of their security effort. Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, has said the presence of guns

in the congregation makes him feel safer. “I’d say a quarter to a half of our members are concealed carry. They have guns, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”³⁷ Later, in reference to the possibility of an armed assailant in his church, Jeffress added, “if somebody tries that in our church, they may get one shot off or two shots off, but that’s it, and that’s the last thing they’ll ever do in this life.”³⁸ Still, there is very little quantitative data on carrying in church.

However, if the Lifeway Research data are accurate, Rev. Jeffress is not far off the mark. In their survey, 45% of clergy reported that their security measures included having armed congregation members.³⁹ There were differences by theological tradition, region, and gender: carrying in the pews was more prevalent among evangelical respondents and in the South and West; male clergy were much more likely to report carrying in worship (50%) compared to female clergy (19%).⁴⁰ These trends are reflected in patterns of gun ownership in society at large. We know that men own guns at a higher rate than women, whites more than people of color, Northeasterners have the lowest rate of gun ownership, and evangelicals own guns at a higher rate than Mainline Protestants or Catholics (especially Latino Catholics).⁴¹ In fact, white evangelical gun owners are more likely to carry their guns with them (65%) than gun owners in general (57%).⁴² Again, since personal protection is the most cited motivation for owning guns, with two-thirds of gun owners reporting this,⁴³ this raises the question of who is seen as a threat. Ironically, the populations most vulnerable to violence and having an understandable cause for fear—people of color, women, Jews, Muslims—are the least

³⁷ Charles Marsh, “The NRA’s Assault on Christian Faith and Practice,” *Religion and Politics*, January 3, 2018, religionandpolitics.org/2018/01/03/the-nras-assault-on-christian-faith-and-practice/.

³⁸ Marsh, “The NRA’s Assault on Christian Faith and Practice.”

³⁹ Lifeway Research, “Pastors’ Views on Church Security: Survey of American Protestant Pastors,” September 2019, research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Report-Pastors-Security-Sept-2019.pdf.

⁴⁰ Lifeway Research, “Pastors’ Views on Church Security.”

⁴¹ Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, J. Baxter Oliphant, and Anna Brown, “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns: An In-Depth Look at the Attitudes and Experiences of US Adults,” Pew Research Center, June 22, 2017, pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/06/22/americas-complex-relationship-with-guns/; Cox and Jones, “Slim Majority of Americans Support Passing Stricter Gun Control Laws.”

⁴² Kate Shellnut, “Packing in the Pews: The Connection between God and Guns,” *Christianity Today*, November 8, 2017, www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/november/god-gun-control-white-evangelicals-texas-church-shooting.html.

⁴³ Pew Research Center, “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns.”

likely to own guns and the most likely to support stronger control on gun ownership.⁴⁴

There are also communities of faith which have neither been unresponsive to the threat of violence, nor turned to some manner of armed security, but have exercised agency in enacting policies in prohibiting guns on their premises. According to the Lifeway Research data, just over one quarter of all congregations (27%) and half of African American congregations reported that they had a no-firearms policy.⁴⁵ This did not preclude them, of course, from implementing security measures that would deter violent threats (such as locking doors, installing alarms and security cameras, etc.). For these congregations, guns were simply incompatible with worship. Often there was support for this stance from their denominations and traditional teachings. One Mainline Protestant denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), issued attractive posters stating, “No Guns in God’s House,” displayed at the discretion of individual congregations. Catholic leaders, such as the bishops of the Diocese of Dallas and dioceses of Georgia, implemented such a prohibitive policy locally. In 2019 the Church of Latter-Day Saints issued a policy forbidding carrying weapons onto church property, except for law-enforcement officers. In Texas, however, the burden is put on congregations in countering state law, which permits licensed concealed carry owners to bring weapons into houses of worship. Congregations must post two large signs at each entrance stating that neither concealed nor open carry of guns is allowed in the building. In the context of a strong gun culture such as Texas, for a church to be a gun-free zone is, indeed, a counter-cultural act.

LIVED ECCLESIOLOGIES OF FORTRESS AND HOSPITALITY

The various ways faith communities have understood that which threatens them and how they have responded to such threats has not occurred in a vacuum. Both *threat* and *security* are social constructions in a continual process of being constructed, reinforced, challenged, and reconstructed. They emerge out of lived ecclesiologies—understandings of who we are as a people of faith, where we are located, and how we engage our social context (“the world”). This is at the heart of religious identity which draws on many sources; from history, tradition, and theology, as well as the built environment, experience, and broader social phenomena. Finally, ecclesiology is performed. For example, whether we think of our faith community as “the salt of the earth” or “the city on the hill” will lead

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center, “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns”; Research findings by Ryan Burge, twitter.com/ryanburge/status/1530276523416100866.

⁴⁵ Earls, “Most Churches Plan for Potential Gunman.”

to different moral orientations and organizational trajectories. For analytical purposes, I would like to turn to two distinct lived ecclesiological models—fortress versus hospitality—recognizing that in human society there are never pure types, and that variations exist within social groups as well as between them. Still, typological models can provide a framework for analyzing lived theological dynamics.

As we have explored, recent high-profile shootings in houses of worship have contributed to how ecclesial communities construct threat. While there have been perceptions of threat in the wider culture fueling fear of the other, this heightened sense of fear has centered on communities of faith—the fear that armed strangers threaten their very existence. In response, congregations have been encouraged by law enforcement and the growing church security training industry to “harden” themselves—that is, fortify themselves against vulnerability.

In his book *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, theologian Scott Bader-Saye argues that fear becomes a moral issue when we allow our sense of threat to shape moral action. This produces alternative “virtues,” such as suspicion and pre-emption (“do unto others before they do unto you”).⁴⁶ This can be seen in congregations in which the avoidance of risk becomes the highest moral good. Whether through self-identified individual “sheepdogs” or armed security teams that verge on the paramilitary, the stated priority is to protect oneself, family, and community of faith. This is seen as a role of sacrificial faithfulness, and occasionally heroism. Stephen Willeford lived across the street from First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs. On the November morning in 2017 when a gunman entered the sanctuary and murdered twenty-six people and injured twenty others, Willeford confronted the shooter as he went to his car, armed with his own AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. He wounded him, then gave chase until the shooter ran off the road and ended his life. Willeford has been publicly praised as a hero by state and local officials, the media, and the NRA. Heroes symbolize the highest virtues of a social group, and their veneration contributes to the collective narrative of such groups—or for purposes of this argument, their lived ecclesiology.

In “protecting the flock,” the boundaries of the community are necessarily defined and limited: who is in and who is out? As NRA leader Wayne LaPierre famously said after the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”⁴⁷ This phrase is frequently heard in security trainings for faith-based groups. It reflects

⁴⁶ Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 33.

⁴⁷ “NRA: Good Guys with Guns Stop Bad Guys with Guns,” *BBC*, December 12, 2012, www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-20817967.

two important values. First, the solution to gun violence is more guns; guns will address our fears even though guns are the source of the threat. The escalation of gun ownership in this country—an arms race, to be sure—has put us far ahead of any other developing country in terms of the number of guns in civilian hands. This flies in the face of reason, however. If guns made us safer, we would be the safest country on earth. Instead, we also lead in the number and rate of gun deaths—in 2021, there were over 48,000 firearm-caused deaths in the US, the greatest proportion of which were firearm-caused suicides.⁴⁸ Still, the Lifeway Research study found in their 2019 online survey of Christian laypeople that a majority (73%) reported that seeing uniformed police officers or security guards made them feel “more safe.” This was especially true for whites, evangelicals, and those in the south.⁴⁹

The second value is reflected in the clear delineation of “good” and “bad” guys. There is an assumption that those armed in churches are “the good guys.” In religious traditions that confess the universality of human moral failing (sinfulness), the uncritical assignment of good to armed protectors remains uninterrogated. This also serves to harden the boundaries with strangers and outsiders, cultivating suspicion as reflected in the code “DLR” (Don’t Look Right). While this serves to reinforce the “bonding” social capital within a community of faith, it deteriorates the “bridging” social capital and trust essential to the functioning of society.⁵⁰

In the lived ecclesiology of “fortress,” threat is constructed; social walls are built and protected. In this ecclesiology, one’s community is privileged over those outside the literal and figurative walls. The focus of concern is the potential danger to one’s tribe, not to those who might be at risk or suffering outside one’s walls. Bader-Saye summarizes Aquinas’s analysis of how fear undermines social solidarity: “When we fear excessively, we live in a mode of reacting to and plotting against evil, rather than actively seeing and doing what is good and right. Excessive fear causes our scope of vision to narrow, when what is needed is for it to be enlarged.”⁵¹ To be concerned with one’s own safety and that of one’s family and congregation is not wrong, but when that concern is narrowly focused, it changes us. Hospitality is

⁴⁸ John Gramlich, “What the Data Says about Gun Deaths in the US,” Pew Research Center, April 26, 2023, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/26/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/; Gun Violence Archive, www.gunviolencearchive.org/.

⁴⁹ Lifeway Research, “Protestant Churchgoer Views on Church Security: Representative Survey of American Protestant Churchgoers,” September 2019, research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Churchgoers-Security-Sept-2019.pdf.

⁵⁰ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

⁵¹ Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, 56.

undermined when the stranger is suspected rather than welcomed. Seeing guns in the sanctuary, knowing that one's pewmates are armed reinforce the operative construction of threat and effect a lived theological understanding of security. Security becomes equated with safety, of which God is not the author; rather, safety is the result of human agency.

Recently, this fortress ecclesiology has responded to unexpected factors. In the early count of FACT's 2020 survey (those who responded before the pandemic shutdown in March of that year), almost 30% of congregations reported that they were concerned about "personal safety and security when you gather." This dropped to 19% later in the year as congregations worshipped remotely.⁵² Suddenly, with the pandemic, the threat to congregations was not an active shooter but an invisible virus. After coming back to worship in person, one church member explained why church security was not as big a concern as it had been before the pandemic shutdown: "It sort of fell off our radar. We were more afraid of a virus than a bad guy."⁵³

There is a need to materialize a threat, to make the threat tangible.⁵⁴ In *The Courage to Be* Paul Tillich argued that humans live with an anxiety about our very existence—an anxiety that renders us helpless because we cannot really contemplate non-existence. We therefore strive to convert this amorphous anxiety into *fear*, whose object can be engaged and overcome.⁵⁵ In the same way, "security" seems vague and unknowable, so we move toward *safety* as a more concretized response. During the pandemic the numbers of gun sales spiked—first in March, as anxiety about the unknown became fixated on fears of scarcity, and again in June, as Black Lives Matter marches filled city streets with those protesting the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others. Both months broke previous monthly records of gun sales.⁵⁶ Anxiety focused on fears that could be encountered.

⁵² "FACT 2020 Common Questionnaire," 7. This breakdown of the data pre- and post-pandemic shutdown was provided by the Principal Investigator, Scott Thumma, in an email to the author on July 31, 2023.

⁵³ Focus group, congregation in Nacogdoches, TX (4/30/22).

⁵⁴ There is a vast literature on fear and its relationship to perceived threat, a survey of which is beyond the scope of this article. It becomes particularly relevant in the field of advertising, for example, as advertisers often tap into anxieties and identify a particular threat and therefore a product that can neutralize the threat. For example, undifferentiated female body anxiety which can be focused on a tangible threat such as offensive body odor or body fat by an advertiser, who has just the product to address that threat.

⁵⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), chapter 2.

⁵⁶ Daniel Nass, "Gun Background Checks Surged to New High in June," *The Trace*, July 1, 2020, www.thetrace.org/2020/07/gun-background-checks-june-record/.

Protestors personified threat, and a majority of gun sales during this period were by first time gun owners.

Now that communities of faith are returning to their sacred spaces to worship, will the fortress ecclesiology be tempered, or will it again focus on potential threats of violence to congregations? With new guns now in circulation, will congregations turn more to armed security strategies? As ecclesiologies interact with a variety of forces in their construction and reconstruction, what changes will emerge? Is it possible that the pandemic will leave us more aware of our vulnerability, more compassionate to those who are suffering, more willing to be open to strangers in our midst?

As the threats under Nazism continued to be horrifically realized—both threats to Jews, Roma, LGBTQ people, the differently-abled, and those who dared to resist, on the one hand, and threats to human rights and values that had made life meaningful—Bonhoeffer continued to contemplate the meaning of the church during his waning days in prison. He described what he called the world “come of age,” by which he meant that there had been a turn in society toward science and the logics of the Enlightenment. “Human beings have learned to manage all important issues by themselves, without recourse to the ‘working hypothesis: God.’”⁵⁷ Religion was no longer needed to make sense of the cosmos, law, or ethics; the role and act of faith had changed. Society had become “religionless.” For Bonhoeffer, the church had become a hollow institution weak in its stance against tyranny and even complicit with evil in the interest of its survival. At this point, Bonhoeffer could very well have become a mystic, trying to escape the crumbling of church and society, or bitterly abandoned the idea of church altogether.

Instead, he took up the question of ecclesiology with renewed energy. What is the church in the context of this worldliness? What might a worldly, “religionless Christianity” look like? Unfortunately, he was not able to develop this idea, or if he did in his remaining months in prison, the writings did not survive. In the end, for Bonhoeffer, when all was stripped away, at the core of his theology and ecclesiology was Christ. His ecclesiology, which he had begun to address as a twenty-one-year-old academic in *Sanctorum Communio*, continued to be highly interactive with his Christology as he moved from the abstract to the concrete, in engaging the harsh realities of his time and place. In his posthumously published *Ethics*, he wrote:

⁵⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “To Eberhard Bethge, Tegel, June 8 and 9, 1944,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 425–426.

Jesus was not the individual who sought to achieve some personal perfection, but only lived as one who in himself has taken on and bears the selves of all human beings. His entire living, acting, and suffering was vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*). All that human beings were supposed to live, do, and suffer was fulfilled in him.⁵⁸

The same *Stellvertretung*—vicarious representative action—becomes the basis of ethics for the individual Christian as well as the church-community. Even as he had seen the moral decay of the institutional churches in Germany, Bonhoeffer believed Christ continued to be present as the church in ways that transcended structures. In fact, as he had presented in earlier lectures on Christology, Christ is the church:

I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me. This in turn means that I can think of Christ only in existential relationship to him and, at the same time, only within the church-community. Christ is not in-himself and also in the church-community, but the Christ who is the only Christ is the one present in the church-community *pro-me*. ... That means he is the church-community. He is no longer acting *for* it, on its behalf, but rather *as* it, in his going to the cross, dying, and taking the sins of the church-community upon himself.⁵⁹

In his dark context, existentially aware of threats all around, Bonhoeffer here makes a bold statement about the church: the church is Christ in the world, a lived, even living ecclesiology. If this is true, how do we recognize this? His answer: we must look at reality “from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.”⁶⁰ In July 1944, he wrote of this perspective to his friend Bethge: “This is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. ... This is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.”⁶¹ Just as Christ was essentially “the one for others,” so too must the church be. In an incomplete outline of a book he hoped to write, he had handwritten an idea he wanted to develop: “The church is church *only*

⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 258.

⁵⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” in *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 274–275.

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years,” 30.

⁶¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 486.

when it is there for others ...”⁶² It is clear from earlier writings that to be “the one for others” meant far more than just doing charitable acts; rather, it requires radical solidarity with those who are suffering. This was an indictment of much of what he saw of the church. It also represented a stunning hope in Christ’s presence in the world.

Bonhoeffer did not live to complete his ecclesiology, but even in its early form, it is antithetical to a lived ecclesiology of fortress. Indeed, even the Confessing Church in its slogan, “Let the church be the church,” was a call to separate from a troubled context and withdraw into a fortress of its own making. Bonhoeffer’s theology of the church was indeed one shaped by threat—but for Bonhoeffer, the threat was not to bodily existence nor institutional survival. The greatest threat was to the integrity of the church itself. Its purity does not depend on profiling people who “Don’t Look Right,” but on concrete action in welcome, service, companionship, and presence, especially with those who are suffering. His is an ecclesiology of hospitality that does not privilege one’s community, but others. As such, it upholds a hospitality that is not without risk. To press further, in a lived ecclesiology of hospitality, security is uncoupled from physical safety and takes on a deeper meaning, rooted in the community of Christ. A community’s identity is not established by exclusion but inclusion. Boundaries are porous and newcomers represent a source of vitality.

Still, decisions about security in the context of an intentional examination of a congregation’s identity—who we are and want to be—are not easy ones. Rev. Kyle Childress, pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, Texas, has led a series of congregational conversations about security over the past several years. In deeply red East Texas, Childress and his congregation find themselves immersed in gun culture, and the massacre of fellow Texas Baptists in Sutherland Springs has intensified their deliberations. Childress writes about a pivotal moment in one church discussion about the risks of hospitality:

A longtime member stood up and reminded us that the heart of the issue was baptism. “When we are lowered into the waters, the pastor says, ‘Buried with Christ in baptism,’” he said. “In other words, our lives are not our own. And when we come up from the waters, the words said are, ‘Raised to walk in newness of life.’ This is no guarantee of a risk-free life. It’s a guarantee that we are not alone when we walk the way of resurrection.”⁶³

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 503.

⁶³ Kyle Childress, “A Texas Church’s Real Talk about Guns,” *Christian Century*, January 3, 2018, www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/texas-churchs-real-talk-about-guns.

By clarifying their identity and source of security, Childress and his congregation were able to more fully realize a lived ecclesiology of hospitality and became the only congregation in their city to implement a no-gun policy. The state-mandated signs are imposing but reinforce their sense of who they are: an inclusive congregation which welcomes all but excludes weapons. 

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