

You probably don't think it could happen at your church, but ...

TAKE VIOLENCE SERIOUSLY!

by Kevin Witt

Honestly, I am not much of an alarmist. It seems wise to avoid overreacting. We can create false impressions of trends based on dramatic isolated incidents. It's tempting, therefore, to conclude that youth attacking other youth or adults are rare occurrences—nothing more than deeply unfortunate oddities.

We hear about shootings at schools from Arkansas to Oregon and about youth killing or injuring youth in other settings. It seems implausible that this is actually a growing pattern. Most youth we know do not cause this kind of harm. Objective data, however, reveals a very real trend of more extreme violence among young people. According to one statistic, 12,000 children and youth were killed last year alone.

Mary Logan and Peggy Lacour, from the General Council on Finance and Administration's Risk Management Team, called me to say, "It's important to realize that this kind of situation can happen at our United Methodist sites. We need to prepare adult leaders to intervene and lessen the potential harm."

We are prudent to heed their advice. Talk with your staff and volunteers. Even though our ministry involves providing an atmosphere of love, mutual respect, and support, some youth may bring feelings of rage with them from other situations. The causes of this rage vary from frustrated hopes to feeling unloved to fears of all kinds.

In our current social milieu, violence is presented as a viable and even glorified response to problems or disappointment. An entire sector of the video game industry is based on engaging youth in scenario after scenario of overcoming obstacles

by killing characters. Fistfights are being replaced by guns and other more deadly weapons.

Television and movies continue to emphasize violence, because people want it and will pay for it. We would be naïve, however, to think that these images do not penetrate hearts and minds and carry over into everyday life.

Four Important Things to Remember

1. Treat any threats of physical harm very seriously, much like we do with every threat of suicide. Very often youth tell someone before they commit an act of violence. Unfortunately, because they have never done anything like that before, people don't take what they've said seriously.
2. Investigate reports of weapons on site or in a vehicle. Weapons are much more readily accessible than they used to be, so it is possible that they are present even when we can't imagine why someone would bring them to a Christian camp or retreat experience or to a church.
3. Violence is a spiritual matter and should be handled lovingly with both the individual and community in mind. Reacting to anger with anger fuels the fire.
4. Serious incidents often require follow up with professional support.

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The Conflict Zone!

How are your conflict resolution skills? You can answer these questions in general; or if you're brave, tackle them in light of your last conflict. If you are feeling really courageous, let someone who knows you well answer these questions about you.

1. I treat others the way I like to be treated.

Yes or No

2. I never try to get in the last word.

Yes or No

3. I don't use "labels" or call names.

Yes or No

4. I don't raise my voice.

Yes or No

5. I focus on the facts during an argument.

Yes or No

6. I keep things in perspective during an argument.

Yes or No

7. I face problems directly, as soon as they occur.

Yes or No

8. I apologize when I am wrong.

Yes or No

9. I realize I am wrong often.

Yes or No

10. I quickly forgive others.

Yes or No

11. I don't worry about getting even.

Yes or No

12. Taking this test does not create conflict for me.

Yes or No

Count each yes as correct. If you scored between 10-12, **GREAT JOB!** Conflict management is something you do well. Teach it to your youth—it is a skill that is greatly lacking today.

If you scored between a 6-9, **GOOD JOB.** You are doing better than average. However, there are a few more skills you could add to your toolbox.

If you scored a 5 or fewer, **OUCH!** Get help. Learning conflict management skills is important—not only to you personally, but also to you as you work with and set an example for youth.

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