

# Religious Leaders Trained To Deal With Mental Health Crises

## Clergy, Staff Learn How To Respond When People With Mental Illness Disrupt Services.

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The minister had just begun his sermon when a gray-haired woman in the second pew at St. Martin's Lutheran Church jumped up and turned to the congregation. With her arms flailing, she shouted, "He doesn't know what he's talking about! He doesn't come from God!"

An usher strode down the aisle of the Central Austin church and spoke gently to the woman. "Ma'am, can I talk to you for a moment? My name is Sam."

After a moment, the woman relented and followed the usher out of the sanctuary. The minister continued his sermon.

The scene wasn't real. It was part of a crisis intervention training seminar conducted this month by the Travis County sheriff's department for religious leaders. But such disruptions in worship services are common, which is why Capt. Mark Sawa urged the audience to have a plan in place before an incident occurs. A plan should include a 911 call to request either a sheriff's department crisis intervention team or a similarly trained officer from the Austin Police Department, Sawa said.

Those officers, he said, will assess the situation and determine what mental health services are needed.

The training for religious leaders came about after someone asked Sawa how church leaders should handle a person with mental illness who acts out during a service. Whether the disrupting person is a regular congregant or someone off the street, he said, "many times, a church service will draw a person like that like a magnet."

Participants represented several Austin churches and the North Austin Muslim Community Center. The Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish civil rights organization, co-sponsored the event. Sawa is hoping that more houses of worship will take advantage of the training, which included how to identify whether a person is having a mental health crisis, how to respond and how officers handle a situation inside a religious sanctuary.

People who work at churches on the Drag next to the University of Texas campus or downtown said they frequently draw people from the streets who disrupt services.

The Rev. David Boyd, rector of St. David's Episcopal Church on East Seventh Street, said his staff members interact daily with people with mental illness who use the church's homeless services. He arranged for members of the church's janitorial staff and the director of the school to attend the training.

Sam Hart, a crisis intervention team member, outlined behavior clues, such as illogical and obsessive thoughts. Often, he said, people believe that God is giving them orders or that they are God.

Hart urged participants to stay calm, use empathetic language and speak clearly when they encounter people in crisis.

"If he's on a rant and he's telling you angrily what's wrong, let him get all the anger out," Hart said.

Jennifer Cumberbatch, an associate pastor at Agape Christian Ministries, struggled with the idea of involving police in a nonviolent situation.

The previous Sunday, she said, a congregant began shouting and approached the altar. The ushers stood by, ready to intervene; eventually the person calmed down.

She said she wants to protect the congregation but also ensure that people with mental and emotional problems consider church a safe place.

"If they're in crisis, they're in the right place," she said.

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