

Pontiac pastor after South Carolina church killings: 'We are mindful of anyone we don't know'

By Carol Hopkins

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Pontiac Pastor Robert Martin was among a group of pastors gathered at a Waterford-based meeting Thursday when the discussion turned to Wednesday's [tragic killings of parishioners inside a South Carolina church](#).

"We were there to talk about how to train church greeters and deacons on how to defuse (violent) situations," said Martin, who serves at Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Pontiac. [SEE PHOTOS FROM CHARLESTON](#)

"There were at least 15 pastors there — and we were all on board with that training, especially in light of what happened in Charleston."

In Charleston, a 21-year-old white man joined a [prayer](#) meeting inside a historic black church Wednesday and then fatally shot nine people.

Dylann Storm Roof — who was captured Thursday — spent nearly an hour inside the church before killing six women and three men, including the pastor, police said, according to The Associated Press. A tipster spotted his car in Shelby, North Carolina, and called police.

Martin said there is a security presence at his church on Bagley Avenue.

"We are very mindful of anyone we do not know," he said.

Martin said it is important to "not have our heads in the sand" regarding violence.

Woodside Bible Pontiac Associate Pastor Reuben Ellis said security is a "reality" at his church on Auburn Road.

"But our No. 1 goal is to have an open door for everybody," said Ellis.

"That's our heart. We don't want to be restrictive."

Ellis called the killings a "tragic scenario," and that the church would be [praying for](#) the families and the shooter. "Obviously he is hurting," said Ellis. "We will also be [praying for healing](#) for this nation."

Pastor Doug Jones with the Welcome Missionary Baptist Church in Pontiac said his church as a security ministry.

“We try to monitor security,” he said.

“Every church has to be concerned. This involves a lack of respect for churches and religious institutions.

“Church is supposed to be a safe zone.”

Jones said he would be speaking to parishioners about sending funds to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina to show the “people of Pontiac care.”

Just recently, the Oakland County Sheriff announced a special committee to strengthen relationships between the Pontiac community and the Oakland County Sheriff’s Office.

The new group — made up of community leaders, local and elected officials, clergy leaders, and Sheriff’s Office staff — is focused on working together to share information and ideas on ways to improve relations between [law enforcement](#) and the greater Pontiac community.

“We have a lot of security in place, and are pro-active,” said Martin, a member of the new committee.

Caroll Turpin grew up in South Carolina and would sometimes visit Charleston. She moved to Pontiac with her husband, a Pontiac resident, in 1978.

“This is so sad, so hard to comprehend,” said Turpin, who is now a Pontiac Board of Education member. “At one time churches were the most sacred places.”

When she is attending church, she said, she never thinks about possible violence.

“You have to have faith you will be OK.”

Turpin said she hoped people would “grow and heal” from the slayings.

“We are a diversified country and we need to accept people who live, work and think differently. We are not all the same.”

The Oakland County Ministerial Fellowship, Martin said, will soon meet to discuss how they might respond to the shootings, Martin said.

In South Carolina, stunned community leaders and politicians condemned the attack on The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Attorney General Loretta Lynch said the Justice Department has begun a hate crime investigation.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

