

■ Security Alert

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3 Killed in Mo. Church Shooting

A gunman opened fire in the sanctuary of a southwest Missouri church Sunday, killing three people and wounding several others, authorities said.

About 25 to 50 people were briefly held hostage at the First Congregational Church until the gunman surrendered, Neosho spokeswoman Desiree Bridges said.

About four or five people were wounded, Police Chief Dave McCracken said, and several others who were injured fled the scene.

Officials removed two covered bodies from the brick-and-white trim church into a waiting funeral parlor van Sunday evening.

"This is a terrible tragedy which was made worse by the fact that it happened in a peaceful place of faith and worship," Gov. Matt Blunt said in a statement.

The shooter was being held at the Newton County Jail, but police were not releasing any information about him. Bridges said he was related to someone in the church, but declined to elaborate. No charges had been filed Sunday, McCracken said.

McCracken said the gunman had two small-caliber handguns and one 9 mm semiautomatic machine pistol with a large magazine.

The shooting followed the 1 p.m. service, which was attended by about 50 people, ranging in age

from children to the elderly. The church opened its doors to the group of worshippers from the Pacific islands that conduct a service in Spanish, said Patty Mendoza, 35, whose friend attends the service.

"There are a lot of islanders that come here," Mendoza said. "It's terrible. I can't imagine what it was about."

The gunman surrendered to authorities after about 10 minutes of negotiation.

"At the time that the rescue attempt was successful we had approximately 20 people in the sanctuary still," he said. "We had some people who escaped the crime scene prior to the police arrival that were wounded, and we had some people escape during the process and at the time of the rescue."

He said no one was injured during the arrest.

McCracken said he could not confirm whether the gunman was a member of the church. But he said an incident involving the suspect and a family that attended the First Congregational Church on Saturday night fueled the shooting Sunday.

"At this point though, we don't have any information more than that," McCracken said.

Calls to the church went unanswered.

The identities of the deceased were being withheld, McCracken said.