

ADDRESSING HATE CRIMES

Recently, two churches were approached by a man who pretended to be a college student engaged in a religion class who was seeking an interview with female pastors of open and affirming churches. One pastor participated in an on-camera interview with the alleged student. The phony student asked about the church's beliefs while "pretending to be LGBTQ" with the goal of "testing" the church's theology.

This phony student posted the video interview on his hate amplifying YouTube channel and called for the death of the pastor and deadly violence to the church. A similar interview was conducted at a Unitarian Universalist church and that church was fire-bombed after a video was posted by the phony student.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/rcna96586>

If your church is approached by someone who claims to be a college or seminary student who is seeking an interview or to gather information about your congregation and its beliefs, the first step is to verify the identity of this person. Ask for information on their school and a telephone number you can call to verify their identity. Accept the telephone number and then do more research to verify it is for a school they claim to represent. Do an internet search. If you know someone at the school, contact them directly for information and ask if the school is sending students out for interviews.

If you are victimized by someone who falsely represents who they are and the purpose of an interview, notify law enforcement to seek to stop this person from conducting other interviews and falsely using them on a social media platform. If you become aware of a video interview being placed on a social media platform with the interviewer calling upon people to attack you or your church, report it to your local FBI field office as a hate crime.

The FBI has a webpage devoted to protecting houses of worship:

<https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/spotlight/protecting-houses-of-worship>

The FBI also has a community outreach program that welcomes contact from houses of worship:

<https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/outreach>

The FBI welcomes contact from houses of worship so that they can track incidents and hate crimes involving local houses of worship.

While we try to make our churches a welcoming place for all peoples; sometimes bad actors take advantage of that welcome. Be alert and seek help if someone takes advantage of you to do harm.