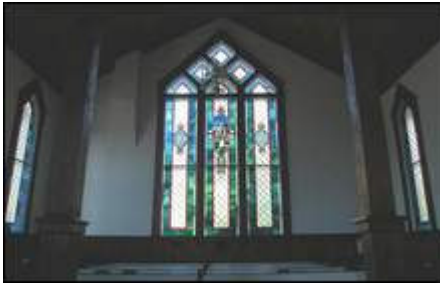


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## Metro police should pursue a 'Safe Surrender' program

**Today's Topic: Church: a site for safe surrender?**



TENNESSEAN / FILE

Published: Thursday, 03/29/07

### Our View

A proposal that would allow fugitives facing criminal warrants on nonviolent offenses to turn themselves in at a church is a perfectly reasonable approach.

It's not only a good concept but has proved in other cities to be remarkably successful.

Metro police are developing a local version of a program called Operation Fugitive Safe Surrender, which is modeled on a U.S. Marshals Service approach created in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2005. If the program is approved in Nashville, nonviolent offenders with outstanding warrants would be able to be booked at a local church, where they would get a new court date and could go free without bond. Davidson County has more than 38,000 outstanding warrants, and most of them are for nonviolent offenders.

Not showing up in court only compounds the problems of a person who is avoiding authorities. The Safe Surrender program is pitched by Metro police as a way to encourage fugitives to come forward in a way that would avoid circumstances like having an officer go to a home at odd hours to make an arrest in front of family members, including children. But another strong reason is to reduce the amount of risk law enforcement officers could encounter when they go after fugitives. A church setting creates a logical, orderly way to conduct the proceedings.

It would not be a simple task. The planning would involve logistical issues involving judges, the sheriff's office and court administrators, and Metro would have to decide exactly what procedures it would want to undertake at a designated site. But there does seem to be a willingness in the community to arrange the program, and the city should pursue it.

At first glance, the whole idea might sound farfetched. If people are avoiding their responsibility, why would anyone expect them to voluntarily show up at a church to turn themselves in? The answer is that there have been dramatic examples of people doing exactly that.

More than 1,300 fugitives turned themselves in over a four-day period last November in Safe Surrender program in Phoenix, including 300 who faced felony warrants. A temporary court was established in a building next to the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church, and many of the people who reported had their cases heard by a judge there. Others got new court dates. A day after the official end of the arrangement, a Sunday, 40 more showed up to turn themselves in after the church services.

The Phoenix story followed a similar experience in Cleveland, where more than 840 people showed up over a four-day period in 2005, including 324 felony suspects. The program was established by U.S. Marshal Peter Elliott, who serves the Northern District of Ohio.

Elliott and the Marshals Service have obviously hit upon an idea with considerable potential. The program is being considered in several other cities, including Indianapolis, Akron and Richmond,

Ohio. The concept was part of the conversation at a recent gathering of community leaders in Memphis looking for ideas for fighting crime.

The early track record for Safe Surrender makes a strong case for trying it in Nashville. It is encouraging to see community leaders willing to embrace the idea. Even if it does not produce the dramatic type of results other cities have found, if it gets even a few fugitives to come forward, that's a good step for justice. Somehow, a church sounds like a good place for justice to be served on any account.

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