

Assemble an expert team to maintain your safe haven

By Eric Spacek

Churches are the very definition of safe havens — places where we can let down our guard and feel protected from the outside world. Unfortunately, unexpected events, such as an accident, a break-in, a fire, or worse, can quickly shatter that sense of peace.

That's why it's important to have a Safety and Security Team in your church. Made up of volunteers from the congregation, this group can create a plan for improving and maintaining the safety of the church and its members. It also can serve as an ongoing resource for church leadership whenever safety and security issues arise.

A Safety and Security Team doesn't have to be big — three to eight people should be enough, depending on the size of the congregation. More important than the number of volunteers on the team is the experience those members bring to the table.

Form the team

Look for volunteers with relevant backgrounds, such as insurance, law, accounting, law enforcement, medicine, human resources, facility or property management, fire prevention and the like. People with these backgrounds can bring invaluable insight, identifying problems and solutions others may not consider. Your volunteers will undoubtedly bring a wealth of knowledge to the team. However, you'll still need to train them on the specific safety and security issues that are relevant to the church.

Fortunately, you don't have to create this training program from scratch. Several books, programs, videos, seminars and online resources about church safety and security are already available.

Once your team is in place and trained, empower them to start addressing specific issues. The following questions will help them get started:

- How can we better protect the facility?
- How can we better protect the church's resources?
- How can we better protect our people?

The number of issues generated by these questions may seem overwhelming at first. Reassure your team that they don't have to fix every problem immediately. Instead, they should start

with the greatest risks and develop a plan to address those first.

The church and its grounds can be damaged by bad weather, fire and, unfortunately, crime. Encourage your Safety and Security Team to review the church's vulnerability to the following:

Burglaries and other break-ins: If your church doesn't already have one, a security system or monitored alarm system should be strongly considered, as this can be a big deterrent to crime. Thanks to advances in technology, these types of systems have become much more affordable.

Arson: Make sure the exterior is well-lit, and trim bushes and trees near the building that could make good hiding places. Secure all windows and doors. Get rid of flammable materials such as trash.

Fire hazards: Sprinkler and monitored fire alarm systems are effective measures to combat fires at church. Check to make sure flammable materials are kept away from heat sources and

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locked in a secure storage area. Perform regular inspections of the facility, heating, ventilation and electrical equipment.

Storm damage, high winds, lightning and hail: Check the condition of the roof and schedule regular maintenance. Remove any trees that could fall onto the building. Consider installing an electrical surge suppression system.

Resources cover more than just cash. Your team also will need to ensure the security of valuable property like buses and cars, computers, sound systems, televisions, DVD players, musical instruments and more. Recent thefts from churches have even included copper tubing from air conditioning systems. The following are some examples of potential risks and basic precautions:

Theft of valuable property: Again, install an alarm system. Lock up anything of value, preferably in an unmarked closet. For insurance purposes, keep an up-to-date list and >>

appraisal of property, equipment and fine art.

Loss or theft of collections: Establish clear, written procedures for collecting, counting, depositing and reporting finances. Train ushers on proper handling of collections. Keep all cash under lock and key. If large amounts of cash will be on hand, consider hiring professional security guards.

Mishandling or embezzlement of church finances: It's unsettling to consider, but embezzlement does happen at all levels of the church. Keep all financial records safe and secure. Complete impartial, scheduled audits of the church's finances. Use a receipt and voucher system for purchases.

Members, employees and visitors put their trust in the church. This is a blessing as well as a huge responsibility. The safety and security of these people should be a top priority. Consider these risks:

Sexual misconduct: Strong measures must be taken to ensure the safety of children at all times. Conduct background checks on all personnel and volunteers who will work with children and young people. Establish a six-month waiting period before allowing anyone to work with the church's youth. Make sure two

who enter the facility during the week. Control access to the building during off hours with techniques, such as an intercom system and electronic door locks. A video surveillance system also is a good deterrent. Ask ushers, volunteers or staff members to regularly walk the hallways to watch for any suspicious activity. Carefully

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unrelated adults are present with children and youth at all times. Train staff members, develop written procedures and create a plan for reporting any alleged incidents of sexual misconduct.

Assaults: Establish some type of barrier between staff members and people

monitor distribution of keys to the facility.

Robbery or assaults outside the facility: Keeping the exterior of the building well-lit, including parking lots, will help in this regard. Urge people not to leave the church by themselves at night. During general worship times, form a group of parking lot greeters to monitor parking areas and discourage car break-ins. During services, have ushers watch for suspicious guests and patrol the hallways.

Fire and storm threats: Establish and communicate plans for evacuating the building and taking shelter during storms. Conduct fire and storm drills with the congregation.

Accidents and injuries: Form a medical emergency team and train all members in First Aid procedures.

Trouble often strikes when you least expect it, so don't wait until something bad happens. If you haven't already, begin forming your church's Safety and Security Team today so you can prevent the misfortunes of tomorrow.

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