✝ cHURcH SAFETY Under the Microscope

By Carolyn Heinze

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Pinpointing the role of proper design and equipment selection in helping keep churches—and their people—safe

The fact that we call worship spaces "sanctuaries" is telling. When we think of church, we think of a place where we feel safe and secure. Most of the time, we are— but this doesn't mean that church leaders don't have a responsibility to keep their staff, congregations, and physical assets out of harm's way.

Jeffrey A. Hawkins, founder and executive director of the Christian Security Network, a consulting organization based in Manassas, Va., underlines the importance of considering security at the beginning of a construction or renovation project. Hawkins and his team work under a system called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), which means just that: minimizing safety risks through sound building design.

"With any organization—no matter how big or how small—there are a number of design elements that you can apply that will make them safer in the long run and eliminate a lot of the problems churches will face later on," Hawkins says. This is not only critical from a security and emergency planning perspective, but it also saves time, money and the hassle of tearing up a building's infrastructure.

For example, many churches may dismiss the option of installing camera and card access systems, largely because of the costs involved. However, it's much less expensive to install the infrastructure required to support these systems—namely wire and cabling—during initial construction, allowing churches the flexibility to add these technologies when they are comfortable with investing in them.

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—Scott Hightower, President and CEO, Remote Protection Systems, Atlanta, GA

At the Church Security Network, advisors consult with all departments within a church, not just the pastoral staff, which gives them a better idea of how the facility is run—as well as what the church's plans are for the next 5-10 years. The team also analyzes geographic location, including traffic patterns (as well as pedestrian traffic), if there is any significant construction planned for the area and, if so, whether it will be commercial, residential, or both. "These elements have an impact on security and emergency planning," Hawkins explains.

Foot-traffic cops?

One of the most significant components of a solid security strategy is controlling how people flow through the facility on any given day of the week. For example, when services aren't taking place, what areas of the church need to be open? Conversely, which spaces can be secured? Will you supplement any security systems with people that are assigned to monitor the comings and goings of visitors? "We encourage churches to think about design, and if there are certain areas that you want closed off during the week, perhaps those spaces are candidates for card access control," says Scott Hightower, president and CEO of Remote Protection Systems, an Atlanta-based security firm. "With a card access system, you can set it on a timer. On Sunday, you want those doors to be unlocked for the service, but during the week you want them to be locked, and you can only access them with a card."

Part of controlling the circulation of people throughout the building lies in limiting entry and exit points. For churches that house childcare facilities, this is especially important, according to Hightower. "If you have a daycare or a pre-school at a church, and there are 12 ways for someone to come in and out of the building, it can be a lot more difficult to document who is coming and going than if you have one entry and exit point with a surveillance camera focused on it," he says. And he adds that there should be a process in place that documents who is dropping the children off and who is collecting them at the end of the day.

While many houses of worship are hesitant to install surveillance cameras in their sanctuaries, this may become necessary in larger facilities, Hightower notes. "When you have 5,000 people in a service, things can happen—it's an open stage area, and [churches] have to be concerned about people rushing up to the ministers," he says.

Today's pan/tilt/zoom camera technology enables operators to be located outside of the sanctuary while maintaining complete control over the system, enabling them to remain out of sight while they monitor the space—provided that the cameras have been installed effectively. "It's important to think about the layout of that sanctuary relative to being able to get a view, with a particular camera, of all the seats," Hightower says. "There needs to be some thought given to where those cameras are placed in the sanctuary, where they can be inconspicuous, yet you still don't want any blind spots." Similar measures should be taken for spaces such as overflow rooms, he adds.

No structural/commonsense passes

In some areas, churches are exempt from the building standards that other organizations are required to follow—

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> —James McGowan, Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Videx Inc., Corvallis, OR

something that Hawkins cautions against. "Even structurally, sometimes churches get a pass, and they don't install the same sound structure that other organizations would be required to have, such as earthquake-proofing," he says. "Just because they are a church and they may be exempt from building codes, they shouldn't overlook that in their design."

This fluctuation in structural standards can become an issue in locations renowned for natural disasters, such as tornadoes. If you are hosting a youth group and you receive news that a tornado is coming your way, where will you shelter everyone? This is something that needs to be addressed long before the weather report announces bad news.

Another element that churches should consider is the protection of staff and pastors. "We look at the office areas to see if they have things like panic and duress alarms, and if there is controlled access during the week," Hawkins explains. "Even in the sanctuary area, if the pastor should be a target for an active shooter—which we have unfortunately seen before—they should have a retreat off the pulpit area and into a safe room."

Securing expensive A/V/L equipment

Theft prevention is a major part of a church's security strategy, and items such as high-tech audiovisual equipment are a prime target for burglars. While good design and controlled access help to alleviate the chance for theft, Hightower points out that technologies such as Honeywell's Wireless Asset Protection Sensor add another layer of security. "Essentially, it's a battery-powered wireless sensor that you can attach to anything and it can be programmed so that if the item moves more than a certain distance, it sets off an alarm," he explains, adding that these devices are effective on equipment such as audio boards, projectors and flat screen televisions.

Videx Inc., based in Corvallis, Ore., manufactures CyberLock, an electronic locking device that enables users to swap out their mechanical locks to take advantage of increased security features. The benefit of this product, notes James McGowan, vice president of sales and marketing, is that churches can change their locks without having to replace their doors. "In many of these facilities, the door hardware is custom, unique and ornate," he says. "We enable these groups to maintain the look and feel of their existing doors, because all we are doing is replacing the cylinder itself."

Along with the electronic cylinder, a CyberLock system includes a CyberKey—a "smart" key also equipped with a circuit board, microprocessor and memory. "When the key touches the CyberLock cylinder, it energizes the cylinder, it updates the clock, and then it determines whether that key or that keyholder has permission to unlock that door on that date, at that time, and at that location," McGowan explains.

CyberLock Web—the accompanying software— is incorporated into the system and serves as access control management. "Communicators" are the communications devices that allow staff to upload their "permissions" (the locks they will grant access to throughout the course of the day) and download data from the keys into the software program at the end of workers' shifts.

The result is that security directors and facility managers may monitor the comings and goings of any given keyholder— what locations they entered, and even which spaces they tried to enter but were blocked from—at any given time. The keys can be expired immediately or pre-programmed to expire after a specific period of time, such as 24 hours, a week, or whatever the church's preference, which not only enables regular monitoring but also minimizes exposure if a key is lost.

Multisite concerns, real-life experiences

Churches with multiple locations face the challenge of maintaining consistency across all campuses without breaking the bank. Thanks to today's technology, many systems can be centrally located and, therefore, centrally operated— enabling facilities managers and security directors to spend less time running from site to site to lock and unlock doors. "You want a platform that can work in a multi-campus environment," Hightower advises. He cites one church client that is currently building a facility 30 miles away from its main campus. To facilitate security operations, the church has installed a Honeywell Total Connect card access and monitoring system that enables the security director to lock and unlock doors at the satellite church from his office on the main campus—or even from a secure Internet connection at home. "With a web browser, you can arm and disarm your security system. You can get email or text alerts when the system is armed or disarmed, and it sends you video clips when motion is detected," Hightower reports.

At Covenant Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, N.C., the leadership is currently considering the purchase of new security technology, including cameras. On the morning of Good Friday of this year, Reverend Chip Vining was notified that the church had been broken into via a rear window leading into the facility's fellowship hall. The thief (or thieves—the case is currently under investigation) made off with a number of musical instruments, microphones, a portable mixing board, speakers, cables, a projector, a playback device, a brand-new computer and about $300 in petty cash.

Covenant Presbyterian is a mid-sized church for the area, with about 250 members. This incident, Vining admits, has the leadership seriously considering improvements in security measures. "Actually, over the last two or three years the

deacons have been looking at security for the facility, and we just haven't done some of these things because of the costs," he says. "Now, they are going to revisit all of that because of this."

Vining notes that in case of burglary, it's extremely important to be able to present good documentation to present to the insurance company—and, of course, it's equally necessary to have an appropriate insurance policy in place. "Our sound engineer, fortunately, has kept very good records of everything we've bought over the years," he relays. "He has been going through invoices and finding equipment, and whenever he comes across an invoice and he can't find the equipment, he knows it's gone." He adds that it's also necessary to keep track of who is in possession of keys.

Despite the headache and challenges surrounding the break-in, Vining—who was able to preside over Easter weekend services "without a hitch"—remains positive. "Even though we think of this as a negative thing, we have to remember that God is always at work, and he gives us trials, which are actually opportunities," he says.

"This was an opportunity for us. Christians are still going to be able to worship the Lord with or without sound equipment. In the midst of crisis, there is always an opportunity to proclaim Christ, and no matter what the situation is, as Christians we have that responsibility to communicate the Gospel," Vining closes.

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