

Prepare your church for the worst-case scenario

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From Volume 2008, Issue 3 - 3 2008

Leaders must anticipate senseless acts of violence that could occur on church campuses.

by: Eric Spacek

In December a lone gunman entered a Youth With A Mission training center in Arvada, CO, and shot several people before driving 80 miles to New Springs Church in Colorado Springs, CO, and doing the same. Police at the church reported that the gunman had two assault rifles, three handguns and 1,000 rounds of ammunition in his possession. The gunman began shooting as he neared the lobby of the church. The shooting spree ended when he was confronted and shot by a church security guard. Five people died, including the gunman, and five others were injured in the incidents.

Church leaders who watched the media coverage of the shootings may have been asking themselves several questions including: How would my church respond if something like this was to happen here? How do you prepare for such a horrific event? Should we have security guards? Should they be armed with guns? There are basic security safeguards for churches to help answer these questions.

In looking at these issues it's important to consider two fundamental points. The first one is that church shootings remain a rare, but incredibly tragic occurrence. While no official statistics exist, the incidence of church shootings in the United States is thought to be no more than a few per year. Often, these shootings stem from domestic situations involving a church member or attendee. Sometimes, they arise from a personal vendetta against a pastor, church leader or particular religion. And occasionally they are the random act of a deranged individual.

Churches are 'soft targets'

The second point is that churches present a "soft target" for criminals, terrorists and others to inflict harm upon innocent people. Much like shopping malls and other retail establishments, churches do not offer the protection afforded by places with rigorous security screening procedures, such as airports or government offices.

Balancing these considerations requires churches to take a measured response to security. On one hand, embracing a fortress mentality with heavily armed guards and requiring all church members to pass through metal detectors would be a monumental response to the recent tragedies. On the other hand, going about business as usual without addressing security concerns would undoubtedly fall below the expectations of the congregation members you're serving. So how should a church prepare and respond?

The first step in addressing church security is to form a team of people to study the topic and recommend options for your church. If your church already has a safety and security team in place, a natural function of this team is to address security. You may want to obtain input from additional congregation members who have specialized experience in the field, such as those with backgrounds in law enforcement, the security industry, the military or emergency management.

Determine size of the team

The team does not need to be large, but its size will vary based upon the size of your church and the scope of your activities. Three to eight members is a typical size for the church safety and security team.

Once the team is formed it should educate itself about the topic of church security. A number of resources are available specifically on the topic of church security from the GuideOne Center for Risk Management Web site (guideone.com), as well as from several books in the marketplace on the topic.

An important step in the process is to conduct a security needs assessment. The purpose of an assessment is to: review the organization's current infrastructure, processes, and procedures

regarding security; identify and assess its vulnerabilities; confirm the existing, positive safety measures already in place; and provide recommendations for building upon existing measures to improve security at the church.

While this may sound like a daunting task, the safety and security team is not on its own in conducting a security needs assessment. Security checklists, which are available from a number of sources, can be a helpful resource in undertaking a security needs assessment. Also, churches should not overlook the tremendous resource that they have in local law enforcement agencies. Many local police agencies are willing to assist churches as they work to identify and address their vulnerabilities to criminal attack.

Consider threat assessment

If your church operates a school you also may want to consider a threat assessment during this stage of the process. Essentially, a threat assessment is a flow chart for responding to individuals who have made a verbal threat against the school/church. For an example of a threat assessment, consider contacting other schools in your area.

Once the security needs assessment has been conducted, the next step for the team is to put together a draft security plan for the church leadership's consideration. Many local law enforcement agencies will provide feedback and suggestions.

Churches should implement a layered approach to security. For example, maintaining an outer layer of parking lot attendants, a layer of outside greeters or volunteers, a layer of foyer-level greeters or volunteers, a layer of sanctuary-level ushers or volunteers and the innermost layer of those involved in pastoral security. Ideally, each layer of security should be able to communicate to the other. The goal is to identify threats early and respond as soon as possible. Other considerations in the plan may include:

- The roles and responsibilities of various layers of personnel
- Dealing with disruptive or impaired individuals
- Dealing with violent persons with or without a weapon
- Pastoral protection
- Lockdown and/or evacuation procedures
- Equipment needs
- Communication to each other and congregation

Because of the confusion and pandemonium that can result from a violent episode, the last consideration can be the most challenging, which involves spending a significant amount of time addressing crisis communication methods.

Your security planning should include cooperation with local police. In advance of any incident, consider providing local police with a copy of your security plan, including drawings or photos of the facility layout, emergency contact information and other information they might request. By doing this they will be better prepared to respond to emergency situations at your facility.

In all likelihood, the church security plan will recommend spending some funds for equipment and training. While some security measures, such as the installation of a video surveillance system, can be a significant expense, others, such as the purchase of two-way communication radios, are more manageable. Funds used for security is money well spent if they help to avert a tragedy.

In addition, training on security can be invaluable. Churches should consider taking full advantage of whatever training opportunities their local law enforcement agency offers.

Put plan into action

Once the security plan is in place, necessary equipment has been purchased, and training has been provided, consider practicing your security plan by putting it into action. A simulated event

during off hours or even a scaled-back practice situation while church is in session can provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of your security plan and needed improvements.

Areas of particular importance to practice include lockdown procedures, building evacuation and crisis communication to security team members and to the congregation at large during an event. A practice session can help you evaluate the effectiveness of your response.

In light of the Colorado incidents, questions have arisen about the use of security guards and whether or not those guards should be armed. In general, a church has two options regarding security guards, maintain its own force or hire a professional service.

If a church chooses to maintain its own security force it is responsible for running background checks and screening all security personnel. The church is responsible for the training and supervision of its personnel. It is also responsible for ensuring that its security force complies with all licensing and certification requirements that might exist under the state law. In most circumstances the church would be liable for the acts of its security guards.

Off-duty officers offer advantage

One option a church has is to hire off-duty active law enforcement officers. An advantage in hiring these individuals is that they will have superior training and experience. However, the church must still train these individuals in what their role will be in emergency situations.

If a church decides to employ a professional security guard service it will be provided a layer of liability protection for the church. With this option the church still must undertake reasonable precautions in hiring the security service, such as checking references and fully understanding the service's screening, training and supervision procedures.

The church should verify that the security guard company has a license by obtaining a copy. Also, it should enter into a written agreement with the security guard service in which the service agrees to indemnify (hold harmless) the church from any injury or damage that might result from the service's activities. The security guard service should be fully insured and have the church added as an additional insured on the service's insurance policies.

Armed guards raise risks

The use of armed security guards presents additional complications. While the presence of armed guards can potentially prevent or bring an end to an episode of church violence, their use also raises the risk of injury or death to innocent bystanders, claims about the use of excessive force and an increased burden for ensuring that all guards are properly screened, trained and supervised.

Arming a church's security guards is something that should only take place after consulting with the church's counsel, local law enforcement and insurance agent.

While still rare, a violent incident at a church can result in mass casualties, emotional devastation and potential questioning of church leadership about the handling of their security obligations. Each church should consider and address the issue by forming a safety and security team, conducting a security needs assessment, developing a security plan and practicing that plan through training and communication. By following these steps church leaders will demonstrate that they are concerned stewards and shepherds over the congregations they serve.

Eric Spacek is senior church risk manager at GuideOne Insurance, West Des Moines, IA. [guideone.com]

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