

Safeguard against violent 'insiders and outsiders'

A vocabulary of violence helps church leaders manage risk.

By John Nicoletti



During the past 15 years violence has migrated from the workplace through the school system and college campuses and has now set its sights on churches. Since 1999 church campuses have had more than 40 violent incidents — which have resulted in 75 deaths, 76 injuries and 13 suicides. Churches can no longer maintain the attitude of, “It can’t happen here.”

Safety from violence requires detection:
Identifying the potentially dangerous person

before they become violent.

There are two categories of violent individuals: The insider and the outsider. The insider refers to an individual who is on a church’s radar. This person could be a church member, a former church member, a spouse, or a non-member who has a grudge against the church. An outsider is an individual who attacks without warning.

There are two timelines related to violence: The Event Threshold occurs when the individual starts engaging in concerning behaviors and as a result gets on the church’s radar. The Event Horizon occurs when an individual starts engaging in attacks against either property or people.

With an insider, there should be enough time between the Event Threshold and the Event Horizon to disrupt behavior. The probability of violence from an insider should be low. Unfortunately, with an outsider the Event Threshold and the Event Horizon either occur simultaneously or without very little time between them. An outsider may not be able to be disrupted, which means the church must tactically respond to the individual and the incident.

The first step is for the church to develop a proactive detection system. Individuals do not go from behaving normally to engaging in attack behaviors. They will progress through an observable spectrum of behavior. The first observable sign will be the presence of a “perceived injustice” on the part of the potentially violent individual. This behavior will be followed by the individual blaming other people or the church for their problems and suffering. At this point, the individual will begin boundary probing and pushing tolerance limits of others and the church.

The final behavior before an attack occurs will be making threats, along with the person being disrespectful and derogatory of others. These behaviors can be detected by various people in the

church such as security, congregation, clergy and other staff. The statement used to detect terrorism, "If you see something, say something," also applies to preventing violence in the church.

In order for churches to detect these behaviors, they must have a Vortex. A Vortex is a central person or team where information about all concerning behaviors are sent to be documented and acted upon. The Vortex should be made up of key decision makers in the church along with church security. At the detection phase it is important to "Not Worry Alone" or be afraid of "Overreacting."

Take action to disrupt

Once church leaders become aware of an Event Threshold, they must do something that involves taking action to disrupt the behavior. Never let a concerning behavior happen without applying a disrupter. Disruptors fall into three categories: questioning the person, confronting the person or taking action against the person. If the individual is making concerning statements or engaging in concerning behaviors, a representative from the Vortex should question them with regard to what they said or did.

If the concerning behaviors continue after questioning or confronting, then the risk should be viewed as higher and action should immediately be taken. If an individual continues in a concerning behavior after knowing they need to stop, then it means that they are choosing to disregard rules or cannot control their impulses.

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Vocabulary of church violence

- Detection
- Disruption
- Insider
- Outsider
- The Event Threshold
- The Event Horizon
- Vortex

