

Take a few simple steps to improve your church's security | Church Executive

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By Jeffrey A. Hawkins

It doesn't matter the size, location or denomination — all churches are vulnerable to crime.

Church pastors want their congregation members to come to their church and have that sense of peace, to be able to pray to the Lord without distraction, and to be able to escape the world that seems so overwhelming at times.

It's therefore ironic when the same pastors state they do not believe in implementing security into their churches because they want the church to remain open and inviting. The reason it is ironic is because the very definition of security is to be "free from fear and anxiety" and isn't that the environment pastors want in their churches?

The misconception is that security is all about guns, guards, cameras and metal detectors, but that really isn't what security is all about. In fact a properly designed security program is like an iceberg, people should only see about 10 percent of what you really have in place; the other 90 percent is in place in case it is needed.

The American Christian church used to be a safe sanctuary, where pastors really did not have to think about the evil on the outside; very rarely did it enter the church and doors could remain open almost 24/7 without fear of crimes typically seen elsewhere.

Those days gone

Well, those days have passed and church staff, volunteers and congregation members are becoming more and more aware that the church is no longer that safe-haven; evil does enter the church on a regular basis and no church is immune. And even the smallest of the family of believers, the children, are at risk while in the church.



If people who come to church are worried if their children are safe, if their car is being broken into in the parking lot, or who walks into the sanctuary during service – and do they have a gun? – they are not at peace.

And if you believe it cannot happen at your church, look at what some other churches have experienced, just this year alone; they probably did not believe they would be victims either.

On Feb. 26 of this year, a woman working alone on a Saturday afternoon in a Georgia church was sexually assaulted and savagely beaten. Her attacker was eventually caught, but it appears that he knocked on the door and she opened it only to be immediately attacked.

Around noon on Feb. 23 a church in Hollywood, FL, was going about its usual business that most churches do during the week. The pastor was there, a custodian was working, and a small Bible

study group was going on in one of the classrooms.

People should be screened

Their doors were open and obviously no one was there to greet or screen people. At one point the custodian heard someone in one of the rooms and found a man he did not recognize trying to make coffee.

The custodian confronted the subject and the subject pulled a knife and went after the custodian and pastor, trying to cut them.

They both retreated, while fending off the attacker, into the room where the Bible study was taking place, and were able to lock the subject out. They were very fortunate neither was stabbed. The police were called and upon entry into the church found the subject still armed and acting in an aggressive manner. When ordered to drop the knife he did not and the police shot him in the arm and chest.

And in Texas in March, a young pastor and his elderly female assistant were working when a young man entered, killed the pastor by suffocating him with a plastic bag, and beat the woman unconscious and near death.

The offender was caught and allegedly laughed about the incident when he saw the news report on TV before his capture.

First concern: children

And then there are the children.

Over the past two years there have been attempted abductions and one successful abduction of an infant during Sunday services.

In April 2010 within weeks of each other, there were two attempted kidnappings of children, one in Oregon and the other in Alabama — both during church service time, in broad daylight, in plain sight. Both were lucky to get away.

In June 2009 in Michigan someone actually did abduct a one-year-old infant from a church nursery and leave the church. This church was fortunate to have security cameras installed that recorded the identity of the kidnapper — who was actually one of their own volunteers assigned to the children's area — and alerted police who went to the offender's home and safely recovered the child.

Sadly, when children in churches and at church events are not properly supervised, tragic incidents occur.

In June 2009 an eight-year old boy was accidentally killed by an elevator after he wandered off during an event at a Kentucky church.

And just in April of this year a 4-year-old and 5-year-old were sexually assaulted separately in a restroom during a church event.

These incidents are only a sampling of the thousands of incidents that take place every year in Christian churches in the United States.

It doesn't matter the size, location or denomination — all churches are vulnerable to crime and many may be prevented with a few simple steps. The most often heard excuse why churches do not have security in place is expense, again because the misconception that security is all about cameras, alarms, card access.

But as these incidents show, training, awareness and a few security procedures might have prevented most of them.

Learn these lessons

The first lesson is to lock your doors. Churches for some reason are averse to locking their doors, even at the expense of putting people and church property at risk.

In schools, businesses and most other organizations you do not expect to walk right in; usually the doors are locked and there is an intercom or some other screening device.

But leadership in most churches does not want to lock their doors and screen visitors.

Will people stop coming to church if there were locked doors and there was an intercom?

Would the offerings go down? Would people become atheists? What are the consequences that church leadership seems to feel will happen? Do they think people will believe less in God?

Second, train your people, especially females working alone, not to open the door for everyone. It is OK to feel that some people trying to enter the church are evil, because they are. When in doubt, call the police and let them check the person out.

Third, watch your children, inside and outside. Implement a policy that children must stay with their parents or guardians while at church. There are a number of reasons children should not be running around without supervision, but safety remains one of them.

And definitely, while there are outdoor activities going on, like an Easter egg hunt, have enough trained adults to watch the kids; the key phrase being trained adults.

There are many more steps that need to be taken to keep churches safe and secure and these are only a few, but an important few and good first steps. None really cost money, just a little bit of time and probably a change of the way things have always been done.

The Bible states in Proverbs 22:3: "A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences." (NLT)

There is no tomorrow, it can happen at your church, so be prudent and take precautions — today.

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Thou shall not steal copper — but thieves do anyway

The theft of copper has hit epidemic proportions in this country and the U.S. Department of Energy estimates the losses are more than \$1 billion a year in America.

The price of copper has been rising since about 2008, partly because of increased demand overseas, especially China, and partly because certain mine production facilities have been shut down in other parts of the world.

The number of churches that have been targeted by thieves stealing copper cannot even be tracked due the high volume, but the estimated losses are in the tens of millions of dollars.

Criminals will steal anything made of copper including downspouts, gutters, bells, pieces of cemetery markers, and crosses – basically anything made of copper.

Construction sites of churches have been hit with plumbing and wires being stolen. And AC units are being taken at an alarming rate, in some areas dozens of thefts a week from churches in almost every area of the country.

Unfortunately, AC units are the main targets and most unfortunately the criminal will do \$10,000 worth of damage to get a couple hundred dollars in copper. Very often the damage far exceeds

what the AC units cost.

The AC units being stolen are not just window units, there have been thefts of AC units weighing as much as five tons, which means the criminals are serious, organized, well prepared and want the AC unit badly. Yes, sometimes they are just common thieves looking for an easy target (and this group is the easiest to deter), but sometimes they are parts of organized gangs.

Why churches? Because of the reason churches are targets of every other crime: They are predictable (when people will be there and when they will not), they have what every other business have (an AC unit from a church is the same as an AC unit from an office building), and because churches generally do not have security measures in place to deter, detect, or deny the theft (surveys show over 75 percent of churches do not have security measures in place).

There are five critical measures every church needs to take.

Secure your AC units that are outside of the church at ground level. Install them on a concrete pad and build a cage around them or buy a pre-fabricated cage that is out of the market specifically designed to protect these units.

Keep the area well lit. Install floodlights or motion detector floodlights, but either way, light up the area where the AC units are located.

Install video surveillance if possible. Many churches do not have CCTV capabilities and cannot afford it, but if your church already has cameras, make this an area to extend your system to cover.

Talk to your alarm company about putting in a sensor on the Freon line to trigger your alarm system if the Freon drops (which happens when the thief is taking the AC unit). These devices are not that expensive to hook up and work for units that are mounted on the church roof also, which have been targets. Make sure when that alarm goes off it is not silent; hook up a horn, siren, bells, or something loud enough to wake the neighbors, alert the police, and scare the thieves.

Security is never 100 percent no matter what you do, so you may have a loss. Consult with your insurance company to see what your policy covers if your AC units are stolen or damaged. Many churches are surprised to find that these are not covered because they are not technically part of the building or their deductible is almost as high as the loss. One church lost \$12,000 in their AC unit theft and found out that their deductible was \$10,000 on AC units.

