

SECURITY FOR THE RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT

By Michael Hodge, CCP, J.D.

AT ONE TIME, it was unheard of to “utter” an offensive word in or around a church. Nowadays, we worry not only about offensive language, but physical harm to congregants and church property.

Just a snippet of headlines include the following:

GUNMAN SHOOTS FIVE PEOPLE AT SYNAGOGUE IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

MARYLAND CHURCH ROBBED DURING NEWYEAR'S SERVICE

GUNMAN KILLS 4 PEOPLE AT BATON ROUGE CHURCH

MULTIPLE CHURCHES ARE BURNED IN THE SOUTH

GUNMAN KILLS SELF INSIDE L.A. CATHEDRAL

MAN DRIVES BULLDOZER INTO CHURCH

Michael A. Hodge, CPP, J.D. is the president of Michael A. Hodge and Associates, LLC, a security consulting firm that specializes in security for Houses of Worship.



He is the author of *Security for Houses of Worship, the Complete Guide*. He also sits as the vice chairman of the Crime and Loss Prevention Council of ASIS International. He can be reached at www.hodgesecurity.com.

PASTOR STABBED WHILE ASSISTING A HOMELESS MAN

GUNMAN OPENS FIRE AT TEXAS PRAYER SERVICE KILLING 8 PEOPLE

ARSON ATTACKS IN THREE SACRAMENTO AREA SYNAGOGUES

Sadly, these incidents of violence affect all houses of worship: churches, synagogues, temples, and all faiths and denominations.

The reasons for such attacks vary. Common themes include the need to make political statements, mental illness, domestic violence, and simply for criminal purposes. It is clear from recent incidents, therefore, that church leaders need to examine this new dynamic as an operational issue worthy of discussion and action.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF?

Churches can protect themselves from harm by first creating a comprehensive security plan. The security plan addresses all the potential harms to an organization, and these harms are identified through the risk assessment process. The findings of a risk assessment will advise church leaders as to what security measures should be adopted; however, at minimum, your plan should address some of the following issues:

Establishing a Security Force. A security force may come from your existing ministry. If not, you may look to hiring a contractor, or looking at developing your own proprietary force.

Uniforms are always a touchy point for sensitive environments, such as the church. You must strike a balance between maintaining security and keeping an “inviting” appearance for your congregants. This can be done by uniforms that consist of business apparel. For example, dark blazer, slacks, and white shirts work well for this purpose.

It is not necessary to have badges similar to law enforcement. A simply name bar identifying you as security is sufficient.

Training for Security Personnel. Training is critical for security personnel. Training should be ongoing and continuous and at a minimum include blocks of instruction on interpersonal skills, personal protection, report writing, radio communications, self defense, legal liability, emergency preparedness, and first aid.

Protection of Finances. Because churches are large depositories of money, standard operating procedures for its protection are necessary. This includes after-collection protection, screening of counting teams, transportation to banking facilities, and incident investigations.

Care for Younger Congregants. Protection for infants to school age children deserves mention. Foremost concern is the screening of workers involved with children. These positions should be considered “sensitive” and proper background checks should be completed before anyone engages in these duties.

Other issues involve children "horse playing" or getting into mischief on church property. If so, in-depth investigations are necessary to document courses of events. This documentation may provide the best protection from criminal or civil liability.

Very careful attention is advised in handling domestic situations with children, like a child custody case. Court order visitation issues can easily spill into the church facility. In such a case, it's advisable during any registration process of a child, to inquire about potential legal conflicts.

Business Continuity Plans

Every organization is prone to disasters, whether natural or man-made. How quickly an organization gets back up and running, is the mark of a professional organization; therefore, if not already in place, your church should develop a formal Business Continuity Plan (BCP). This document is very helpful in outlining resources, courses of action, and more. There are a number of Web sites which can help you develop such a plan:

www.ffiec.gov/ffiecinfobase/booklets/bcp/bus_continuity_plan.pdf

www.yourwindow.to/business-continuity/

www.disasterrecoveryworld.com/

Special Events

Special events include anything from worship services to events involving large number of attendees. Needless to say, the success of protecting a special event is in the planning. This area of protection involves personal protection of VIP's, products and merchandise, facility protection, and even corporate identity.

The protection of corporate identity within church security is not mentioned often, but is very important. For instance, a simple theft of merchandise or an assault within your facility could have lasting implications in the eyes of the public.

CHURCHES CAN PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM HARM BY FIRST CREATING A COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY PLAN. THE SECURITY PLAN ADDRESSES ALL THE POTENTIAL HARMS TO AN ORGANIZATION, AND THESE HARMS ARE IDENTIFIED THROUGH THE RISK ASSESSMENT PROCESS.

When it comes to a special event, therefore, plan, plan, and plan! You will be rewarded in the end when everyone goes home safely.

CONCLUSION

From the incidents cited earlier, harm against the church is real! Equally real is the issue of security for church leaders. Study it, plan for it, and the mission of your church will certainly prosper! ❏

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