

PUTTING TOGETHER A *Safety Plan*



MAXIMUM MINISTRY.
MINIMUM LIABILITY.



IN MANY JURISDICTIONS, ANYONE ACTING
IN A “SECURITY” ROLE IS REQUIRED TO
ABIDE BY THE LAWS AND REGULATIONS
OF THE PRIVATE SECURITY INDUSTRY.



An overwhelming majority of churches who responded to recent surveys admitted that they have no safety or security plan.

Despite the numerous tragic incidents reported in the news in recent years, many regular churchgoers still have not thought of church safety, and others still have a this-will-never-happen-to-us mindset. Some even insist on ignoring practical safety measures because they just need to have faith that God will take care of them.

But scripture states repeatedly that the Lord expects His people to be proactive and wise. The Old Testament recounts numerous instances of the children of Israel fortifying themselves for their own self-defense at His direction. God’s work is always accomplished through God’s people.

In virtually every church, attendees can readily identify certain people who are gifted in specific areas. They teach Sunday school, lead music, care for children, or perform any number of other tasks. It is also likely that there are those in each church who are equipped to help keep the congregation safe, even if they have not yet been identified. Once those people are identified and a safety team has been formed, each member needs to be assured that he or she knows exactly what to do so that all members function as a cohesive unit in any situation. That means having a plan.

It is more appropriate, legally and practically, to use the term “safety plan” rather than “security plan” for at least two reasons. First, in many jurisdictions, anyone acting in a “security” role is required to abide by the laws and regulations of the private security industry. Those who are not trained and licensed but who are acting as security and calling themselves “security” can face legal trouble for doing so. Calling the team a “safety team” minimizes this possibility.

CHURCHES FACE RISKS OF INJURY
AND/OR DESTRUCTION FROM NATURAL
DISASTERS, WHICH CAN OFTEN BE
TOTALLY UNPREDICTABLE.



Second, although violence in churches has received national attention in recent years and has become a great cause for concern (as it should be), most of the incidents the team will address in a given year will fall into a different category. The most common will usually be medical emergencies. Churches face risks of injury and/or destruction from natural disasters, which can often be totally unpredictable. They include severe weather, such as blizzards, tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes. Other possible dangers include fires, earthquakes, landslides, and disease epidemics. Any of these can be problematic for a large gathering of people in one location, such as a church service.

Weather-related threats are more or less likely depending upon the geographic location. The same is true for technological disasters, which are almost always unpredictable. A busy urban or suburban area is especially susceptible to problems stemming from traffic accidents and power failures. When these problems occur in a neighborhood, they can make life difficult for thousands, even tens of thousands of people—not to mention a few hundred who might get stuck in a church building at the time.

Then there are man-made disasters that come in the form of criminal activity. Physical violence is almost always the most traumatic, but it is also the most easily prevented. The “open door” policy and welcoming atmosphere to visitors at most churches make them prime candidates for criminals.

A BUSY URBAN OR SUBURBAN AREA IS ESPECIALLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO PROBLEMS STEMMING FROM TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS AND POWER FAILURES.



Christ warned His followers that the world around them would be dangerous, saying in Matthew 10:16, ***“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”***

The first step to creating a thorough safety plan involves a detailed assessment of the property. This means knowing what borders the grounds in every direction, as well as all of the internal spaces in every building. What are the points of entry? How many different keys are used? What are the specifics of the alarm system? Is there a complete and updated list of all real property inside and outside the buildings?

Several factors are involved in the decision to commit a crime. Anyone who has watched enough movies and TV shows has often heard the phrase **“means, motive, and opportunity.”** Simply put, the accessibility of the church to a criminal element can make it easier or more difficult to target, just like the geographic location makes it more or less vulnerable to certain natural disasters or types of severe weather. Some locations are more conducive to ministering regularly to homeless people or addicts in the inner city. Some churches are in close proximity to organizations or individuals that consider parts of the church’s message to be **“hate speech.”** Or maybe people live nearby who see the church as a worthwhile target for robbery.

A megachurch is defined as having 2,000 or more people in attendance on an average weekend. Obviously, these kinds of crowds are attractive to someone who wants to make a statement using violence to kill or injure as many as possible. At the same time, it stands to reason that such a church will bring in tens of thousands of dollars in a weekend, much of it in cash that is dropped in the offering plate.

THE FIRST STEP TO CREATING A
THOROUGH SAFETY PLAN INVOLVES A
DETAILED ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPERTY.



That is as much money as some banks might keep on hand, without many of the state-of-the-art security measures nearly every financial institution would implement. That could be a prime candidate for a heist.

When assessing the church property, it is a good idea to involve local law enforcement as well as emergency management and first responders. This will help church leadership identify the particulars involved with different types of threats, such as how frequently it could happen (as with severe weather), what the damage is likely to be, how much time there is to warn the congregation, and how long it typically takes for help to arrive. Planning for each possible threat should be based on these factors.

Fire can be accidental or intentional, but either way, it can result in serious injury or death as well as catastrophic property damage. Safety team members should know their roles in the event of a fire during a church event—evacuating the congregation, utilizing fire extinguishers when necessary, and calling 911 as soon as possible.

As for evacuations, there are various types depending upon the event. People might need to move well in advance if severe weather is coming through, on shorter notice due to a bomb threat or in response to a fire. Sometimes people move to different locations within the same building, and at other times they exit the building completely. This should be made clear to all involved, and carrying out an evacuation properly requires planning and practice, especially in an environment that might produce higher stress or possible panic (many people do not think clearly during an emergency situation).

SAFETY TEAM MEMBERS SHOULD
KNOW THEIR ROLES IN THE EVENT OF
A FIRE DURING A CHURCH EVENT.



Clear guidelines should be developed for the safety team regarding who does what in an emergency. Maps should be posted throughout the campus showing the best way to get out of each building and which areas should be avoided. If a building has elevators, it is good to know if they can operate during a fire (many newer models have this capability).

Other situations may not require evacuation but need quick and appropriate responses that only come from training and coordination of the safety team. The most common will be a medical emergency. More of these types of emergencies will occur than any other type. If someone collapses and a safety team member is told to bring the medical kit, he or she should know where it is. Every church should have an automated external defibrillator (AED) or even more than one, depending upon the size of the facility.

Occasionally an alert about a missing child will be issued. Sometimes it will be as simple as a first-grader who decided to go into the second-grade class during Sunday school, then is reported missing by the first-grade teacher. Children will naturally want to wander, which is why they must be watched.

Other possible activities requiring a safety team response include a disruptive attendee in the sanctuary, a domestic dispute on the campus, or a panhandler or homeless person on the property. Each of these scenarios should have a response that is planned well in advance so everyone knows what to do.

EVERY CHURCH SHOULD HAVE AN AUTOMATED EXTERNAL DEFIBRILLATOR (AED) OR EVEN MORE THAN ONE, DEPENDING UPON THE SIZE OF THE FACILITY.



Knowledge of the campus is a must for every safety team member. Some churches provide maps with designated stations, such as “W-1” and “W-2” in the worship center and “C-1” at the children’s ministry location. These should be kept as simple as possible so no one is confused. If a team member is heard on the radio saying, “We have a suspicious person on the left side of the building,” whose left is he talking about? And what building? “Suspicious person near C-1 at the women’s bathroom” is not ambiguous; everyone knows what he is talking about.

When stationing personnel in various positions around campus, it is important that they know when to remain in place and when to respond. It is natural to run toward a disturbance or threat. But what if this is a diversion intended to get everyone out of place? If it is, it worked.

A vital part of a church’s safety plan is understanding the laws in its jurisdiction concerning firearms. It is well known that Florida and other states have a “stand your ground” law. There was a national media sensation in 2012 when George Zimmerman, while performing his duties as neighborhood watch coordinator in his gated community, shot and killed Trayvon Martin.

Zimmerman was acquitted in 2013 due to the “stand your ground” law, which led to a huge outcry. What most people do not realize is that the homeowners’ association in his community was exposed to a lawsuit by Martin’s family, which resulted in a settlement.

WHEN STATIONING PERSONNEL IN
VARIOUS POSITIONS AROUND CAMPUS, IT
IS IMPORTANT THAT THEY KNOW WHEN TO
REMAIN IN PLACE AND WHEN TO RESPOND.



In many states, a church could be held liable for the actions of a safety team member. The Mississippi Church Protection Act protects churches in that state and also makes a member of the safety team carrying out his or her lawful duties immune from civil liability. The NCLL supports that measure and is in favor of it being duplicated in other states. In any event, church leaders and safety team members must know the legalities of operating wherever they are located.

In 2016, a visitor walked into a church in Pennsylvania and sat down just before the service was to start. Another person tapped him on the shoulder to advise him that the seat was reserved for someone else. The visitor had some choice words to say, after which an usher and a greeter came over and de-escalated the situation. The people who were planning to sit there gladly gave up their seats to the visitor.

Everything was fine until another man in the church came over, showed the visitor a “concealed weapons permit” badge and said, “You need to step outside.”

“I don’t have to go anywhere with you,” the visitor replied, at which point the man raised his shirt to display his handgun. The visitor stood up and pushed the man, who responded by pulling his weapon and shooting the visitor to death. A situation that had been defused without any trouble was stirred up again and resulted in a totally unnecessary and tragic shooting. The gunman, incidentally, was sentenced to ten years in prison.

IT TAKES A COORDINATED EFFORT FROM A GROUP OF PREPARED PEOPLE TO CREATE THE BEST OUTCOME IN A TERRIBLE SCENARIO.



His comments to the police after the incident were equally disturbing, “I’ve done this before, and it de-escalated the situation.” No one knows for certain if that is true, but if he had acted that way in the past at a church and the leaders did nothing to discourage it, they were only enabling him.

There will be times when a threat is real and immediate. Imagine that it is Sunday morning at church and a man overdressed for the weather gets out of his car. He walks in past two greeters without acknowledging them. Just inside the doors, he pulls a weapon out of his coat and starts firing.

- **What would ministry staff and volunteers do?**
- **Is the staff and safety team trained to look for danger signs?**
- **Does the church have the ability to communicate with all members immediately?**
- **Could the ushers alert the entire safety team with a single communication?**
- **How quickly can law enforcement get to the facility?**
- **Does the safety team have established standard operating procedures for dealing with this type of threat?**
- **Does the church have a plan for directing the reaction of the congregation in this scenario?**
- **Do the members know when to shelter in place?**
- **Do they know when to evacuate and how to do so safely?**
- **Is the safety team able to lock down other areas of the building away from the shooter, especially the nursery and children’s ministry areas?**
- **Is the safety team trained to perform lockdown immediately after the threat is identified?**
- **Has the church worked with local law enforcement so the authorities are aware of the layout of the facilities?**

AN OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF CHURCHES WHO RESPONDED TO RECENT SURVEYS ADMITTED THAT THEY HAVE NO SAFETY OR SECURITY PLAN.



It is apparent that many variables come into play in situations like this, and the reaction must be immediate because people's lives are in danger. It takes a coordinated effort from a group of prepared people to create the best outcome in a terrible scenario.

Some churches prefer to use special sleeves or sashes to identify their safety team members. That is fine for the congregation, but in a crisis situation, it is likely that local law enforcement will be coming in without that knowledge. If a safety team member has a gun in hand when police arrive, it will not matter what he or she is wearing. The best policy is to communicate with law enforcement in advance and put all guns away when they arrive.

As more churches become cognizant of the need for these kinds of precautions, it is more advantageous for churches in a specific region to network with each other. This practice is in line with the "two-are-better-than-one" and "threefold-cord" principles outlined in the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes.