



DEVELOPING *a Safety Team*

MAXIMUM MINISTRY.
MINIMUM LIABILITY.



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More than a decade ago, a church on the Gulf Coast of Florida began a campaign to raise money for new property it was purchasing. As funds for the project began coming in each week along with the regular offerings, church leaders took steps to keep it safe.

At the end of each service, the money was moved from the back of the sanctuary to a room in the main office where it was counted and secured for transport to the bank the following day. Because the distance from the sanctuary to the office was about one hundred yards and because of the amount of money typically collected each week, church staff and elders became concerned about the possibility of an armed robbery. So in 2006, the church formed a safety team.

It didn't take long to realize there was much more to consider than just keeping money safe.

It is surprising how many churches today are almost entirely unprepared for any type of major emergency. Surveys put an overwhelming majority of churches in this category. Reasons vary from a perceived lack of resources to a belief that they should simply trust in God for protection.

Many churches are not sure how to move forward regarding a safety plan that would steward the ministry in a way God would have them. Although all of them understand that it is ultimately God's protection that keeps them secure, they want to be faithful stewards in this regard.

MANY TIMES A CONGREGATION IS
HESITANT TO CREATE A SAFETY TEAM
BECAUSE OF LIABILITY CONCERNS AND
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As reports of extreme violence in various churches across the United States have risen in recent years, hundreds more churches are dealing on a weekly basis with incidents involving domestic issues, attendees with mental health problems, and a host of other challenges. Church campuses also must guard against burglary, arson, and vandalism throughout the week. The devil looks to attack the Lord's house in any way he can; and with increasing frequency, he is using people who come to church with the sole purpose of causing disruption, chaos, and destruction.

To best protect their congregations, churches increasingly realize the need to organize a special group of volunteers into a safety team. Ultimately, every member of the church must be safety conscious. Someone working in the children's ministry may see something that a safety team member might not be aware of. Reporting what they see can help ensure that children and adults are kept safe. But it is still important to designate a particular set of individuals within the congregation as a "safety team" and ensure those workers are properly trained and equipped for various situations that may arise.

Many times, however, a congregation is hesitant to create a safety team because of liability concerns and perceptions of how the team's presence might affect the ministry. It helps to make sure the congregation understands that the threat of violence could pose a risk to their safety, while instructing the safety team to maintain a visual presence that reflects what the ministry wants for visitors.

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A safety team is about more than just guarding against the possibility of an active-shooter situation. Congregants must be prepared for medical emergencies, weather-related threats, fires, and other potential incidents. When these real-world situations are brought into the discussion, the need will become more apparent, and even those who are most skeptical will see things in a different light.

A layman who presents the need of a safety team must be prepared to answer nuts-and-bolts questions from the pastoral staff and church leaders. They will want to know what the costs are going to be, how many people will be needed, and who is going to be in charge, just as with any other ministry idea that is presented. It is important to present a plan that answers these questions, although it can be a limited one at the outset.

Proper research is necessary when making the case for the formation of a safety team, including recent data to support the argument. Several resources may be found in print or online that can be a great help. But keep things simple so as not to overwhelm decision makers when making the presentation. One person cannot assume everyone else sees the need immediately in the same way he does.

Take a good look at where the church is located and what its needs are based on the surroundings. The level of crime in a particular neighborhood is fairly simple to research. Data may reveal little more than some random automobile burglaries made possible because people left their cars unlocked. On the other hand, if there are a couple of bars down the street, there will likely be some reports of assaults and other incidents.

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No matter how calm a neighborhood might appear to be, safety-minded people can never let their guard down.

It is also important that the church make local law enforcement its friend and partner. The proper authorities should be included in planning so they know the church is doing everything it can to make sure its preparations are undertaken in the right way.

The thought of an intentional approach to keeping the church safe is foreign to some people, even those who have spent their entire lives in church. But it is common sense, and it is biblical. God uses His people to conduct all facets of His work, and with the many scriptural admonitions related to parents guarding their families and even the role of government in protecting citizens, it is unwise for churches not to take an active role in ensuring their own safety and security in God's house.

The safety team should be considered a ministry of the church, just like any other. Thus, its members should be considered and chosen as carefully as those who lead worship or work with children. Certain ministries in contemporary churches are considered vital for attracting families or younger people, but none of that matters if attendees no longer feel safe. They will go somewhere else.

After the church makes the decision to form a safety team, the first priority is selecting the team leader. Approaching it as a ministry, it is wise to look at I Tim. 3:1-13 and the requirements for an elder or overseer in the church:

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“This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

The safety team leader must be above reproach, with a pure heart and the mind of a servant. The analogy of sheep and shepherd is one of the oldest when referring to the church. And it speaks to the responsibility and integrity of the shepherd to protect the sheep and ensure their safety.

In the Old Testament, a detailed description of God’s people taking steps to protect themselves is found in Neh. 4:13-15. **“Therefore set I in**

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the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses. And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work."

All churches have people who are gifted or equipped in certain areas. For some, it is natural to work with children, while others could not imagine themselves ever doing it. Leading the music ministry requires a definite aptitude as well as a certain amount of training. It is the same with safety volunteers. It will be natural to gravitate toward those who have a background in public safety, whether it be law enforcement or emergency medical services, as well as those with military experience. It may be that church members with expertise in these areas are among the first to volunteer anyway because they recognize the importance of their qualifications and have a desire to serve.

It is important that the safety team leader be allowed to have a voice in choosing the other members of the team. A safety team leader should never be forced to take a certain person with questionable qualifications just because that person volunteered and someone in leadership in the church mandated the selection. Churches would be wise to require potential safety team members to have previously served in a ministry or to at least have been a member in good standing for a period of time so they may be observed and vetted in this way.

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Any member of the church who applies to be part of the safety team should also be required to submit to a criminal background check. And background checks should be repeated every few years for existing safety team members. Each of them should have a clean record, although something in a person's past does not automatically disqualify him or her from service. A minor infraction by a person who has been serving faithfully in the church for several years may be reviewed and discussed with the applicant, and church leadership can make the appropriate determination.

As with any other ministry, serving on the safety team is a commitment. To ensure everyone is doing the job efficiently and with excellence, proper training is essential. That may begin with an in-person consultation on the church's campus with a professional who can assess the strengths and weaknesses of the property and prepare the people to do what needs to be done to protect it. Once initial team members are selected, they will need to be trained individually and as a unit so each one knows his or her responsibilities and can support the others properly.

Some churches conduct quarterly training sessions for safety team members on a continual basis. As with any training or rehearsals with any other ministry, these should be attended faithfully by those involved. Attendance policies for safety team members should be implemented consistently and enforced appropriately. A person's performance in any job reflects his or her training (or lack of it).

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Safety team members must have strong people skills, be mentally and emotionally stable, and have a keen ability to observe people and situations. The church needs people with good judgment who are not impulsive and can adopt a survival mindset in a crisis. They have to know how to respond quickly, when to call 911, and how to react when law enforcement arrives.

With active shootings on the rise, it is more important than ever to know how to respond to these types of threats before they happen. When a team is trained and prepared in advance to respond to an active shooter, they will be able to instruct the congregation to begin lockdown or evacuation procedures correctly. Having a plan that is followed by a trained safety team will reduce chaos and be far more likely to save lives than if nothing is done to prepare for such a situation. We are all keenly aware of news reports in recent years about churches being targeted, and in many of those cases, the results were tragic. Every second counts.

Churches should call their teams “safety teams” rather than “security teams” for two reasons. First, in many jurisdictions, anyone acting in a “security” role is subject to 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 potentially face criminal charges and fines (in the same way that someone acting as and calling himself an attorney may not do so if he is not trained and licensed to do so). Since the vast majority of church members are not licensed security guards or law enforcement officers, calling the team a “safety team” minimizes this possibility.

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Second, a safety team's job will consist of much more than just minimizing the threat of violence. Safety teams must also be prepared for other potentially life-threatening situations, including weather-related incidents (tornadoes, hurricanes, excessive snow and ice), medical crises, and situations that originate off-campus. The safety team should always include medical personnel because a church will have more medical emergencies than any other type of incident.

Cooperation and planning for medical, weather, and other non-security-related situations are just as important as planning for a security incident. If someone is injured or has a heart attack and a safety team member is instructed to bring the medical kit, that team member should know exactly where it is. Churches should consider keeping an automated external defibrillator (AED) on hand (and perhaps two or more, depending upon the size of the campus) and should be well-stocked with medical supplies appropriate to the church's size and budget.

In the days following the 2015 shooting where a 21-year-old Caucasian male killed nine African American attendees at a Charleston church, the Confederate flag flying outside South Carolina's state capitol building was taken down by order of Gov. Nikki Haley, leading to several days of protests. During one such gathering, in the intense heat of summer, a uniformed officer monitoring the activity noticed an older man having trouble with the scorching temperatures and brought him inside the air-conditioned government building.

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This wasn't just any uniformed officer. It was Leroy Smith, South Carolina's director of public safety. He was the state's top law enforcement officer. He could have radioed another officer to assist the man, but he did it himself. Unbeknownst to him, someone took a photo.

The image of Smith, who is African American, helping this man—whose T-shirt included a swastika, among other things—went viral. Smith was soon asked why he would take such measures with a person whose beliefs were so contradictory to his own.

His response? **"I consider myself like every other officer who was out there to serve and protect. . . . Service is at the heart of what we do."** This should be the attitude of every member of the church's safety team.

Safety team members are watchmen, diligent at all times, looking for every opportunity to serve and protect. The Bible says in Isa. 62:6, ***"I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night."***

As those watchmen in Old Testament times observed the comings and goings of the people in their cities, ready to warn them or act in their defense at a moment's notice, modern-day churches must do the same. It is part of their calling and their ministry.