



Church Security

Introduction- defining the problem:

For most of this nation's history, firearms were not needed in houses of worship. Off-duty police officers locked their weapons in the trunks of their cars before entering the house of the Lord, and congregants sat in the pews with their backs to the doors watching and listening to the worship service without any thought of danger to themselves and their families. Churches were very safe environments.

But that has changed. The National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) compiles data on criminal offenses as reported to approximately 5,300 local, county, and state law enforcement agencies across 32 states, or about 31% of the law enforcement agencies in the nation, policing only about 20% of the U.S. population. During the years from 2000 through 2016, NIBRS recorded 1,652 incidents of serious violence at houses of worship, an average of 97 incidents per year, resulting in 155 deaths and 742 injuries or an annual average of 9 deaths and 44 wounded. Extrapolating to the whole U.S. population, it is estimated that there are actually about 480 incidents of serious violence at places of worship in the U.S. each year.¹

Mass shootings are defined by the Congressional Research Service as having four or more victims. The first mass shooting at a house of worship in the modern era occurred in 1980 during Sunday services at First Baptist Church in Daingerfield, Texas.² But in the 2000s, active shooter or active killer incidents began occurring more regularly in houses of worship. Here are some examples:

1. In August 2012, a 40-year-old man armed with a handgun began shooting outside the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek, Wisconsin and then moved inside and continued to shoot congregation members. Police confronted the shooter as he exited the building. Six people lost their lives, and four people, including one police officer, suffered injuries. The shooter committed suicide after he was shot in the stomach by responding officers.
2. In April 2014, a 73-year-old man armed with two handguns and a shotgun began shooting in the parking lot of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City in Overland Park, Kansas, killing two. He then drove to the nearby Village

¹ <https://www.dolanconsultinggroup.com/news/serious-violence-at-places-of-worship-in-the-u-s-looking-at-the-numbers/>

² <https://projects.voanews.com/mass-shootings/english/locations/worship.html>



Shalom retirement community and opened fire in the parking lot, killing one. No one else was wounded.

3. In June 2015, a 21-year-old man armed with a handgun began shooting during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine people. The shooter fled the scene, and law enforcement apprehended him the next day.
4. In November 2017, a 26-year-old man outfitted in full tactical gear and armed with a rifle exited his vehicle and began shooting outside the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. He entered the building through a side door and continued firing at the members gathered within. Upon leaving, a neighbor wielding a firearm confronted the assailant, leading to a car chase. Twenty-six people lost their lives, and 20 suffered injuries. The shooter committed suicide. It was the deadliest attack on a house of worship in U.S. history.
5. In October 2018, a 46-year-old man armed with a rifle and three handguns began shooting inside the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Eleven people died, and six suffered injuries, including four law enforcement officers. Police apprehended the shooter at the scene after exchanging gunfire.³

This is a serious problem, and one that should be addressed by church leadership. There are a number of aspects to church security such as all hazard emergency preparedness and procedures for instruction of children. However this paper will focus on security measures to defend against and prevent violent incidents.

We trust in God, so we do not need a security team at our church:

We at the Pacific Justice Institute believe that providing a safe environment for your church family is critically important and in line with Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:1 (NKJV) “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come.” The increase in violence in houses of worship in the past several decades certainly falls in line with this prophesy.

In Luke Chapter 10, Jesus sends out the 70, and basically tells them God will provide everything for them. Luke 10: 1-4 (NKJV, words of Jesus in red) After these things the Lord appointed

³ MITIGATING ATTACKS ON HOUSES OF WORSHIP, Security Guide, December 2020, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.



seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go. Then He said to them, **“The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves. Carry neither money bag, knapsack, nor sandals; and greet no one along the road.”**

Contrast that with the instruction Jesus gives His disciples in Luke 22. Luke 22:35-36, 38 And He said to them, **“When I sent you without money bag, knapsack, and sandals, did you lack anything?”** So they said, **“Nothing.”** Then He said to them, **“But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one.”** So they said, **“Lord, look, here are two swords.”** And He said to them, **“It is enough.”**

We believe these verses of scripture indicate that there are times when God promises to protect his people, but there are also times when He would have us protect ourselves and others. We all know of tragic incidents involving the missionaries, pastors, and others who love and serve God. Some of these incidents are violent in nature. We believe there are times when it is biblical as Jesus said in Luke 22 to arm ourselves for protection. Therefore pastors and church boards of directors should take steps to protect the flocks entrusted to them by God.

Churches are very different, but have commonalities regarding security:

Churches come in all shapes and sizes. Some churches have thousands attending each service and have a large budget. They may have multiple buildings and floors to secure. There are sophisticated access control systems and digital security technology that are available on the market, and may well be beneficial for churches.

Other churches are smaller with limited budgets. However, this paper is intended to provide some basics that would apply to all sizes and budgets.

Security is a ministry:

Security should be a ministry within your church. Consider having ushers, greeters, and parking lot attendants be part of your security team. Remember, the goal is prevention of violent incidents. Ushers, greeters, and parking lot attendants serve important functions in recognizing potentially violent persons and putting out alerts that can prevent or mitigate potentially violent situations. Ushers, greeters, and parking lot attendants should train with armed security personnel and actively communicate with armed security personnel.

Appoint a security director:



The security director should be a long-standing and well-known member of the congregation, with a law enforcement background, either current or retired. It is preferable that the director has held a leadership position in law enforcement so that he or she is comfortable in administrative tasks as well as supervising operational issues. The security director should be empowered to organize the team with oversight and approval from the pastor and the board of directors.

Getting started with an armed security team:

It is recommended that all churches implementing an armed security program begin with contacting their insurance company. They may have policies with restrictions regarding these programs, but may also have training resources they can make available to you.

Secondly, the director should make contact with the police department which has jurisdiction over the church. Laws regarding the carrying of firearms, regulation of armed security, training requirements, etc., vary greatly from state to state, and some cities have their own specific laws as well. Some police departments may be able to offer assistance in risk or vulnerability assessments, training, and other issues. It is preferable that the security director have a relationship with a police department representative where information can be exchanged regarding current issues in the neighborhood surrounding the church.

Some of the laws that need to be addressed and understood for each jurisdiction include the following:

Are houses of worship required to hire licensed security guards?

May volunteer security team members wear a uniform or badge that identifies them as security?

Does the law require any special training for volunteer security team members?

Can volunteer security team members legally carry firearms? Are there training, licensing or other requirements?

Does state law place any special restrictions on the lawful carry of firearms in places of worship?

Can houses of worship prohibit the carry of firearms on their premises?

Laws regarding use of force (including deadly force), self-defense, and arrests by private person.



Local fire departments and emergency medical services should also be contacted, as they will play critical roles should a violent incident occur. They should be invited to participate in some training exercises with the team.

Selecting the armed security team:

In addition to active and retired law enforcement, security professionals, active and retired military, and others who are trained in the use of firearms can be incorporated into the team. All of these people should be well known in the congregation and have the right temperament and judgment for the awesome responsibility of deciding when deadly force is absolutely required.

Conduct a risk assessment / security survey of your facility or facilities

These go by many names, vulnerability assessments, security survey, risk audits, etc. The idea is to take a close look at your facility and identify areas where you have vulnerabilities, and correct them if possible. You may find areas where additional video surveillance or other technology or hardware will reduce your risk.

You may also identify areas that can be safely secured during a violent incident, where persons can safely remain until police arrive.

If budget permits, there are experts who can come in and perform a thorough assessment. If not, there are forms and checklists available online. Your police department or local emergency management agency may also be able to assist. Your insurance carrier may also be able to help.

Training:

Training is an essential component of any security team. There are many resources for training; there are dozens listed online. Professional, certified training should be obtained if the budget permits. As previously mentioned, police and fire departments may be of assistance. Basic firearms training can be obtained by local instructors. Specific training requirements should include:

- **Tactical training for armed personnel-** Things like the safe handling of firearms at all times up to the point when deadly force is required. Avoiding crossfire situations and shooting from depth. Ask your local police department if they or another area agency



has a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. SWAT team members train tactically on a regular basis and may be able to assist in training your security team, or point out a local resource who can.

- **Periodic firing range practice for armed personnel-** If your congregation does not have a firearms instructor, a local range or gun store can likely direct you to a trainer. The National Rifle Association (NRA) also has instructors around the nation that can provide local training at reasonable cost.
- **For all personnel-** how to spot potentially violent or distressed individuals, and methods to de-escalate. The primary goal is to prevent violence. This type of training is available online, or in person if budget permits. However, there may be times when a disruptive person is not amenable to de-escalation techniques. The team needs to be trained on proper use of force techniques to defend themselves and others, and how to restrain a person if necessary. This training can likely be done by the Security Director or local police. The team should leave the arrest of a subject to the police unless force becomes absolutely necessary before police arrival. If the team is required to use force, try to video the encounter.
- **Communications-** the team should be equipped with portable radios and be trained on how to use them. Plain English should be used- not codes. The only exception would be a name or code word that could be used to surreptitiously communicate that you are engaged with an individual who could become violent. This is a signal for other team members to gather around without raising the suspicion of the subject.
- **Regular training for the entire team-** scenario training, classroom training, tabletop exercises. Simulate drills, exercises, and conduct walk-throughs to reinforce the appropriate conclusions and applications. Hopefully your Security Director will be able to do this in-house. The Director may also seek assistance from police department personnel or other resources.
- **Active Shooter Preparedness training for people other than the security team-** should be offered to the congregation and provided to church staff. It should provide options for individuals to choose from to give them the best chance of survival. This training is best done by professionals, if the budget allows. If not, seek resources such as your local police department, or online training opportunities. There are some very important points to this training, such as the fact that merely moving rather than sitting still can increase your chance of surviving a deadly incident by 90%. The skills people take from this type of training extend far beyond the church, as they apply ANYWHERE a person may encounter a violent incident.
- **Evacuation drills-** this sounds simple, but it is not. If shots are fired by a shooter outside the facility, evacuation would likely not be advised. People will be looking for direction from the security team. This should be included in the Active Shooter Preparedness Training mentioned above, as well as the scenario training for team members.



Access Control-

For smaller churches, there should be one entrance into the church for services. After 10 or so minutes after the service begins, that door should be locked with an attendant to allow entry for congregants who have arrived to church late.

If your church is larger with multiple entrances and buildings, each entrance should be addressed as above- attendants at each door, which is secured shortly after service begins.

Larger churches should have roving patrols outside in the parking areas as well as inside. If multiple floors, patrols could be assigned by floors. Special attention should always be given to areas with children's ministry activities. Patrols should vary their routes of travel and time intervals so as not to be predictable.

Radio communication is critical- Do not be overly "chatty" on the radio- it must be available for emergency or time sensitive broadcasts. Parking lot attendants should be trained to be alert to anyone exiting a vehicle or approaching the church with a weapon or people who show other indicators of violence, and immediately radio ahead so the doors may be secured. The same is true with persons who are exhibiting signs or other indications they may protest or disrupt the service. THESE SITUATIONS SHOULD BE ADDRESSED AS FAR FROM ENTRY AS POSSIBLE, WELL BEFORE THE SUBJECT COMES INTO THE CHURCH. Law enforcement should be notified as soon as possible.

Disrupting church services-

Team members may have questions regarding the free speech rights of protesters or other persons vocally disrupting church services. The First Amendment rights in this case belong to the church, in the free exercise of religion. In 1994 Congress passed the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrance Act (or FACE Act). This federal law extends specific protection to churches. The Act makes it unlawful to intentionally interfere, injure, or attempt to interfere or injure, or use the threat of force or intimidation directed towards any person exercising or seeking to exercise the First Amendment right of religious freedom at a place of religious worship.

One typical problem in church security is dealing with the trespasser. A church can withdraw its permission for access to an individual. Thus, like any other property owner, a church has the right to decide whom to allow on its premises. Once that permission is withdrawn, the individual who refuses to leave is deemed a trespasser. A trespasser is subject to arrest and prosecution.

A church may have someone who chronically engages in disruptive behavior at services or other activities. There may be a history of ushers, security and/or local law enforcement



officers having to escort the same person off of the premises as a trespasser on several occasions. Under such circumstances, the church should send a certified letter to the disrupter directing him or her to stay away from the church campus until written permission to return has been received. If the directive is ignored, then a restraining order from the State Court should be secured and served on the individual.⁴

All events at the church need security:

There must be security scheduled for all events at the church, regardless of size. Remember, the mass killing at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, occurred at a prayer meeting with about 10 participants.

Conclusion-

The purpose of this resource is to serve as a stimulus for the formation of a security team at all churches. It is designed to bring out important points and pieces of information that church officials can use create a program that fits their particular size, location and needs. Obtaining the help of professionals in the area of security and training is highly recommended.

⁴ PJI memo to clergy from Chief Counsel Kevin Snider, dated August 2020, available at PJI.org