



Putting Together a Safety Plan

A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO CHURCH SAFETY

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PUTTING TOGETHER A SAFETY PLAN

Because of constant attacks on houses of worship, leaders and worshippers who at one time thought of a safety/security team as being a luxury, now knows it is a necessity. For so long churches had the mindset of this-will-never-happen-to-us or that God will protect us that now they see we live in a fallen world and nobody is safe anymore. Vandalism at churches and sexual assault against youth appear to be on the rise. When we look at other countries like France, it is reported by two official sources (France's Interior Ministry and the national police), around 700 to 877 acts of vandalism occurred at Christian places of worship in France in 2018, a rate of 1.9 to 2.4 per day. Because of the increase of these types of incidents in the United States, churches must be more proactive in not only protecting its members but also their campuses.

Names like Christchurch, New Zealand, Chabad of Poway Jewish synagogue, Tree of Life Congregation synagogue, Sutherland Springs Baptist Church and Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church have brought houses of worship across the United States to the table, talking to staff, members and volunteers about putting together a safety/security team.

Scripture repeatedly states 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. Ezekiel 33 advises that the Lord warns what will happen if the watchman does not warn the church of pending danger and Nehemiah put families together with swords, shields and bows to protect those that were working on rebuilding the Jerusalem wall. 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.

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 any 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 also the most easily prevented. The “open door” policy and welcoming atmosphere to visitors at most churches makes them prime candidates for criminals. 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 strength and weakness assessment of the property. This means knowing what borders the grounds in every direction, as well as all 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. That’s 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).

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.

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.

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. Trinity Security Allies 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, Robert E. Braxton III went to his church, Keystone Fellowship Church in Pennsylvania and sat in a seat that was already reserved by other church members. When another member of the church tapped him on the shoulder to advise him that the seat was taken, Braxton became agitated and began swearing at the church member. Ushers and an associate pastor tried to calm Braxton down but when the situation continued to escalate the pastor told someone to call the police.

Mark T. Storms, another member of the church approached Braxton and showed him a concealed weapon badge that he had bought on the internet and his legally concealed weapon and told Braxton that he had to leave the church. This caused Braxton to become even more agitated. Storms was never asked to assist in the situation and also was not on any safety team in the church.

Braxton then stood up and pushed Storm, who responded by pulling his weapon and shooting Braxton to death. Because of Storms’ interference in an already volatile crisis situation, without being asked to help and shooting an unarmed Braxton he is now facing 10 to 20 years in the state penitentiary. Courts said that Storm should had not gotten involved and should have retreated and avoided the use of deadly force on an unarmed man.

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?

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.

A safety team leader at one church reported someone making statements that raised a red flag—including about another church in the area. The safety team leader contacted that church and told the leaders there to watch out for him. During that same conversation, the administrator at the second church noted that a sexual predator had come over from the first church to the second one. The safety team leader knew immediately who she was talking about; his personnel had caught the man seeking out young girls and grooming them. They told him not to come back, so he found another church and started again. By coordinating information, these two churches were able to prevent potential abuse.

Sexual predators, aggravated stalkers, disruptive attendees and panhandlers are among the types of people who are known for going from church to church.

A man claiming to be a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Coast Guard showed up at a particular church. He wore a full uniform. One night he was stopped by police and produced his Coast Guard ID. The officer happened to be familiar with the Coast Guard and said, "This is a fake ID."

The authorities went to his house and found fake IDs from many agencies, including the CIA, along with different uniforms. He had hospital scrubs and a photo of himself in a hospital holding

a newborn baby. When word got back to the church, the leaders realized that he had stood on the platform during a service with other men pledging their fidelity to their families. During a local safety presentation at another church, when the man's picture came up, several people pointed and called him by name. He had been at their church also.

Churches should not be in competition, and anything one church can do to protect others should be encouraged. Several dozen churches in a single metropolitan area sharing data such as this could save lives.

It all comes down to planning. A church with a group of dedicated people who are prepared for any situation will be an asset that cannot be measured. If the congregation and visitors can see the priority placed on keeping everyone safe, they will know that the church loves them and the community they are serving. As the saying goes, "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." A church that protects its people physically can feed them spiritually.



Be sure to visit our website for upcoming Church Safety Network Group Meetings.

This is an opportunity for church safety teams and local law enforcement, when available to look at current events, best practices in protecting your church and potential community threats. These events are held quarterly.

For those out of state, let us know how we can help build your network of churches.



Join the conversation on Church Safety & Security through our Facebook Group live chats. This is another way to stay up to date on current topics weekly.

Trinity Security Allies started in 2015 to provide education and safety training to houses of worship, faith-based schools and non-profits who cannot afford the high cost of a security consulting firm. Trinity Security Allies believes that every organization should have access to safety education and training regardless of their ability to pay. Imagine the lives that could be saved in the event of a tragic situation if safety education and training had been provided to all those involved. With domestic violence and mental health issues on the rise, it is best to have a plan in place, and not need it, to ensure the safety of those frequenting your house of worship, faith based non-profit or school.



Jim Howard pictured here lead the charge for the safety team for that church in Pinellas County, Florida. Because of the training that he offered at what is now known as Generations Christian Church; other churches began reaching out for help; ultimately the beginning of Trinity Security Allies in 2015. Jim works with hundreds of churches in Florida and around the country.

Jim brings a wealth of knowledge through nearly forty years of law enforcement, built and currently leads a safety team for a small mega church and whose family was a victim of church shooting when Jim was just 16 years old. To learn more about Jim's background and the services provided by Trinity Security Allies, visit our website.

"Our police department hired Trinity Security Allies to conduct a church safety seminar for our area churches. I can't speak highly enough about how satisfied we were with the experience. Jim's passion and professionalism were evident. We've received nothing but glowing reviews from the attendees. I'd highly recommend him!" Captain Eric Hill, Venice Police Department, Venice, Florida.

Let us know how we can be of help. Visit Trinity Security Allies for more information.