

Developing Emergency Plans: Acts of Violence on Church Property

All churches should engage in emergency planning so that when an incident occurs, staff and church leaders follow safe procedures. Potential emergencies can arise from acts of God (hurricanes, snow storms), accidents (electrical fire, flooding), and acts of man (violence, infectious disease). While creating a plan can seem overwhelming, breaking down an emergency plan by potential emergency and discussing possible responses can make the task less onerous.

This information piece includes suggestions to create emergency plans for potential acts of violence on church property. While much of this information is for congregations, there is also information for mid-councils who use churches and other locations for their meetings.

Who Should Work on the Plan?

Your session should form a committee that will report the final draft plan to your session for approval. The committee should include session members (such as past and present members of the property committee), members of the church staff, and any members of the congregation who might have experience in emergency management, insurance, and law enforcement.

Mid-councils should consider emergency planning for their offices using similar resource people who work for or serve the presbytery. Such a plan might contemplate general emergency planning for off-site meetings, such as when meetings of a presbytery are held at a local church.

Sources of Guidance

All councils can start by contacting their insurer. Presumably your local agent has visited your property and knows about potential risks on the property and in the local area. Ask the agent and the insurer about guidance and resources to help you create an emergency plan.

In addition, contact local law enforcement and ask them to help you think through risks in your building. Local police will know your neighborhood and its risks. Invite law enforcement to meet in your buildings and ask for opinions on high risk areas, locks on doors, security in general, and any other guidance the police can suggest.

Also, inquire if anyone in your congregation or presbytery works for a firm that provides security services or products to companies or consumers or are responsible for security at their workplace. They may be able to provide information for your project.

There are also some good resources to consult online. Start with the Federal Emergency Management Agency's publication "Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship." You can find it at this link:

<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/33007>

You can also find resources at the Church Law and Tax website, including risk management resources, at this link:

<http://store.churchlawtodaystore.com/emergencies.html>

Preparing a Plan

Plans will vary from church-to-church and council-to-council based upon size, number of buildings, budgets, and other factors. There are some common elements to consider in creating a plan.

Examine your Property

The first step is to examine your property and go through a checklist of questions, such as:

Do all doors have secure locks?

Are there alarms on some or all of the doors and are they active and functioning properly?

If there are no door alarms, should you have alarms on certain doors to alert staff when they are opened?

Are exits marked and are exit signs and doors properly lit?

Do all first floor windows have locks and/or bars?

Where are the remote sections of buildings which can be used to get access away from public and church office view?

Where are the church's vulnerable spots?

Do you have security cameras and what can they see?

Which buildings and portions of buildings are used on any given day of the week?

Where have we had issues in the past with breaches of security, break-ins, and uninvited guests?

Assess Where Incidents May Occur

Some days of the week will present more challenges than other days. On Sunday mornings activities will likely take place in the sanctuary, Christian education areas, and nursery. On Sunday afternoon there may be Bible study and other classes as well as youth group activities. Planning for emergencies on Sunday may be different than planning for the rest of the week at an active church.

During the week staff will be in the church office. In some churches staff offices may be outside the main church office. It will be harder to secure staff when their offices are spread around your property. Meanwhile you may be hosting a daycare or church school in a separate building. During the day there may be a variety of meetings in rooms all over your property including church committees, church groups, exercise classes, Bible study, Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups related to various addictions, Brownies, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Indian Guides, and the list goes on and on.

Give some thought to how you need to secure various locations on your property on certain days of the week. Churches often are welcoming spaces with doors open to anyone who wishes to enter. Places of sanctuary. However, such openness comes at a cost. A committee considering an emergency plan should assess whether to reduce accessibility and limit ingress and egress to certain areas where visitors can quickly and easily be identified. Another issue is whether to have all guests sign in and out so that staff can control who is in the church building(s) at any given time.

Assess Who Can Help

Make lists of members of your congregation or council who may be of assistance in a crisis. Then ask those folks if they are willing to assist in the event of a crisis. These are also folks you might want on your planning team:

- a. Doctors, nurses, and EMTs.
- b. Members of law enforcement.
- c. Members of the media or person who are communicators in their regular jobs.
- d. Employees of a security company or locksmiths.

Communications by Staff – I Am Worried About A Problem

Employees should be trained that if they hear or see something that they perceive is a problem, they should say something. Sometimes church staffers become complacent because they feel an issue is none of their business or because the business of a church is to help people, not report them to law enforcement. Remember that churches are places where people go to get help when they face tough economic circumstances (poverty, job loss), difficult personal issues (separation, divorce, loss of custody of children), and personal loss (death of a family member or friend). Even though churches seek to offer solace and compassion to people facing serious personal challenges, some people may take desperate actions toward churches or have mental health issues that distort their view of a church and its staff and members.

Make sure your staff knows that they can and should report to their supervisor and the pastoral staff anything that makes them uncomfortable. If neither is available and the issue is serious, staffers should be told to contact local law enforcement for guidance.

Communications – Internal and External

Communications during a crisis is important and should be included in your plan. Also think about internal communications versus external communications. Internal communications looks at how to communicate with staff and volunteers in your building during a crisis. Do you have a public address system heard throughout your property? If so, you should consider a code that would warn folks of a situation that involves a shooter on property or risk of violence. If you do not have a public address system, do all staffers have walkie talkies or cell phones with that capacity? Will you send a warning text? In short, how will you notify staff and volunteers to seek shelter and go to a safe place in your building.

External communications means having contact information for a variety of third parties who you may need to call for assistance or information. That list should include local law enforcement, nearby hospitals, and other emergency services. When a crisis occurs you should have several people prepared to call 911 and report a problem so that if people get separated or one person is injured or killed you do not rely upon that one person to call for help.

Finally, you should consider point persons if an event occurs and the media contacts your church. Keep that group small. Channel all inquiries about the event to that small team. Include members of that team on your list of who to contact in an emergency.

Evacuation or Shelter In Place

Security experts advise that in a case of an active shooter your plan should direct people to get out of the building if possible, but if not, to shelter in a safe place and be still. A factor to consider in your plan is evacuation routes (including alternate routes if primary routes are blocked) and where staff can shelter safely in place during a crisis. Emergency responders and law enforcement can help you select the best evacuation routes. It is useful to post those routes so that in an emergency people can look quickly at a diagram and know where to go. Security experts advise that there are some areas where people should not shelter with an active shooter in a building: near windows; in doorways, hallways, stairways, and elevators. (information provided by Securitas Security)

Your plan should include diagrams of your property and buildings including names of rooms. It should identify church offices with names of staffers. If there is a daycare or school it should indicate which rooms they occupy. It would be useful to include in the plan a church calendar, which should be updated regularly, so emergency personnel can quickly determine what meetings, events, and activities are happening on your property.

Once Law Enforcement Arrives

Remember that when law enforcement arrives, officers will be looking for the person who is causing a problem or is an armed aggressor so that they can neutralize the threat. Train staff and volunteers that when officers arrive they should keep their hands visible and empty and they should identify themselves to the officers. Then they should share any information they have about the crisis. What happened? Where did it happen? Describe the person causing the problem. And so forth. Next law enforcement will seek to rescue victims and provide medical assistance to anyone who is injured. Finally, if there is an active shooter or criminal in your building, it is a crime scene and law enforcement wants to preserve and secure it. (information provided by Securitas Security).

Threats of Violence

Whether or not you have a plan in place, you should report threats of violence from any source to law enforcement. No matter what you think of the credibility of the threat or its source, law enforcement can help you assess credibility and assist in a response.

Of course, actual incidents of violence, damage, burglaries, arsons, graffiti, and other property crimes should be reported to police. These may not be isolated incidents in your neighborhood and reports may help police identify and catch those responsible.

Failure to report and respond to past incidents may create liability for your church. For example, if someone repeatedly enters your buildings and makes threats or behaves in an unusual manner and no one reports the disruptive behavior to law enforcement, if that person returns and harms someone, it could be argued that your church was on notice of this dangerous person and failed to act. The injured party may bring a lawsuit on the grounds of negligence and argue that the actions of the person who caused the injury was foreseeable and preventable.

Training and Sharing

Having a plan is useful, but without training it is merely a document that likely will not be adequately implemented when an emergency unfolds. So, share your plan with all church/council staff and allow them to ask questions. Then train the staff on how to respond in case of an emergency. Hold an annual discussion at a staff meeting to remind staff of the plan and to make sure all staff members know the plan of action. Just as you might hold an annual fire drill to know how to exit safely in a fire emergency, consider a similar drill for an emergency involving potential violence on your property.

For possible incidents in the sanctuary, train your greeters and ushers on the plan and recommended responses.

If you have any weekday operations in your buildings, such as a daycare or church school, share your plan with the leaders and staff of those operations. Discuss with them what to do in case of an emergency and where to go to safety. Include someone from those operations on your planning committee that creates the emergency plan.

When you share the plan with your session or presbytery for approval, discuss it thoroughly so that your leaders know how to respond in an emergency. Bring out the plan once a year to discuss at a meeting.

Make your congregation or council aware of the plan and where to find it.

Mid-councils often meet in churches under their jurisdictions. Have the plan available for such meetings. When your congregation gets a request to use your church, include in your planning process time to discuss your emergency plan, including the plan for active shooters.

Mid-councils who use churches and other buildings should build into their planning process time to discuss what to do in case of an emergency. Not only an active shooter situation, but also weather (hurricane, tornado) and other emergencies. While working with a church, school or other location to plan a meeting, ask for a copy of their emergency plans and discuss them with someone who can share information about the plan and the building. Take time to locate safe places in each building and emergency routes and exits.

Finally, congregations should make local law enforcement contacts aware of their emergency plan and ask if that agency wants a copy.

Where to Locate the Emergency Plan

Maintain the emergency plan in two formats: electronic and hard copy. All staff members who have computers should have access to both formats and those who do not should have access to a hard copy near their work area. In that way, when an emergency occurs, all staff members can quickly find the plan and use it.

Give copies of the plan to key staff to keep at home, such as the pastors or executive presbyter. In the event someone contacts them at home in an emergency they can refer to the plan and provide instructions. This may prove useful if a pastor or executive presbyter is off-site when an event occurs.

Multiple hard copies of the plan, including diagrams, should be kept in various locations on your church property. In that way if and when law enforcement comes during an emergency you can give the officers a copy of the plan and diagrams so they can quickly assess the property and where staff, volunteers, and others might be found.