

Church and Synagogue Safety

I have been approached by pastors, rabbis, deacons, and other church members in positions of authority with questions about church and synagogue security. The interest is usually in forming some sort of “security team” of volunteers and is focused on the legal concerns inherent in doing so. I believe that these well-intentioned inquiries are often born of misconceptions about what security really means. I feel it is important to truly understand what the goals of church security ought to be and what can be done even on a small budget without raising any legal concerns. The goals of religious institution security are the same as personal security inside the home, a mall, or basically any building: **deterrence**, **detection**, and **response**. Below I will discuss ways to accomplish these goals regardless of budgetary constraints.

DETERRENCE

To potentially **deter** violent actors, you don’t have to have a big budget. It is very inexpensive to hire an off-duty police officer or an armed security guard to come stand outside the main entrance to the church. An overt security presence might cause a would-be violent actor to think twice before following through with their plan. However, a determined attacker could simply find a way around overt security measures. We have examples such as the Columbine school massacre, where the murderers simply waited for the resource officer to leave his post before beginning their attack. Overt security measures in the form of uniformed officers may provide the psychological “warm and fuzzy” that some people seek when they talk about security, but aside from the possibility of deterrence, there is nothing magical about having one uniformed officer (or ten) on site.

In understanding this reality, church leaders should consider the visible presence of armed personnel as only a piece of the security puzzle. It would be foolish to do what I have seen some larger churches do by posting armed security guards and simultaneously preventing legal concealed carry. Turning your church into a “gun-free zone” when it is not designated as such by state law is tantamount to inviting would-be violent actors in. Making the naïve assumption that overt security measures will be at the right place at the right time if and when something goes down is very shortsighted, in my opinion, unless you plan to turn your church into a fortress complete with metal detectors, pat-downs, etc. This is obviously not the type of atmosphere most parishioners would be comfortable with and, even if it were, fortresses such as courthouses and airports are often defeated by determined attackers. Do not view overt security measures as more than what they are, and definitely don’t rely on them to the extent that you take away the congregation’s ability to carry their own personal defensive tools.

Usually these pastors are interested in getting volunteers from within the congregation trained and licensed as security officers in order to form a legal church “security team.” Companies will

come in and provide the training to help churches get set up with the proper credentials and insurance to make this happen. I would approach this option with extreme caution. Becoming a skilled personal-protection officer is not something you can do as a part-time gig just because you are on the parish council. Asking for volunteers will likely invite overzealous individuals, well-meaning though they may be, to bite off more than they can chew.

You don't want to create a team of poorly trained amateurs and put them in official positions of authority when it comes to security. I have seen several churches do this and have yet to meet an amateur security team that I have confidence in. In my opinion, it is best to leave those services to actual professionals. If you happen to have some of those professionals in your congregation, you have more options, but I would avoid any sort of security team composed of amateurs, even if they are "licensed" amateurs. If you understand the real value of this type of team as discussed, about overt security in general, you will understand that regardless of whether or not you choose this option, it is not the end-all, be-all.

DETECTION

With or without overt security, there are several methods we can use to *detect* potential violence inside a structure. The most efficient method is to control access. Obviously, in a church setting, all are welcome, which means we aren't likely to have access badges or anything like that for the main service. People can literally come in off the street. That being the case, the best way to control access to the church service is by limiting entry options to monitored access points once the service has begun. If church services begin at a certain time, all side doors that are not monitored should be closed and locked after that time, so people cannot get into the service without someone seeing them.

Any nursery areas or places where children congregate outside the main service should also have controlled access. Here, we do have the options of requiring ID badges or employing door buzzers to help restrict access only to parents and workers. You can go about as high tech as you want to accomplish this goal. But something as simple as an attendant sitting in front of a locked door with a sign-in/out sheet is a good start. With controlled access in place, we can see who is coming and going and limit the options for someone to slip in without being seen and/or engaged by someone.

If we make it such that someone is likely to be seen and/or engaged by an usher or someone else when they come through the doors, we have the opportunity to "size them up." Whoever is handing out bulletins or standing by the door greeting people ought to be looking for obvious cues that an individual could become a problem. While it is true that a crafty individual bent on bringing violence into a house of worship could blend in until they make their move, obvious signs can often be observed simply through basic human interaction. If something about the way a person looks or acts raises a red flag, they can either be denied access or watched more closely once allowed to enter. You have to trust your instincts on this if you perceive something unnerving.

Everyone fixates on the idea of an active shooter coming in and laying waste to the congregation. However, it is far more likely that other less horrifically violent situations could transpire: domestic situations have a tendency to erupt in churches, mentally unstable or inebriated individuals come into services and cause problems, etc. The list of more plausible

scenarios goes on and on before you get to the worst-case scenario of a mass murder. Good articles about recognizing pre-attack cues that any vigilant individual can and should read. Recognizing the potential for a bad situation before it occurs gives you more options to deal with things before they get out of hand.

RESPONSE

When deterrence doesn't work and the detection strategy either raises significant concerns about an individual or is circumvented, you must be ready to **respond**. Response can come in several forms. If an individual is found to be a potential problem during the detection process, the response could be asking them to leave and calling the police if they refuse. If an elderly person starts to have a stroke, the response could be rendering aid and calling EMS for an ambulance. That's one we don't think about often enough! You are far more likely to encounter a medical emergency than any type of violence inside a church. Do you have a quality aid bag somewhere in the sanctuary? Is there an AED in the building and someone on staff trained to use it? Having the ability to respond appropriately to a medical emergency is far more important than the ability to respond to the threat of violence.

If violence occurs, the response might mean fighting with and possibly shooting the bad guy, whether it is a domestic situation, an inebriated person who becomes violent, or the worst-case scenario of an active shooter. If you have uniformed officers or a church security team on site, they are a piece of the response puzzle to be sure. But they may not always be in the right place at the right time to stop the threat. Allowing and/or encouraging armed citizens to carry their defensive tools in church gives each individual the ability to take responsibility for their own security. That is really the crux of the misconception when churches approach security.

There is no way a church can guarantee the security of the congregation with or without a special team, just as there is no way a police force can guarantee the security of the public. It is ultimately the individual's responsibility to defend him or herself when the chips are down. You can have all the overt security presence you want, but if they aren't in the right position to take action immediately, the individual will live or die based on their own personal preparedness for the attack.

When churches allow concealed carry, churches can and should offer access to training programs for their members. There are tons of extra-curricular activities that are offered to congregations on a weekly basis. Why not make personal defense training one of them? Churches will likely be able to find trainers who are willing to offer their services at discounted rates if the church wants to host a class. Doing this would be an easy win-win for the individual armed citizen and the congregation as a whole.

CHURCH SECURITY CONCLUSION

Churches have numerous affordable options to take advantage of when it comes to security, with the goals of **deterrence**, **detection**, and **response** in mind. Overt measures such as armed security guards and resource officers are inexpensive and can provide a potential **deterrent** effect as well as a **response** option. Controlled access and behavioral recognition techniques can help detect potential violence and stop it before it starts. **Response** can come in many

forms, from asking someone to leave, to calling the police, having overt security in the right position to respond, and allowing armed citizens the ability to defend themselves.

In addition, churches can and should encourage armed citizens to train by offering classes from reputable trainers. Approaching security in this manner will be effective regardless of your budget. While volunteer security teams are a possibility, they should be approached with extreme caution from legal, financial liability, and professionalism standpoints. As always, make sure you understand the laws in your state before implementing any of the strategies presented here.

The *Advantage* team will meet with you and develop a plan suited to your terms and needs. Call and schedule a consultation with Advantage!

