

Security Challenges for Houses of Worship

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Abstract

Violence in American Churches is on the rise; churches today are no longer safe havens from the violence of their communities and religious leaders face the unique challenge of providing an inviting and loving environment in the church without being mistaken for an easy target. Churches can no longer afford to ignore their security. The challenge for worship staff is preventing the potential victimization of worship members and visitors while asserting ones self as a “hard target” and maintaining the peaceful and welcoming milieu one expects at a house of worship. Unfortunately, the religious community is subject to many of the same hazards that secular organizations face. These include both external and internal threats which can come in the form of street criminals, white collar criminals, hate groups, terrorists, ideology groups, and others. Typically, congregations are not prepared at all or at best are prepared minimally for the risks these groups present. This paper addresses the specific security concern and suggests a simple plan for action.

Key Words

Church security, active shooter, crime prevention, preparedness, religious attack

On Sunday, May 21, 2006, a gunman walked into a church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, near the end of Sunday morning services. He proceeded to shoot five people at the church before abducting his estranged wife and three children. While the children were eventually released, the woman (wife) was later found dead at another location. The church’s pastor was shot during the incident. Shocking as it may seem, violent incidents of this nature happen several times each year at churches across the country. Because places of worship are open to the public and often times inviting, churches have become more vulnerable to these senseless acts of violence.

American houses of worship are rarely the focus of security or crime prevention efforts. However, a 2009 report published by the Christian Security Network outlines 1,237 crimes against Christian churches including 12 homicides, 38 other violent incidents including, 3 sexual

assaults, 3 kidnappings, 98 arsons, and over 700 burglaries resulting in more than \$24 million in property loss (Hawkins, 2010). Faith leaders typically are not aware of vulnerabilities and basic crime prevention methods. Consequently, many churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques are soft targets. With over 600,000 ministers and over 400,000 Christian churches reported in America and a growing concern over church safety and security, faith and worship leaders are looking for opportunities to ensure they are providing a true safe environment for all their members. Faith-Based Organizations (FBO) have traditionally lacked the security measures and emergency preparedness planning that businesses and other secular groups have put into place. Indeed, many of these organizations are reluctant to discuss whether or not they are aware of ever having been targeted and what, if any, active security preparations they have put in place. Loss prevention typically has been discussed; however efforts at houses of worship are typically targeted toward internal losses and property crime. Preventing cash mishandling and property vandalism pose frequent challenges for worship facilities and this should not be underscored. If external threats could be controlled through effective countermeasures, the internal environment of houses of worship would benefit from a renewed interest in security methods. Consequently, much like shopping malls and other retail establishments, worship facilities do not offer the protection afforded by places with rigorous security screening procedures, such as airports or government offices.

Today we see a renewed interest in worship facility arson throughout the United States. Recent headlines reveal that active shooters have made their way into the front doors of our most sacred institutions, killing or maiming innocent individuals. Probably the most ominous potential threat is that of terrorists using primitive weapon systems, such as explosives acquired on the open market, to cause mass damage.

How does a faith-based organization deal with violent or destructive threats? How does proactive preparedness and basic security mesh with faith based organizations? For example: Most world religions are taught to prefer their brother/sister, to turn the other cheek, and to forgive and forget. This ideology can still exist while faith leaders “protect the flock”. While no worship facility is expected to hold off armed gunman by taking a military style defensive position, it can be reasonably expected for a house of worship to have evacuation plans, emergency contacts, and a security awareness posture (mind set) put in place. While worship facilities are doctrinally places of refuge and peace and all should be welcome, some basic behavioral detection techniques may identify a violent episode before it happens. Unfortunately, there are many examples of where violence took parishioners by surprise.

In October 2006, a man sloshed fuel on pews and parishioners during a church service and started a fire intended to kill everyone in the building. Two women were burned when their clothing caught fire. Fortunately for church members, staff was able to subdue the suspect while law enforcement responded. The police report later stated that the suspect admitted that he took gas cans and a knife to the Peoples Church in Salem Oregon with the intent of killing all the people in the church. Trial testimony indicated he thought he was acting on God’s orders. Mental health experts testified he had paranoid schizophrenia (Koe, 2006).

In 2007 a black-clad gunman walked into New Life Church, in Colorado Springs, CO on a typical Sunday and started shooting. Fortunately, he was met with the church's first line of defense: a congregant with a concealed-weapons permit and a law enforcement background (Gorski, 2007). The armed volunteer shot the gunman. New Life's pastor credited the church attendee with saving dozens more lives due to quick action.

The use of explosive devices is not just a foreign phenomenon any more, harkening back to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombing incidents in Great Britain. In Louisiana, four men allegedly broke the windows of Cypress Creek Baptist Church in Vernon Parish in July 2009 to steal electronic equipment. After that, the men are reported to have robbed a fireworks stand. Using the stolen explosive materials, they made three bombs. One was set off on a roadway in Vernon Parish, one was set off outside of the Champions Center at Grace Church, and one was left, but not detonated, in Three Pines Apostolic Church (Bulger, 2009).

In December of 1986 in Long Beach, CA the Morningland Church was the victim of a strategic bomb attack. A lone suspect was disturbed at the churches teachings and the “harassment” of a sister. The suspect smartly placed the concealed bomb within the church structure and subsequently, part of a 10-stick dynamite bomb went off. Thomas T. McCoy, 26 was arrested on suspicion of ignition of a destructive device, possession of a destructive device, and carrying a concealed weapon (Ex-Morninglanders, 2010).

While houses of worship typically have medical guidelines to turn to if someone has a heart attack or an evacuation procedure if there is a fire, not many would quickly know what to do if a person with a gun walked into the church, temple or synagogue. Unfortunately, the religious community is subject to many of the same hazards that any other organization faces. These include both external and internal threats which can come in the form of street criminals, hate groups, terrorists, white collar criminals, common criminals and others. Churches want to present an open and welcoming image, but in an era of mass-casualty shootings and terrorism threats, the above mentioned incidents highlight what should be a new emphasis on security. Some of the nation's estimated 1,200 megachurches — places where more than 2,000 worshippers gather each week — have been quietly beefing up security in recent years, even

using armed guards to protect the faithful. Even without a security department, faith leaders can train volunteers to keep watch for suspicious behavior, such as a visitor dressed in a long coat during the summer or not making eye contact with fellow congregants.

Security professionals must understand that the faith-based community is different in many ways from the business or government setting. Because of the challenges identified above, emphasis should be placed on the application of:

- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (manipulating the built environment such as landscape designs, natural surveillance, and using structures to divert or influence flow);
- Physical security monitoring (alarms, cameras, access control);
- Security/terrorism awareness training for faith leaders;
- Establishing a security committee that produces preparedness plans; and
- Fostering positive relationships with local law enforcement

Balancing these considerations requires faith leaders to take a deliberate response to security. On one hand, embracing a fortress mentality with heavily armed guards and requiring all congregants to pass through metal detectors would hurt the faith's philosophy and be a monumental response to a low frequency event. On the other hand, going about business as usual without addressing security concerns would undoubtedly fall below the expectations of the congregation members you are serving.

So how should a worship facility and its staff prepare and respond to a future security threat? The first step in addressing security is to form security committee dedicated to studying the topic and ultimately, recommend options for the facility. If your congregation has a safety

and security team currently in place, conduct a threat and vulnerability assessment for the property. You may want to obtain input from additional congregation members who have specialized experience in the field, such as those with backgrounds in law enforcement, the security industry, the military or emergency management (Spacek, 2008).

Once the threat and vulnerability assessment has been completed, the next step for the committee is to put together a draft security plan for the leadership's consideration. Local law enforcement agencies should be consulted as they will provide feedback and intelligence to which faith organization would not otherwise be privy to. Houses of worship should implement a layered security approach utilizing a defense in depth mentality. For example, parking lots offer the opportunity to suggest that the facility is a "hard target". The lot should be well lit, appropriately marked, and offer protection to foot traffic. Next, multiple layers of greeters or volunteers (outside, foyer-level, and sanctuary-level). Ideally, each layer of security should be able to communicate to the other. The goal is to identify threats early and respond as soon as possible. Combine a well trained staff with security enhancements such as cameras and physical locks, and this could be the difference between life and death. Other considerations in the plan may include:

- The roles and responsibilities of various layers of personnel
- Dealing with disruptive or impaired individuals
- Dealing with violent persons with or without a weapon
- Pastoral protection
- Lockdown and/or evacuation procedures
- Equipment needs
- Communication to each other and the congregation

One option a faith based organization has is to hire off-duty active law enforcement officers. An advantage in hiring these individuals is that they will have superior training and experience. However, the faith facility must still train these individuals in what their role will be

in emergency situations. A contract security guard service is another option. With this decision, the facility still must undertake reasonable precautions in hiring the security service, such as checking references and fully understanding the service's screening, training, and supervision procedures.

Faith leaders should not simply accept the risk but rather seriously consider the consequences of having no plan at all, and as a response, instill the need to prepare an overall security strategy. A wide variety of resources are available to both security professionals and religious leaders.

The U.S. Department of Justice offers no-cost technical assistance to groups involved in projects to protect houses of worship. The process of seeking such assistance is explained in a publication titled *Church Arson Prevention Training and Technical Assistance Program*. The Justice Department will solicit information about the churches specific security need. If assistance is approved, the U.S. Department of Justice will contract the work to a private firm that will coordinate the assistance and search for a specialist whose expertise most closely matches the needs of the recipient. The recipient can also suggest a specialist and play a role in negotiating the type of assistance needed. Technical assistance, training, and evaluation are three primary forms of assistance that will enhance projects to protect houses of worship (DOJ, 1997).

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) provides a no-cost training presentation targeted at churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship. This training, titled *Soft Target Awareness Course (STAC)*, strives to bring awareness to faith leaders by education (highlighting the risk) and targeted awareness of anti-terrorism directives (DHS, 2010). In addition, this presentation advises about the effectiveness of signs, lighting, guards, perimeter security, and surveillance detection.

It is essential that those charged with leadership balance having a security presence while still keeping a house of worship open to everyone. One key component of a faith organizations security program is observant volunteers. These frontline roles are often the first people to see or hear problems, and often have access to all parts of the building before, during and after the service. But sadly, many greeters and ushers receive little or no training related to the role they can play in observing, getting help quickly, and providing leadership in an emergency situation (Rowe, 2009). Today domestic terrorism is often overlooked due to Middle Eastern events being displayed prominently in the media. However, when domestic terrorists or lone-wolfs are looking for an easy target with unsuspecting prey, they typically need not look further than their local neighborhood house of worship. Construct a security plan, plan for the inevitable, and be prepared!

About the Author

Brian M. Harrell, CPP is currently the Manager of Critical Infrastructure Protection for the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) which monitors the reliability of the Bulk Electric System (electric grid). Brian has spent his career consulting on antiterrorism, physical security, and infrastructure protection.

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