

On Sunday, July 27, 2008, a gunman walked into a church in Knoxville, Tennessee, during the performance of a children's musical. He proceeded to shoot eight people, killing two, before he was overpowered by congregation members and subdued until police arrived. The gunman reportedly admitted to police that he committed the crimes because of his disagreement with the church's stand on issues, although he himself did not attend the church. He later pleaded guilty to murder and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

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, churches have become more vulnerable to these senseless acts of violence. This fact sheet addresses what churches can do to prepare for, and respond to, violent acts.

The Reality of Violence at Church

- While rare, acts of violence do occur at churches.
- Violent acts may include robbery, assault, rape, even attempted murder or murder.
- The majority of violent acts are carried out by people who have some connection to the congregation.
- The most common violent act at churches, as with schools, is a shooting.
- Often there are pre-cursors or warning signs to the violent act, such as threats or previous outbursts, disputes, or confrontations.
- Most churches are unprepared for a violent event or its aftermath.

Who is at Risk?

- No church is immune to the risk of a violent episode occurring.
- Churches of all sizes, locations, and resources have experienced acts of violence.

Can a Violent Outburst Be Avoided?

- There is no assurance that a violent episode in church can be avoided. However, you can be prepared for the possibility of an incident occurring.
- By taking personal responsibility for the safety of your church, you will have done the best thing possible to prevent a violent incident from occurring.

How to Make Your Church Less Vulnerable

- Working with your church's Safety and Security Team, designate a point person on security issues to be the church security director. Define the responsibilities of that position.
- Conduct a security assessment to identify your church's vulnerabilities. Ideally, this assessment is conducted in conjunction with your local law enforcement agency or other security professional.
- Develop a church security plan and guidelines with defined roles for all staff persons, including greeters, ushers, and other frontline workers and volunteers. Your local law enforcement agency may be a resource to you in forming the security plan.
 - Include in the plan a seating location for ushers and/or security personnel (strategically stationed in both the front and the rear of the sanctuary), lockdown procedures for areas of the church, crisis communications, and an evacuation plan for the building.
- Establish a method for quickly communicating issues of concern, such as a weapon, to appropriate church personnel, such as the security director, as well as to authorities. Depending on the size of your church, walkie-talkies, two-way radios, pagers, and/or cell phones may be appropriate to have on hand.
- Establish a no tolerance policy for fights, altercations, and other disruptions.
- Work with your local law enforcement agency to provide training for staff and frontline workers and volunteers on topics such as dealing with disruptive individuals and identifying and diffusing potentially violent situations.

A Word about Security Guards

The use of professional or volunteer security guards at church has become more commonplace in recent years. A church has several options regarding security guards: 1) hire off-duty law enforcement personnel; 2) hire a professional security guard service; or 3) maintain its own security guard force. Considerations for each option:

Off-Duty Law Enforcement

- Active law enforcement officers typically have superior training and experience in dealing with suspicious individuals.
- In many jurisdictions, off-duty law enforcement officers responding to a criminal act do so as police officers, which can provide churches some measure of liability protection.
- Off-duty law enforcement officers and/or their agencies are not likely to provide indemnity (hold harmless) agreements and additional insurance protection to the church, such as may be obtained from a professional security guard service.
- Churches should come to a meeting of the minds with the law enforcement officer(s) about the preferred approach to security at the church.

Hired Security Guard Force:

- The use of a professional security guard service provides a layer of liability protection for the church.
- The church 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.
- The church should verify that the security guard company has a license by obtaining a copy.
- The church should enter into a written agreement with the security guard service in which the service agrees to indemnify (hold harmless) the church from any injury or damage that might result from the service's activities.
- The church should make sure that security guard service is fully insured and have the church added as an additional insured on the service's insurance policies. Then, the church should obtain a copy of a certificate of insurance showing that it has been added as an additional insured on the service's insurance policies.

Own Security Guard Force:

- The church is responsible for running background checks and screening all security guard personnel.
- The church is responsible for the training and supervision of its security guard personnel.
- Since "security" is a regulated profession in many jurisdictions, the church is responsible for ensuring that its security force complies with all licensing and certification requirements that might exist under its state's law.
- The church will in most circumstances be liable for the acts of its security guards.

The use of armed security guards presents additional considerations. While the presence of armed guards can potentially prevent or bring an end to an episode of church violence, their use also raises the risk of injury or death to innocent bystanders, claims for the use of excessive force, and an increased burden for ensuring that all guards are properly screened, trained, and supervised. Also, armed security guards must be properly licensed; hold necessary permits; and only carry legal and authorized weapons.

Arming your church's security guards is something that should only be undertaken in consultation with your church's counsel, local law enforcement, and your insurance agent.

What to Do in the Event of a Violent Incident

If a violent incident occurs at your church, the first priority is to protect the people in your congregation. To do this, follow these steps:

- Call 911.
- If there is an opportunity to keep the invader out by locking doors and/or closing off areas of the church, do so.
- If there is an opportunity to remove all members and guests from the premises, do so as quickly as possible.
- Quickly control panic situations. By doing so, you will be more likely to conduct a sequenced evacuation, if possible.

- A leader, such as the pastor and/or security director, must take charge and provide orders to be followed.
- All orders must be clear and direct, such as the following:
 - “Ushers, secure the building.”
 - “(Fill in name), contact the police.”
 - “(Fill in name), secure the nursery.”
 - “Everyone, take cover on the floor.”

How to Make Your Church Staff and Members Less Vulnerable

- Never allow staff to work alone. Always ensure that there are at least two employees present at all times.
- Establish an internal distress code that will alert others in the office to your need for assistance. For example, if church office workers typically address each other by first name, your distress code may be that addressing a colleague by last name (i.e., “Mr. Smith”) will signal a distress situation.
- Keep all church doors locked except when in use and then limit access points as much as possible.
- Consider installation of a “panic button” for frontline workers such as receptionists.
- Ensure that exterior lighting is adequate in all areas, especially parking lots and walkways. Ask your local law enforcement for assistance with a lighting audit.
- Always park your car in a well-lit area that is not obstructed by shrubbery, dumpsters, trucks, or vans.
- Ensure that all staff know of and understand the church’s security plan.
- Know where all telephones are located.
- Prepare for the worst case scenario.

While not every violent incident can be prevented, taking the steps outlined in this fact sheet can help your church become better prepared for responding to criminal acts at church and for communicating to your congregation during a crisis.