

# Advising Houses of Worship on a Comprehensive and Balanced Security Plan

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**H**ouses of worship should be the safest places on Earth; sadly, they are not. Every day, across the United States, they are victimized by criminal occurrences. Some incidents, such as last year's fatal shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, are so dramatic that the event shocks the senses. These tragic events, though representing only a small percentage of church-related crime, spur debate among law enforcement officials, security professionals, and spiritual leaders concerning how best to protect a house of worship.

Houses of worship represent a unique crime prevention challenge for police officers due to the very nature of such places. They are often open environments, both physically and figuratively. Once one is victimized, a standard response is, "Who would steal from God?" Regrettably, the answer is that there are many people who would. Criminals do not respect the sanctity of such places; they are interested only in finding an easy target.

Protecting a religious institution from potential criminal occurrences requires a balanced approach that integrates crime prevention strategies and security technologies with the overall mission of the institution. It is critically important to recognize that risk mitigation must complement the activities of a house of worship and not interfere with its outreach and service ministry. If a balance between the need for security and the needs of the spiritual mission is not struck, resistance and noncompliance are likely to follow. Houses of worship exist for a specific purpose, and that purpose involves a number of activities that are in direct conflict with acceptable crime prevention methodologies.

As has been observed with school-based shootings, preventing tragic incidents requires a combination of physical security features, electronic security mechanisms, environmental security strategies, and proactive policies and procedures. Even with this matrix of security precautions, stopping an obsessed gunman is problematic. Protecting a spiritual congregation is even more troublesome, since their place of worship will likely be disinclined to deploy the number of security features that are now commonplace in schools.

To be successful, any crime prevention or security-based intervention must offer spiritual leaders holistic initiatives that enhance the safety of their congregations and protect their houses' physical assets but do not distract from their ministry. To accomplish this balancing act, agencies must communicate to religious institutions the need to account for the following nine aspects of security: security consciousness, risk assessment, security assessment and evaluation, target hardening, protection of financial assets, youth protection, developing proactive strategies, media response, and ministry protection.

## Security Consciousness

An obstacle that many law enforcement officials may encounter when mitigating potential criminal threats at houses of worship is the belief that such venues are immune from criminal attack. Many congregations simply assume God will protect them. But even the Bible speaks of gatekeepers protecting the church!

Due to the recent tragic events that have occurred in a number of churches and other religious venues, this attitude is changing, and spiritual leaders are recognizing their vulnerability. The mission of a house of worship is not driven by a sense of security consciousness; security will always be considered only as an afterthought. Law enforcement officials must understand the nature of this situation and work within parameters acceptable to houses of worship.

## Risk Assessment

Risks can be divided into two large subcategories—internal and external—and one intangible category. Determining what specific risk a house of worship may encounter is a lengthy analysis that will require spiritual

leaders to think outside their comfort zones and orientation.

Internal risks involve threats that exist inside the institution's campus or building. A general rule of thumb is that the more involved in community outreach a house of worship is, the more potential risks that exist.

For example, spiritual leaders who initiate a divorce recovery workshop are, in their own beliefs, offering a helping hand to those that are involved in the traumatic experiences of divorce. From a crime prevention perspective, a divorce recovery workshop has the potential for domestic-violence incidents.

As discussed earlier, a balanced approach to crime prevention is an absolute necessity. An agency cannot tell a spiritual leader not to offer the divorce recovery workshop due to the potential for domestic violence. What it can do is provide procedural guidance that involves access control; increased vigilance and awareness; parking lot escorts; and training for staff, volunteers, and visiting counselors.

Other site-specific risks may include reliance on volunteers; opening and closing routines; gymnasium hours of operation; food pantries; benevolence or affinity frauds; cash management; property inventory; day care facilities; hours of operation; concerns particular to certain demographic groups; events such as weddings, concerts, and holiday services; and availability of desirable merchandise such as musical equipment, computers, office equipment, and audiovisual equipment.

It is also important to bear in mind that houses of worship are iconic representations that in the past have resulted in statements of hate (arson and vandalism), and many homeland defense professionals have labeled them as soft terrorist targets. The shooter in the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church incident projected his beliefs that church members represented ideologies that were responsible for his problems.

External risks are those that stem from the site's physical location. These risks include neighborhoods; traffic patterns; isolation and natural surveillance; areas of concealment; land usage (for example, commercial, industrial, or mixed use); parking lots; and off-site activities (such as mission trips, recreational trips, and in-home events).

The last, intangible category of risk involves the institution's reputation. Decades of "good" works can be destroyed by a negative incident occurring on the property of a house of worship and the resulting media scrutiny. The importance of this concern cannot be understated.

## **Security Evaluation**

A threat assessment and security survey is an excellent first step in developing a comprehensive security plan. This assessment is a critical on-site examination and analysis that determines the present security status, identifies security deficiencies, determines the protection needed, and makes recommendations to improve overall security.

Pinpointing or discovering potential vulnerabilities and correcting those deficiencies can have a dramatic impact on a thief's decision-making process. Reducing opportunities for potential criminals is a fundamental aspect of proactive crime prevention. A secure exterior may displace crime to a less-protected facility.

Law enforcement officers trained in risk assessment and security surveys can be a great resource for houses of worship interested in pursuing this option.

## **Target Hardening**

Target hardening refers to the strengthening of the security of an individual premise with the goal of reducing or minimizing potential criminal attack, risks, or vulnerabilities. The concept of target hardening does not necessarily imply a fortress or bunker mentality. Simply put, the idea of target hardening is that a strong, visible defense will deter or delay a criminal attack.

Target hardening is a means to reduce the opportunity of criminal attack by increasing the effort that criminals must exert to accomplish their goals. The more effort that is expended, the greater the risk and the greater the chance that the criminal will be apprehended. Criminals therefore seek easy targets that minimize the likelihood of being detected or caught.

Target hardening involves the application and use of access control, lighting, alarms, locks, closed-circuit television (CCTV), landscaping, signage, safes, and inventory control.

Regardless of what target-hardening applications an agency may believe are necessary or desirable, the deployment of target-hardening hardware or technologies must be acceptable to the house of worship. For example, a CCTV system that protects the counting room may be considered acceptable, whereas a CCTV system deployed in the sanctuary may be considered intrusive or offensive. Agencies must work with spiritual leaders to ensure that targets are hardened to the greatest extent acceptable by the institution.

### **Protecting Financial Assets**

The financial assets of a house of worship transcend the actual monetary value of those assets. Offerings by members represent a tangible trust between the congregation and the institution. When those funds are misused, stolen, misappropriated, or not used for the intended purpose, there frequently are emotional repercussions. This can cause members to leave the congregation, ministers and staff to be investigated, negative publicity to increase, and ultimately a reputation to be damaged.

Cash management begins with the collection of donations from the congregation and concludes with the funds being used for their intended purpose. The first step in developing a financial security policy is to identify how money should be collected, counted, deposited, reported, and audited. Each phase of this process is equally important, since each represents an opportunity for theft or misappropriation.

Financial threats to a house of worship include the crimes of robbery, embezzlement, theft, and fraud. Each element of risk provides a separate obstacle and challenge when developing a cash management plan.

Crime prevention officers across the United States have developed robbery prevention plans for commercial businesses for decades. The same philosophy can be adapted to the environment of a house of worship. Regardless if it is the collection, depositing, or auditing of funds, traditional robbery prevention strategies can have a positive impact on this particular vulnerability.

Robbery prevention transcends weekly collections. Depending on the size of the congregation and the number of activities a house of worship offers, a wide variety of funds may be collected or dropped off at the office every day of the week. These smaller funds tend to be in cash increments. Proceeds from vending machines, mission trips, social activities, bake sales, book sales, and car washes can quickly add up, making them an attractive target to thieves. Traditionally, these funds can be stored in a variety of methods, from a shoe box in a secretary's office to a small, easily transported money box.

Another threat concerns the increasing number of U.S. houses of worship that now allow members to use credit cards and automatic withdrawals for their charitable giving. These new "payment methods" represent the risk of identity theft or credit card fraud. Protecting the information on a computer system is as important as protecting computers themselves from theft.

An additional and highly dangerous new threat is the robbery of congregations during services. Strong-armed gunmen storm a congregation and proceed to steal the offering and rob the members of their personal funds, jewelry, or other valuables.

### **Protecting Youths**

No single element of crime related to houses of worship has received more media attention than the unfortunate occurrence of child abuse and molestation by spiritual leaders or employees or volunteers. These recent incidents have focused attention on the importance of protecting the most vulnerable members of a

congregation; this urgent need transcends any individual denomination.

Parents allow their children to participate in ministry programs for the positive experiences of spiritual growth, fellowship, and mentoring. These experiences and the lives of all involved are shattered if a child is sexually abused while participating in an event sponsored or conducted by a house of worship. Even more troubling is that most religious institutions are ill prepared to deal with this fact.

Sexual abuse is not limited to any racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic class, and it can happen anywhere. Religious institutions are not immune to these crimes, and it is the responsibility of every institution to protect the children that are entrusted to them. Agencies must remind these institutions that good intentions will not negate potential criminal occurrences.

Although a house of worship cannot guarantee the safety of every child or youth, it is imperative that it take responsibility for reducing or eliminating conditions that could possibly lead to a physical or sexual assault.

Researchers have reported that sexual predators will gravitate to activities and organizations where fewer protective measures are in place. Organizations such as 4-H and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America have developed proactive policies, practices, and protocols for working with children and youth; if houses of worship do not, they can be seen by comparison through a potential violator's eyes as a fertile environment. Religious institutions should champion methods for promoting a protective culture that is easily seen and obvious to parent and offender alike.

Every house of worship should operate within carefully tailored policies and procedures that balance the mission of the ministry with the inherent risks associated with children's programming.

The following are model procedures that agencies can advocate as benchmarks:

- Establish a standardized application process for all employees and volunteers.
  
- Provide oversight and accountability.
  - A person should have the designated responsibility of safety-related management and monitoring of all aspects of children and youth ministry.
  
  - Youth ministers may or may not have sufficient time to devote to this task.
  
  - All workers (staff or volunteers) should be trained in all safety-related precautions and procedures.
- Conduct background checks, but bear the following in mind:
  - Application forms must be verified.
  
  - Checks cannot verify whether a person is trustworthy or appropriate to work with children.
  
  - Many sexual offenders might not have a criminal record, so they might not be exposed through a criminal history check.

- Restrict the access of the following types of unauthorized individuals to children:
  - Strangers
  
  - Nonsanctioned workers
  
  - Noncustodial parents
  
  - Older youth involved with the children's ministry, to minimize the chances of peer-to-peer abuse
- Establish bathroom protocols for adult supervision.
  
- Provide chaperons for overnight events.
  
- Drop-off and pick-up procedures should contain a system of identification, such as a child tag system.
  
- Establish activity standards.
  - Ensure that every activity has not one, but two adults supervising.
  
  - Require a six-month waiting period on child supervision for new volunteers.
  
  - Enhance visibility of activities, including using rooms with windows and keeping doors open.
  
  - Monitor activities, including making periodic and unannounced drop-ins.
  
  - Stay cognizant of signs of physical and emotional abuse.

### Proactive Strategies

A critical aspect in building a comprehensive security plan is the designation of a group of congregation members that will develop both general security policies and procedures and crisis response plans, evaluate weaknesses, coordinate all safety concerns within the house of worship, and ensure that the plans and procedures are observed. Such a group should be led by a staff member with sufficient authority to develop policies; enforce compliance; coordinate with others throughout the administration; and act as a liaison with the

public sector, insurance underwriters, security integrators, and local law enforcement and fire officials.

By establishing a centralized responsibility, a house of worship makes a positive commitment to ensure that all safety and security concerns are addressed in a coordinated manner.

## Media Response

Facing a high-profile crisis could have serious ramifications for any religious institution for years to come. Reputation, image, and community standing are important assets that require protection. In fact, protecting the reputation of a house of worship is much more important than apprehending a thief who breaks into the sanctuary and steals musical instruments.

When a crisis situation arises, spiritual leaders must act immediately to put a crisis management plan into full swing. Media relations during a crisis response can make or break an organization. No matter how well personnel execute the response effort, if the media get the wrong message—or, worse, no message—the potential negative effects can last a long time.

The media must be viewed as an ally in getting the right message out; ignoring them is a recipe for disaster. Rather than avoiding press conferences, spiritual leaders should actively schedule regular briefings to present an update. Obviously, as response efforts change, conflicting information can arise. It is imperative not to ignore these contradictions but to explain them—if not, less desirable explanations may be provided by others.

For crises involving houses of worship, the media plan should contain the following objectives:

- Instill confidence in the community that agencies are effectively working together in the response effort
- Promote a positive understanding of the response, recovery, and mitigation programs in place
- Provide all target audiences with appropriate access to information about the crisis
- Maintain communication with those affected by the crisis

No discussion of crisis response would be complete without addressing the need to be prepared to respond to inquiries from the media and the public. A “no comment” response is not considered a response; it is a dodge. In today's environment of instantaneous news, houses of worship do not have the luxury of delaying or ignoring requests from the media. Put simply, if a religious institution is slow in its response, or chooses not to respond, to media requests, the media will get its story from other, less reliable sources.

Despite best efforts, emergencies will happen. One of the most important aspects of crisis management is having a plan in place before it is actually needed. Houses of worship that develop comprehensive crisis response plans and exercise them are in the best position to anticipate a successful outcome.

## Ministry Protection

Ministers and other religious leaders occupy a unique position in their members' lives. Often they are revered, respected, and honored. Other times they are judged harshly for some individual shortcomings or are seen as the individuals responsible for an adverse event in either a member's life or in the organization as a whole.

Congregants often turn to ministers in times of personal or family crises, trouble, and difficulties. This adulation can also create a sense of celebrity for ministers and other religious leaders. The “celebrity” variable is amplified with larger congregations and ministries that use electronic media to further their outreach.

The very characteristics that make a minister or other religious leader distinct can also invite threats or vulnerabilities. Accusations about misconduct, unlawful or unethical behavior, and even criminal behavior are made on a regular basis. The reasons ministers and other religious leaders are targets of extortion and false allegations can vary: get-rich-quick schemes, delusional beliefs that tend to exaggerate the minister’s role in a member’s life, a desire for the proverbial 15 minutes of fame, vindictiveness, or more sinister and evil reasons, including the desire to see the minister’s downfall or even the institution’s downfall.

A recent lawsuit filed against megachurch copastor Victoria Osteen, which alleged a personal attack during a flight, illustrates the sort of vulnerability that some ministers endure.<sup>1</sup> There have been numerous times when a person has verbally (and in some instances physically) attacked a minister during services. Vindictiveness can take many forms and manifestations.

Mentally ill or psychologically imbalanced people also present a threat to ministers or other religious leaders, as was the case in the shooting death of the Reverend Fred Winters at the First Baptist Church in Maryville, Illinois, during a Sunday morning service. The suspect has been diagnosed with a type of mental illness.<sup>2</sup>

For whatever reason, spiritual leaders are often the targets of threats, assaults, and false accusations and allegations. This inescapable fact requires organizations to take proactive prevention measures. Regardless of the facts, damaging accusations and allegations can have a dramatic impact on the personal and professional life of a targeted minister and can also damage the reputation of the religious institution. The last building block of a comprehensive security plan involves protecting the leadership from physical harm and allegations of impropriety.

Ministers and other religious leaders have the right to conduct their ministries without fear, to live safely, and to enjoy their lives without undue anxiety. The best recommendations for the safety of an institution’s leaders should begin with always being aware of surroundings and circumstances while remembering not to become overly suspicious. The fear of crime should not rule anyone’s life or inhibit a ministry. In fact, doom and danger are not lurking behind every corner; however, agencies can communicate to spiritual leaders that a balanced approach to personal safety must involve a few simple precautions that can considerably reduce potential risk:

- Stay alert and tuned in to your surroundings, wherever you are. Don't be taken by surprise. Be aware and be prepared.
- Project an image of strength and confidence. Stand tall and walk confidently. Don't show fear. Don't look like a victim. Criminals are basically cowards and will be less likely to attack a person that appears confident.
- Trust your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable in a place or situation, leave right away and get help if necessary.

One golden rule to remember is the simple adage: “Trust your gut.” If the situation feels wrong, it probably is. Gut instinct can improve leaders’ safety if they learn how to channel it. The fear response is purposeful and accurate in most situations. People tend to get into trouble only when they have the feeling that the situation is becoming dangerous but they override that feeling with the assumption that everything will work out or the belief that they have to “hang in there” despite that bad feeling.

## Conclusion

Law enforcement agencies can serve as a valuable crime prevention resource for houses of worship. Following the nine-step process outlined in this article to build a comprehensive security plan will help protect religious institutions from criminal attack and victimization.

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**Notes:**