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Safety, Security, & Contingency Planning for Places of Worship and Faith Based Organizations

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"Very well done! I appreciate your sensitivity to me and the ordeal I have had to endure. The efforts taken to prevent future violence in places of worship on your part is admirable and I cannot fully express my appreciation."

~Cindy Winters, author of "Reflections from the Pit" and wife of the late Pastor Fred Winters, provided the above statement regarding the following article.

ABSTRACT

According to recent U.S. reports, violence in places of worship is on the rise. This is due in part to places-of-worship being viewed as “soft” targets to crime and criminal activity, crimes carrying over to worship grounds (i.e., domestic violence), robbery, and an increase in populations seeking out assistance or refuge in places of worship. Safety and security in places of worship remains everyone’s problem. Education regarding the dangers (i.e., hidden and obvious) is one of the best ways to protect those who attend such organizations. In addition, faith based organizations are seen as sacred places where people should be able to worship freely and without fear. However, this is no longer the case. It appears that nothing is sacred any longer.

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It is very clear that the world has entered the church. For centuries, the enemy was ever present, intent on bringing harm to those of faith. However, many walk with a blind faith, believing they are safe from evil once inside the church walls. Slowly this safe haven picture faded, as national news highlights increasing criminal activity within places of worship. The actions of leadership and parishioners alike have been made known as some of the first offenders and violators to this Holy Place. The actions of vandals and fire starters encouraged churches to modify existing “Open Door” policies. These modifications are bold reminders to congregations about pain, suffering, and death within the world.

Violence on the Rise

Faith-based organizations have become the target of increased violence. Since 1999, a recorded 649 deadly force incidents (DFI) have occurred in places of worship and faith-based organizations (Chinn, 2013). In 2012 alone, there were 135 documented cases of DFI’s, “a 36 percent increase over the previous year” (Steffan, 2013). DFI’s for the purpose of this paper included: “abductions, attacks, suspicious deaths, suicides, and deadly force intervention/protection” (Chinn, 2013). In addition, over half of all DFI’s reported in places of worship were the result of “... domestic violence spillover, personal conflicts, and robbery” (Chinn, 2013; Steffan, 2013). Oftentimes, perceptions are inaccurate regarding violence against places of worship.

Many associate “religious bias” as a key issue to violence perpetrated in religious organizations, but those cases are relatively low (i.e., 7%). In addition, drug related violence (i.e., 11%) and cases involving confirmed mental illness (i.e., 9%) are also relatively low. So the idea that religious extremists, the homeless, transient populations, or the mentally ill are the greatest perpetrators of violence in places of worship is just not accurate. Of course anyone has the propensity for violence, but the focus on safety and security should be reasonable, statistically based, and on a case-by-case basis.

Perpetrators of Violence

It should come as no surprise that males perpetrate the majority of violence worldwide. This is also true for violence perpetrated in faith-based organizations. That being said, the top two weapons of choice (i.e., in over 75% of all cases of violence) for the perpetration of crimes in faith-based organizations are firearms and knives/edged weapons (Chinn, 2013). These statistics are alarming. So why are so many people unaware of the violence perpetrated in places of worship? Many are unaware because it has not happened to them, it has not happened in their communities, or in their places of worship.

Case-in-point: March 8th, 2009; Sunday church service started out like any other Sunday service at the First Baptist Church of Maryville, Illinois. But just minutes into the

service, Pastor Fred Winters was gunned down in the pulpit and two parishioners were stabbed after tackling the gunman, later identified as Terry Joe Sedlacek of Troy, Illinois (Davis, 2011). This act of church violence left a community stunned and a nation fearful of even the most sacred places.

The Event

Could the incident at Maryville First Baptist been prevented? A common consensus is yes. Many believed this tragedy could have been prevented if those closest to the shooter were more in tune to the clues and cues regarding the shooters actions and behaviors leading up to the incident. Oftentimes, after such incidents, stories emerge from family members, friends, and neighbors regarding the mindset and possible intentions of the shooter.

Everyone must remain observant of behaviors and comments (i.e., written and spoken) by anyone making disparaging remarks with increasing anger, particularly those with known mental health issues. These behaviors and comments may be aimed at organizations (e.g., government entities, churches or places of worship, schools, etc.) or at particular individuals (e.g., domestic violence, stalking, etc.). The key is to report concerning behaviors and actions to the proper authorities before an act of violence occurs. Those closest to the individual must relay to the proper authorities if they observe increasing signs of displeasure. All too often, threats of violence are not taken seriously until it is too late. Signs of increasing displeasure and rage can often be found by checking computers, other digital devices, drawings, doodles, and personal journals. Have plans been made to act out any of the threats? Does the person have the means to proceed with the threats or plans? Notifying the proper authorities is imperative for early intervention, and doing so may prevent future tragedies.

First Line of Defense.

The first level of safety for churches or places of worship are greeters. Greeters often welcome attendees and personally know the members. Greeters should not harass, but welcome unknown members, by inquiring about the individual's name, where the individual resides, and what has brought them to the service. While engaging unknown attendees, greeter's will observe whether clothing is appropriate for the weather, whether a weapon could be concealed in the clothing or on the person, and will also note the attendee's demeanor. Are they nervous? Are they acting strangely? Security should be notified if greeters are uncomfortable with an attendee's demeanor, behaviors, or comments.

Notifying security is merely a precaution, but it should never be underestimated. *In addition, never leave entrance(s) and exit(s) unattended once services begin. This is what allowed Mr. Sedlacek to enter the church unimpeded.*

As Mr. Sedlacek entered the sanctuary, as he spoke to Pastor Winters, and even after the first gunshot was fired, church members and attendees believed a skit was being performed. Careful consideration should be given when creating skits to teach lessons or entertain. Pastor Winters was known to have made surprising and unexpected scenarios during his church activities. An armed, retired police officer was in attendance that fateful Sunday morning. His position in the church and the large number of people trying to take cover made clear shot impossible.

Church members that are active, retired, or prior law enforcement should be encouraged to carry concealed while attending services. It is best to identify these individuals and to seat them in a tactically sound position inside the church (e.g., at the end of a pew near the front and back, beside an aisle, and near entrances and exits). These individuals should possess a badge or some type of identifying marker that immediately identifies them to emergency personnel. Make sure your local police department is aware of the identifier. It is imperative to use individuals who are current, retired, or prior law enforcement personnel when deciding to shoot or not to shoot. Law enforcement personnel are trained “when to shoot,” and marksmanship is not the only qualifier. Churches are advised to only allow law enforcement associated personnel to have firearms while on property. Non-law enforcement security members should call the police if violence occurs or a situation of potential violence is present.

As Pastor Fred Winters responded, the gunman pursued him, firing additional shots until the gun was eventually disabled. Church members tackled the gunman and were eventually able to gain control of him and his weapon, but not before a couple church members were stabbed. This follows the Run, Hide, and Fight philosophy of the Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship released by the federal government in June 2013.

First Responders.

Notification to the Maryville Police Department provided the response of police, fire, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS). The first responding officer on-scene located a victim being attended to in the foyer by persons in attendance. The officer was notified that the gunman was still in the building. During the search, the officer found the gunman being restrained by church attendees in the sanctuary. The officer took custody of the suspect and remained with the suspect in the hospital until the officer was released from his duty. The officer followed proper protocol by actively seeking the intruder, and not initially attending to the injured. Numerous events similar to this one have caused law enforcement personnel to rethink how they triage a scene, especially when the scene involves an armed assailant.

The injured were treated and transported to area hospitals, while local police and fire personnel finished securing the church and surrounding areas. Church security guided approximately 150 attendees into the gymnasium area, where witness accounts were collected through interviews. Additional police agencies and officers arrived to provide assistance. A complete building search was conducted to ensure no other intruders were involved.

Members of church security and local officers were assigned to control all church entrances and exits. The church library became the Command Center. Law enforcement personnel reporting on-scene were sent to the Command Center for assignment information. Plans should be made in advance about available rooms and space within your organizations that can be used as a Command Center, triage area, and interview area. It is important to remember that some circumstances may require the entire building be evacuated. If this occurs, make plans for an external command center, triage area, and interview area.

Media Response.

Shortly after the shooting, local media arrived on scene, followed by national media. Reporters wanted information from law enforcement and church attendees. The media sought out attendees of Maryville Baptist Church that attended the service.

It is recommended to provide a specific area for the media to gather and to designate a single spokesperson to release information. The officer in charge of the investigation and a designated church representative should approve any information being released to media outlets regarding the incident. If the church designates its own spokesperson, no information should be released without prior approval from law enforcement. Press releases should be in print and are best conducted at scheduled times to avoid live coverage. This also allows media personnel preparation time prior to newscast.

The Investigation.

The Illinois State Police crime scene technicians arrived to process the scene. Attendees were given a preliminary interview to weigh the value of their testimony. Persons providing information that may be used at a trial were given an in-depth interview and each were video recorded.

When the number of attendees was manageable, they were asked to identify their vehicle on the parking lot. The process of elimination proved very helpful. This process led to the discovery of the intruder's vehicle and eventually to the identity of the intruder.

Church staff was essential in the investigation stage. Staff members provided police access to Pastor Winter's computer to search for any threatening communications. Church security cameras and morning service recordings were obtained. The church remained a crime scene for over 12 hours. Church staff, members, and attendees should plan to have limited access for an extended period of time.

Aftermath.

On the evening of March 8, 2009, a service was held at another local church to honor Pastor Winters. A heightened vigilance was present out of fear of another attack. Hospital personnel personally familiar with Pastor Winters were unable to work. Some left work and some sought counseling.

Monday, March 9, 2009, volunteer counselors arrived at Maryville First Baptist Church to provide their services for church members. A crisis intervention team from a local hospital provided a group session for first responders at the Maryville Administration Building.

The visitation was held at the church on Thursday, March 12, 2009. More than 5,000 were in attendance. Law enforcement and church security provided protection. Several persons arrived at the visitation with backpacks. They were briefly detained until the property was searched. A private security firm was hired to provide security for Pastor Winters' family.

The funeral services on Friday, March 13, 2009, drew the attention of the Westboro Baptist Church protestors. Law enforcement followed protocol and provided a protected area for protestors. Patriot Guard riders positioned their motorcycles to block the view of protestors. The protestors stayed about an hour and left before the funeral services were finished. The funeral procession was extremely long and law enforcement provided assistance.

The First Baptist Church advised the Maryville Police Department that some of their members were afraid to come back to church. A call was made for local law enforcement agencies to provide an officer and marked squad car for services on the following Sunday. Over twenty agencies participated and lined up at the front entrance of the church. Many attending services expressed their gratitude for the increased police presence. Several attendees said they sat in their cars debating whether or not to attend services. The increased law enforcement presence provided attendees the courage to attend services. The Village of Maryville dedicated a park in the honor of Pastor Winters. The gunman, Terry Sedlacek is still in custody. He has not been declared mentally capable to stand trial.

Is Anything Sacred?

Though most would say faith based organizations and places of worship are sacred, there are just as many who would argue the opposite. These may be individuals who understand the changing times, those who have been involved in incidents of violence, or even those who perpetrate such hate even in places deemed sacred.

Society at-large may be unaware of the truth about what awaits them in this next life. But this is no different than the blind eye many churches and places of worship turn in the face of present day evil. If churches and places of worship are so inwardly focused that they fail to see what's happening outside their walls, they will not only miss the opportunity to reach people, but they will allow the worst of society to permeate the walls of their sanctuaries.

Protecting Worshipers and Structures from Violence

Oftentimes, conflicting emotions come into play when discussing security measures in faith-based organizations. However, Chinn (2012), explained: "... there is no conflict; just because we pray for God's protection before driving does not mean we speed or dismiss the value of seatbelts. Likewise, faith-based organizations must intentionally provide for the safety of staff and visitors" (p. 130).

In a proactive approach to raise awareness to violence in faith-based organizations, the Southern Illinois Law Enforcement Commission (SILEC) provided a 3-hour training course titled: Introduction & Awareness for Church Security Planning. The course provided insight into why places of worship are targets for violence and how these organizations can minimize the risk of attendees being victimized.

Security Assessment.

The following information is a compilation of ideas addressed at the 3-hour SILEC training, by the authors, and safety and security resources. The first thing to remember is that churches and places of worship range in size from several members to thousands on any given day of worship. In addition, other areas of such diversity include: organizational budgets, backgrounds of attendees, and mindsets on what is and is not an appropriate security measure in churches and places of worship.

External security. Proper landscaping and adequate lighting help deter and reduce crime against persons and property. Proper lighting at all entrances, exits, walkways, and parking lots not only provides added security for attendees, but makes criminal activity more obvious and less attractive to would be criminals. Maintain upkeep

of landscaping and check lighting periodically for any bulbs that may need to be replaced. Exterior security measures assist in maintaining interior security. In addition, check the following items regularly: window frames, locks, and latches, door frames and latches, gates, fences, security cameras, and any exterior buildings.

Greeters and ushers. The role of greeters and ushers should never be underestimated. “These front-line 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” (Rowe, 2009). One important caveat regarding greeters and ushers is that they often lack adequate training to fill these roles. Training can assist these front-line individuals in “... observing, getting help quickly and providing leadership in an emergency” (Rowe, 2009).

Protected information. Oftentimes, church bulletins and other paperwork regarding church activities are easily accessible to attendees. There is nothing wrong with letting attendees know what your church or place of worship may have planned. But the idea here is to not provide too much information. Remember, not everyone attending your church or place of worship is there with good intentions. Keep the dissemination of personal information regarding staff and attending members to a minimum. Limit the use of home phone numbers, as they can be traced to a personal residence. Instead, use cell phone numbers or emails whenever possible.

In addition, avoid putting financial information (i.e., collection amount, special collections, cash on hand, and budget information) on bulletins or paperwork that is given out to all attendees. It is suggested to alternate collection times. Limit the distribution of materials with personal information or monetary amounts only to: staff members, attending members, and those on a need to know basis. Security also includes the security of all attendees after they depart your facilities. Maintaining confidentiality and limiting access to certain documents and information will assist in keeping all members safe once they depart the premises.

Locks and keys. Locks, keys, and re-keying can become costly, especially when attendees are not good stewards of overall facility access (McGowan, 2013). Many attending members believe they should be given a key merely because they belong to a church or place of worship. The truth is, the more individuals with keys, the more problems your facilities will encounter. How can anyone be sure the facility was properly secured after each departure? Does everyone with access to the church become a suspect when a crime occurs within the church? The best idea is to limit key distribution to specific members (i.e., clergy, secretaries, building and grounds workers, childcare workers, and security staff). This limits the number of individuals with 24-hour access to facilities and it limits chances of leaving the facility unsecured.

Evacuation plans. Evacuation plans should be in place for your facility for safety and security issues (e.g., fires, bomb threats, tornado, and intruders). These plans may differ in execution, but it is essential to run practice drills to ensure compliance and understanding. Drills should also be conducted for congregations with older members or attendees who may require assistance and families with young children. Practice drills should also be conducted with daycare facilities and children’s programs within the facility. Conducting practice drills will not cause undue stress. Undue stress is often the

result of unpreparedness and a lack of practice. Conduct drills for different scenarios several times a year. Announce some of the drills and let attendees know that drills may occur without notice. Providing a heads up will also keep undue stress to a minimum. Find out if any attendees will need assistance and match them up with individuals able to meet these needs. Remember that attendance changes, so do not conduct drills where the same individuals are paired together every time.

Emergency procedures. Everyone should be aware of emergency procedures. If there is an intruder, information must be relayed timely and accurately to the proper authorities. Remember everyone on scene is a potential witness. And in today's world, nearly everyone has access to a cell phone. Use phones to take pictures (only if you do not draw attention to yourself). If it is unsafe to make a call, use your phone to text someone who can notify the police. If someone is able to safely make a call to the police, here is the information they should relay:

- Church/Place of Worship address and phone number
- Callers name and location in the building and a cell number
- Description of the intruder (gender/race/age/height/weight/clothing/tattoos)
- Description and number of any other individuals and weapons
- Location of intruder in the building or direction of travel if they exit
- Number of individuals wounded and location in the building
- Notify if security members are present/markings/armed/unarmed

Conclusion

If we simply begin with our return to intentional observation of those around us, we submit to our true purpose. "*Natural surveillance increases the threat of apprehension by taking steps to increase the perception that people can be seen*" (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design, as cited in ASM Group, 2012). How church campus facilities and membership are viewed, can be a first step in sending a clear message that the church has taken a position of ownership and control. Arrival on campus should portray a message to all that the safety and security of all attendees is a top priority.

Well-planned landscaping and lighting, as well as parking lot greeters will aid in identifying issues outside the facility, prior to entrance. Are places of worship so busy that they fail to see they are experiencing a problem of the heart? In addition to landscaping and lighting, natural surveillance can provide a two-step approach to crime prevention inside the church. First, it suggests to those wishing to do harm, that this is no longer a soft target. And secondly, natural surveillance may encourage congregations to see life as others see it. Everyone would be safer if they understood the condition and motives of troubled individuals. The reality remains - we cannot predict the future for violence in churches or places of worship, but we must remember, CHURCH ... AWARNESS ALTERS ACTION.

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