

Redefining Workplace Violence

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“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like the roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour”

~1 Peter 5:8

Though rare, acts of violence in churches and places of worship are on the rise in the United States. According to Chinn, (since the collection of data since 1999 until current) approximately 800 deadly force incidents (DFI’s) have been perpetrated in or near places of worship (1999-2014). Violence against religious organizations occurs for several reasons. Many of these places are open to the public, many are seen as “soft” targets to crime and criminal activity (e.g., robbery), and people often see these organizations as “safe havens,” which helps explain how domestic violence-type incidents can end up on property.

When we talk about workplace violence, we often do not think of the church as a workplace. However, thousands of churches and places of worship exist nationwide of all denominations, which means thousands of individuals (i.e., staff members, volunteers, contractors, etc.) will fill thousands of roles within these organizations. In addition, approximately 60% of acts of violence perpetrated against places of worship are often perpetrated in what Chinn calls “off hours,” (e.g., times outside of regular worship hours). Anyone in the organization during ‘off hours’ or normal business hours would appear to be at greater risk for violence. Thus, it would only seem reasonable for these individuals to understand their vulnerabilities in the workplace.

Understanding Vulnerabilities

In order to understand “personal” and “organizational” vulnerabilities, one must look at things in a different light. This may include discussing this with individuals who may have a better understanding of the day-to-day operations in areas outside your scope of knowledge (e.g., building and grounds, security members, daycare directors, etc.) (Johnson, Schardan, & Lane, 2013). Often, administrative assistants are the frontline of the organization. They will meet and greet members, visitors, and others like mail carriers, delivery people, and even individuals seeking additional assistance (i.e., transient, homeless, or mentally ill) or even those under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, or those wishing to do harm.

Staff members are expected to deal with all kinds of individuals in all kinds of circumstances, while being Christ-like and professional at all times. However, in certain circumstances, professionalism should not jeopardize personal safety (see Scenario 1). As seen in Scenario 1, the administrative assistant decided the best alternative was to return back to her vehicle, as she did not want to confront the sleeping man by herself. This was an excellent decision. This scenario presented many unknown factors (i.e., mental state, possible weapons, issues with church members or staff). However, there is power in

numbers and waiting for other staff members to arrive is a great option, but the author would also suggest calling local authorities. This is an excellent option for a couple reasons. First, it allows for law enforcement personnel (who are trained and prepared) to handle a situation that has the propensity to become violent. Second, if this individual in question is wanted or known to local authorities this opportunity allows the situation to be documented for future reference. Remember, safety and security are paramount to everyone working in, doing business in, or attending your place of worship.

There are many areas to address when talking about safety and security, but for the purposes of this paper, the physical safety of staff and physical security in the sense of walking to and from the parking lot or a vehicle are the areas of focus. The largest area of control for most staff members is usually an office space or specific designated community-type area. This is often a familiar area, but knowing this area and what resources exist are key to you surviving an attack or a possible intruder.

In the sense of physical safety, you must know where you can run and hide should the need arise. Do you know which offices or areas have locked doors and do you have access to these areas? Do you have additional entrances and exits so you are not left cornered? These are very important things to think about. In addition, what types of things do you have in your office area to use as a possible weapon? These can include things like: ink pens/pencils, bug spray, staplers, scissors, keys, etc. The important point here is to remember anything can become a weapon, but it can just as easily become a weapon for the bad guy. As stated earlier, there is power in numbers. If others are available have them present when speaking to unknown visitors and guests, especially when females are addressing male subjects or when addressing more than one subject.

Developing a Game Plan

All staff members should be involved in developing a game plan in order to deal with intruders or violence perpetrated in or near their places of worship. When acts of violence occur in churches or places of worship, it is essential to learn from these situations in order to better prepare for future events. In 2009, a church in Southern Illinois came face-to-face with a male subject intent on robbing the church, even though nothing was ultimately taken. Two older female staff members were assaulted when they came in contact with the male subject. The pastor was unable to hear the scuffle, as his office door was shut and the sound of the running air conditioner further muffled the assaults (Heartland News, 2009). Several things can be learned from this case, to include: locking all doors during business hours, leaving office doors open, possibly installing a panic type button or alarm, and checking on others periodically.

The following is a compiled list of ideas that can be used in developing a game plan:

- Try to have at least two people working at all times
- Walk in and out together
- Limit distractions to and from the parking lot
- Develop Lock-down procedures
- Have visitors check in and out with the front office
- Keep documentation of problematic visitors (names, addresses, physical description, photo identification, etc.)
- Train staff on self-defense or the use of mace.

- Visually inspect entrances and exits before entering and exiting (in case someone is hiding).
- Secure doors (e.g., entrance and office) doors once safely inside.
- Make sure all windows are locked
- Note physical security issues to building and grounds
- Park close to entrances, to limit time outside while trying to unlock doors
- Do not answer doors if you do not feel comfortable.
- If you are working alone, do not let anyone know you are there alone.
- Report any suspicious activity to the security director/team and if necessary to local law enforcement
- Remember, if you need to call the police, do so. That is their job.

Remember, safety and security is everyone’s responsibility. Observation skills are essential and everyone can fine-tune these skill sets. Never place personal safety in jeopardy; if something does not feel right, get assistance.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” ~Mathew 10:16

APPENDIX A. Scenario 1: The church administrative assistant (AA) arrived at work around 9 am to find someone sleeping outside the church. The individual was wrapped from head to toe in a blanket and there was no way of identifying the individual. Unsure what to do, the AA decides to wait in her vehicle until other staff members arrive.

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