

## Church Safety and Security—An Alliance Approach

Church shootings and other security issues continue to seize our attention. Up until recently, church security was mostly about making sure that someone kept track of keys and that the building was locked up. Although most of our churches remain safe places, the impact of a violent event, while extremely rare, is so damaging that **every Alliance church leadership team must have this conversation**. We must resist the impulse of irrational fear while still acting with wisdom and foresight. This paper is designed to guide a leadership team through that process.

### Why We Care

Most importantly, an Alliance church should be a safe place for people to gather for worship. Through our child and youth screening policies we promote that a local Alliance church should be the safest place for young people to hear the gospel, and the same should be true for our entire congregation. Again, any type of violence is extremely rare, but people who attend our churches expect that reasonable and appropriate security measures are in place. Church leaders are called to be shepherds and, in Scripture, shepherds both cared for and protected their sheep. Part of this protection is against our spiritual enemy (the devil) and rightly so. In The Alliance we also believe that protection is physical. We do this for our children when we guard against sexual abuse and it is appropriate and right to also consider the safety of anyone who attends one of our churches. Put another way, in The Alliance our goal is for security to enhance, not inhibit, our worship of the true and living God.

Legally, the law imposes on a church a duty to protect occupants against foreseeable criminal acts. The foreseeability of a violent act is based on a variety of factors, such as the church location, size of the church, known threats against the church or church members, and past violent behavior in the church vicinity. Recent church shooting incidents have targeted small rural churches, so it would be unwise to think it could never happen to your congregation.

### Who This is For

These guidelines are designed for the “typical” Alliance church. More than half of our churches have 100 or less in weekly attendance and more than 80 percent have less than 200. Our larger churches have access to far greater resources and may have addressed security concerns. While still helpful, this document is not provided primarily for these larger churches but rather to assist those more typically-sized Alliance churches that have either just started or have not yet had this conversation.

### The Big Ideas

- Every church has a different culture, size, and location. There is no “one-size-fits-all” security plan. These guidelines are designed to help your leaders engage

with the most essential issues and point them to trusted resources as a church develops its own safety and security plan.

- For a plan to be effective, it is essential to gain buy-in from the entire leadership team, particularly the lead pastor and elder and/or governing board. Sometimes it is necessary to overcome the notion that “nothing like that could happen here.”
- Any security plan should not just address the unlikely event of an active shooter, but the far more likely scenarios of a non-violent confrontation or medical or weather-related emergency. Typical scenarios to consider include:
  - A child in your children’s ministry is caught in the middle of a domestic dispute
  - Someone under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or who struggles with mental health issues, sees your church as a place to express their anger
  - An attendee has a medical emergency during a worship service
  - A local activist group protests outside your church doors on a Sunday morning
  - A fire spreads out of control
  - An auto accident occurs in the parking lot
- Any security plan involves everyone in public leadership. This includes pastors and staff, ushers, greeters, parking attendants, elders, and deacons. This is true even for churches that create a separate safety and security team. Each person should know their role in a crisis scenario. For example, the easiest and most effective strategy is for church team members to be vigilant for anything that is out of the ordinary. This is often referred to as a DLR – “doesn’t look right.” Do ushers or greeters spot someone who looks out of place? He/she should be engaged as soon as possible to assess any potential concerns. This can be as simple as introducing yourself, welcoming them to the church, and asking them what brought them to your church that day.
- When your safety and security plan is ready, the proposed plan should be reviewed by your insurance agent, a local attorney, and your local law enforcement agency. Every insurance company has extensive helpful resources on this topic and your agent will ensure that your plan doesn’t jeopardize necessary liability coverage. Your attorney will align the plan with any state or local municipality laws. Your local police and fire department can provide practical help as well as coordinate any emergency response. The importance of insurance, attorney, and police, and fire department engagement is particularly important if members of your team will be armed.
- It is important to realize that even the most stringent security practices may not have prevented the recent church shootings. It is extremely difficult to completely foil a determined and armed assailant. However, through use of an appropriate

security plan, it is possible to deter such acts in some cases and to mitigate harm in others.

## **Security Plan Options**

Every security plan involves one or more of the following elements:

Even the smallest churches can intentionally create heightened awareness. Your leadership team at Sunday worship services or any other event can be vigilantly aware of anything that is out of the ordinary or seems odd. Is someone wearing a large coat on a warm day? Does someone seem unusually distracted? In most cases, there will be a reasonable explanation, but engaging people with warm and appropriate questions is almost always the first and simplest line of defense.

Some churches have designated their property as gun-free zones. Some states<sup>1</sup> include churches among the locations where concealed firearm permit holders are not allowed to carry. Whether required by law or designated by the church, this is an extremely difficult policy to enforce, especially in some western and southern locations where carrying a concealed firearm is a normal and fiercely protected practice. This prohibition will be largely symbolic unless a church is willing to invest in airport level security practices.

Many churches contract part-time professional security, especially during worship services and other major events. Typically, these are off-duty law-enforcement officers who are well-trained, often uniformed, and who carry their own liability insurance. Some churches consider the presence of a uniformed police officer near the entry an effective deterrent and well worth the minimal cost for only a few hours work.

Most churches will consider creating and training an in-house safety and security team. The advantages to this option are that it would be staffed by volunteers and can be tailored to fit the unique needs of the church. These teams may or may not include members who are armed, and if possible, will include members who are medically trained, such as EMTs, nurses, etc. Although the size and scope of a team will vary with each church, five essential requirements for any team are described in the following section.

## **Church Safety and Security Teams**

Forming a church safety and security team involves five critical steps: identify, recruit, train, deploy, and manage<sup>2</sup>.

Identify – Serving on a church security team is not a position for “any warm body.” It is a significant commitment of time and requires a person with strong people skills, a mature Christ-like character, a stable personality, the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> The firearm laws related to each state are readily available on the internet.

<sup>2</sup> I’m grateful to Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company for this helpful framework.

observe people and situations, good judgment, and a heart for this important Christ-centered ministry. It is helpful to look for people with these characteristics who also have a law enforcement, military, or medical background. This is an opportunity to select from a pool of church members who otherwise might not be interested in traditional volunteer roles.

Recruit – Once a potential team member is identified, recruitment should be done by personal invitation. The full extent of the commitment should be carefully explained, including the expected level of training. Recruitment for safety and security teams should never be casual.

Train – Proper training is the key to team member enthusiasm and longevity. Training and retraining is essential because team members must be equipped to respond decisively and skillfully to a wide variety of difficult circumstances. At least quarterly training is considered a best practice, with the frequency adjusted according to church size and culture. The focus of training should be on the variety of scenarios that could occur in your church setting. Typical training sessions will include response to an active shooter, medical or weather emergencies, custody disputes, or domestic violence. Methodologies include the use of hypotheticals, role plays, hands-on drills, and presentations by experts. It is important to include ushers, greeters, and other non-team volunteers as appropriate so that there is a coordinated response to any circumstance.

There are heightened requirements for any team members who carry a weapon. At the very least these should include: (1) a written application that includes a description of the applicant's previous weapons training; (2) at least three non-relative references; (3) initial and ongoing training consistent with the training required by law enforcement personnel in your community; and (4) active monitoring that the team member has maintained his/her concealed carry permit. Local churches with existing security teams are a good referral source for training providers in your region.

Communication with the church's insurance carrier is essential for teams that include armed members. To ensure liability coverage, you must obtain written approval of your security plan from your insurance carrier. Additionally, your state or municipality may have specific laws that govern the formation and deployment of an armed security team, so it will be necessary to seek the review and counsel of a local attorney.

Deploy – Generally, each team member will be responsible for a specific area and will follow a pre-determined protocol depending on the circumstances. Each team member should know precisely the area, scope, and expectations of their role. In most cases, new team members should first be paired with experienced people for at least three to four weeks to establish fit and competence. This time period may be much longer before a team member may be armed.

Manage – When the team begins to serve, it is helpful to regularly debrief to fine-tune the process. You will: (1) create a plan, (2) train to the plan, (3) rehearse the plan, (4) evaluate the rehearsal, (5) adjust the plan based on what is learned, and (6) start over. Also, to avoid burn-out, care should be taken so that volunteers are not expected to serve week after week without a meaningful break to prevent burn-out

## Common Concerns

### *Won't God protect his church?*

As Christians, we believe in a wholly sovereign God who is in control of his created world. We should and must absolutely trust in his oversight and not live in fear. Jesus left his disciples with these words knowing that the world is a dangerous place: *Peace is what I leave with you; it is my peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid* (John 14:27). God often works through others to fulfill his purposes. He brings healing through the medical community and physical protection from our military and law enforcement personnel. In this more dangerous age, he may also provide protection through the purposeful actions of a church safety and security team. One biblical example is found in the prophet Nehemiah's response to an armed threat as he sought to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem: *we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night* (Neh. 4:9, ESV).

### *Our church is too small*

Yes, a church's size, location, and ministry focus will affect a congregation's vulnerability, but the shooting at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, occurred to a church with an average attendance of only 60 in a town of 1,000. No church is immune from potential attack. The level of security will vary, but the days of thinking "it couldn't happen to us" are long gone. Even the smallest church can take simple steps to increase the safety of its congregation and increase its ability to respond well to any emergency.

### *We can't afford the expense of a safety and security team*

The expense to train and deploy a safety and security team may be surprisingly low. Most churches rely entirely on dedicated volunteers who may pay for some or all of their own training and equipment. Even churches that hire professional security for a few hours a week typically consider the minimal cost to be a worthwhile investment for all that is gained.

### *The presence of a security team will scare or worry members and visitors*

The opposite is more likely. People in your community are well aware of the recent church shootings and will generally have a higher expectation for church safety practices. When measures were first introduced for nursery and child care security, which included screening, stronger oversight, and child check-in procedures, many leaders had the same concern. But again, the opposite occurred. Having stronger security measures increased attendees' confidence that their children were safe in the church. People will appreciate that our church family cares for them and that we desire to give them a place to worship in peace.

*What if someone is hurt by a safety and security team member?*

Any potential risk must be balanced against the potential that someone may enter the church with intent to cause harm. The risk of someone being hurt by a member of the safety and security team will be low and mitigated by careful and consistent preparation and training. In most cases, the church's insurance policy will provide coverage.

*We already have people in the congregation who carry a firearm, can't we rely on them?*

For several reasons, a church wants to avoid attendees acting as informal security. When a church either explicitly or implicitly authorizes someone to carry and deploy a firearm, the church will assume the liability for any consequences. In that scenario, it is possible that the incident would not be covered by the church's insurance. Potential liability could also greatly increase because, although there was authorization, there was no required training or oversight. It is important for church leaders to not explicitly or implicitly encourage attendees to carry firearms and to not rely on them for church security.

### **Recommended Resources**

Donihue, Bryan. 2014. Grand Rapids, Sheepdog Development. *What They Don't Tell You About Church Safety*

Rupp, Tim. 2016. *Pistol in the Pulpit*. Idaho Falls, A Strong Blue Line.

Brotherhood Mutual: <http://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/church-security>.

Church Law & Tax Report: <http://www.churchlawandtax.com/web/2013/march/5-steps-for-building-volunteer-safety-and-security-team.html>.