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Guns in Churches

Addressing Church Security Needs

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The information in this publication is intended to help ministry leaders better understand issues of weapons for church security and assist them in developing a weapons or crisis intervention policy for their churches and related ministries. No portion of this publication should be used without prior legal review, revision and approval by an attorney licensed to practice law in your state. Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company assumes no liability for reliance upon the information provided in this publication.

Introduction

Incidents of Violence in the Church

On November 5th, 2017, Devin Kelly killed 26 people and injured 20 others at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Kelly was wearing tactical gear, including a bulletproof vest, and fired as many as 450 rounds from an assault rifle before leaving the church.

On March 31, 2013, witnesses say the 25-year old man accused of walking into the Hiawatha Church of God in Christ in Ashtabula, Ohio, and fatally shooting his father after an Easter service was yelling about God and Allah after the killing. Police say the suspect killed his father with a single shot from a handgun.

On January 12, 2013, a gunman in Flint, Michigan, stormed into Full Gospel Church during a funeral and shot a man in the head, killing him. The subject was arrested later after a massive manhunt.

On December 21, 2012, at Juniata Valley Gospel Church in Geeseytown, Pennsylvania, a woman decorating the church for a Christmas program was shot and killed. The gunman had killed several other people and was later shot and killed by Pennsylvania State Troopers.

Historically, there have been two or three fatal church shooting incidents in the United States annually from approximately 335,000 congregations. In 2011, the Christian Security Network reported that each week brings an average of two arsons, seven thefts, and 19 burglaries at U.S. churches. Jeffrey Hawkins, the founder and executive director of Christian Security Network says *"It's all about awareness... No church is immune from this kind of thing and they have to start now. There is no tomorrow."* These situations put the staff, church members, and visitors at risk.

Fatal church attacks result from a variety of issues and are not necessarily triggered from the individual who is angry with people of faith in general. Robbery was already mentioned, but domestic disputes can also prove to be tragic when an estranged husband confronts his wife and the attack results in innocent parishioners caught in the cross fire. There are incidents involving persons angry at a pastor or other types of personal conflicts. So far, these kinds of violent attacks have been far more prevalent than acts of terrorism.

"We frequently receive calls and emails from church members who are worried and frustrated that their church leadership is not more proactive about church security," says Jeffrey Hawkins of the Christian Security Network. "As a society, we protect businesses, schools, banks and other institutions. Now more than ever, that same level of protection needs to be extended to churches and faith-based organizations."

For many congregations the use of lethal force becomes a theological or philosophical discussion. Many people and denominations believe the taking of a life in any case is wrong. Others believe the church has a responsibility to protect its members with force if necessary. With all this in mind, church leaders are struggling with the best approach to address the growing concerns regarding church security. Some pastors feel under pressure from the urging of members to be allowed to carry concealed weapons in

states that allow them. Others are feeling pressure to keep guns out of church altogether. Many leaders want to do everything they can to protect people attending church, but fear a bad incident might turn worse should too many people have guns at church. Still other pastors and leaders have never even thought of or had a discussion regarding church violence and safety.

According to Richard Hammar, renowned expert on church safety, security, and legal matters for over two decades, *“Most churches in America are safe places. While incidents of shootings on church property are shocking, they are rare. But because of the “open access” policy of most churches, they remain easy targets for violent acts. While such acts cannot be prevented, there are steps that church leaders can take to manage the risk.”*

This paper is intended to address the various approaches churches are taking to address the issues of violence in churches. Regardless of the approach your church takes, we encourage you to make that decision based on study and prayer. Obtain clear facts, have frank discussions with your church leaders and insurance agent, and develop and adhere to clearly written policies.

What are the options?

You will hear many suggestions, ideas, and options in response to this issue. Some of them may be good, while others may not be in the best interest of your church and people. More than anything else, we feel it is important for your church to have the conversation regarding its approach to addressing potential violent incidents in the church. The church should keep in view not only the safety of its members but also the additional liability it assumes. Let’s consider the pros and cons of each option.

Option #1: Never allow guns on church property.

A church can adopt this approach for a couple of reasons. From a doctrinal standpoint, there is support for believing that churches are to love their enemies, show the way of peace and be an example of non-violent resolution to conflicts. There are practical considerations as well. Having weapons brings enormous liability to the church. The potential for accidents, unintentional injury to innocent bystanders, excessive use of force, and confusion when police arrive over who is a threat, are all downsides that can offset any benefits of additional security. Of course, the biggest downside is the increased risk of loss of life or injury until law enforcement arrives.

Option #2: Where allowed by law, give permission to individuals to carry weapons.

The advantage of this approach is that members of the congregation have the ability to protect themselves and others with force should the need arise. The disadvantage is the church has no control over how the use of force is administered as there are no policies, procedures or guidelines in place.

Option #3: Hire only trained professionals.

This can include professionally trained and equipped security agencies or off-duty law enforcement officers. Many churches in high risk areas have used this approach for years.

The advantage is that churches shift liability away from themselves to the outside agency. These professionally trained security officers and off-duty officers are usually trained in such areas as crisis intervention, de-escalation, and proper non-lethal tactics. Most parishioners, even those with a concealed carry permit, do not have this level of training.

Some churches utilize uniformed security personnel while others operate in plain clothes. Regardless, such trained personnel have the best chance at stopping or minimizing violence should it occur. This option is preferred by the previously mentioned legal expert Richard Hammar, *“The exercise of reasonable care can best be demonstrated by hiring only uniformed, off-duty police officers as security guards.”*

On the downside, to hire off-duty personnel during church events comes at a cost. Some private security personnel can cost a church \$17-25 an hour while off-duty law enforcement officers can cost \$25 per hour and up. For some churches, this is just not possible due to limited finances.

Another potential drawback is that the hired officer is not connected to your church and therefore may not represent your church’s values.

Option #4: An in-house, volunteer, trained security team.

With the tremendous growth in the number of people who hold their Concealed Carry Weapon permit, the number of churches forming “safety teams” of people who are carrying weapons to church is rapidly increasing. The advantage of such an approach is the church leadership can form policies and procedures for how the team will respond in accordance with the church’s beliefs and values.

When a church forms a safety team, it takes on additional liability, as its members are now acting on behalf of the church, under their direction and control. Therefore the disadvantage to this approach can be the additional liability created by insufficient training and procedures. Richard Hammar shares, *“Security guards with little or no training, and who are not licensed under state law, present the greatest risk of liability to a church or other employer as a result of injuries they inflict while responding to a crime or otherwise performing their duties, or injuries they fail to prevent.”*

We believe churches who form armed safety teams are obligated to a higher standard of care and must be prepared to answer in court for any action taken with thoughtfully designed policies, procedures and training. Churches need to ask, “What should we do if...?” and make sure the entire team understands and is willing to abide by the church leadership’s values and direction.

Key Considerations

Churches should also keep in mind that most security incidents do not require the use of weapons. Therefore, safety teams should undergo training that includes de-escalation, restraint techniques, emergency communications as well as guidelines regarding the use of force.

In addition to any assistance that local law enforcement is willing to provide, there are a growing number of training resources and consultants to support this approach. Ideally, it should be “hands-on” training where you can practice, be corrected, and refine your tactics. Other options include sending your security team to a training center or conference, having a consultant come onsite to train your volunteers, as well as videos and online training.

There is one aspect of having an armed security team that is worthy of special consideration. While having a Concealed Carry Weapon permit provides a foundation for the safe handling and use of a weapon, the many considerations of firing a weapon in a public place, let alone a room crowded with people. This is an area that requires ongoing additional training by law enforcement personnel and therefore should also be addressed for church security teams through the training methods listed above.

There is debate as to whether the security team should be high profile or low profile. There are advantages to being visible; it shows people entering the building that this facility is protected. Some teams have a shirt that indicates they are safety or security, but the low profile approach also has some advantages. Visitors and parishioners may be put off by uniforms or high profile images. Secondly, it is easier to observe and get closer to people without incident if you are not seen as a “designated” safety or security person. This issue is up to the discretion of church leaders.

Churches should use good judgment as they select security team members and determine what training is needed. This is because churches can be found liable for negligent selection and training of security team members. They should be pleasant, willing to engage people in positive ways, and have a good eye to see potential problems before they occur.

How does a church decide which option to choose?

If churches decide to implement a security team with firearms, the best option to reduce potential liability is to hire off-duty law enforcement professionals or a security agency. We recognize this is cost-prohibitive for many congregations, so should the church opt for an in-house solution, the church must be committed to provide regular training by qualified professionals. The church must offer not only initial training to the team, but plan for ongoing training. Documentation should be kept that includes who conducted the training, when it was done, what topics were covered, what team members were present, and whenever possible, demonstrated and documented competency on the subjects taught.

How to get started

A great place to start putting together an Emergency Response Plan is by reaching out to your local law enforcement and fire agencies. Invite them to your campus and solicit their advice on best practices for your particular ministry context. How to cover entry and exit points, designated patrol areas, and proper location of team personnel are all areas from which to gain insights from law enforcement. Some churches have instituted a First Responders Recognition Service, inviting first responders to attend a service where they are recognized for their service, which also has the added benefit of them becoming familiar with the location and facility layout and building relationships with the local church leadership.

Crafting Your Emergency Response Plan

Below are some key points to address when creating your Emergency Response Plan. Every ministry is unique so some areas may not apply or there may be other areas that are not addressed here.

- Church Doctrinal Stance on Emergency Preparedness
 - Guiding Verses
 - Value Statements
 - Mission Statement for your Safety Team
 - Use of Force policy
 - Physical contact policy
 - Impact or chemical weapons policy
 - Firearm policy
 - Restraint/detainment policy
- Team Member Requirements
 - Application, background checks, membership requirements, scope of authority, responsibilities, physical qualifications, training and schedule requirements
- Safeguarding the offering
- Patrolling of parking lots and hallways, monitoring entrances
- Identifying potential threatening behaviors
- Dealing with problem behaviors
- Restraint techniques
- Severe weather event procedures
- Medical emergency procedures
- Evacuation procedures
- Communication procedures
 - Point person
 - Use of radios
 - Emergency numbers
 - Communicating with dispatch

Summary

As leaders, you are expected to gather the facts, become informed, consult the experts, pray, and have open discussion with your members and other church leaders. By following this process, you can design a policy that is thought out, concise, and clearly communicated.

No one can completely stop bad things from happening, it is unfortunately part of our human condition and the society we live in. However, a well-designed plan can reduce not only the severity, but also the level of liability a church may encounter if, or when, something tragic does occur. At the end of the day, we must be able to say as good stewards, "We trusted God and did our very best to care for the people and property entrusted to our care."

Where to turn for more information

There are organizations, resources, and helpful websites in the area of risk management, safety and security. It is important that you review the specific laws that pertain to your state.

Please be advised that we are not endorsing these websites or organizations. Some of them lean towards their particular view of gun laws, or have a theology or philosophy that may or may not align with Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company or your church. Use discernment when looking into these sites and organizations.

Please know your local insurance agent is always available should you have any additional questions.

State-by-State Gun Laws – <http://www.handgunlaw.us/>

Indiana: *May carry weapon in church unless the church has a school or day care.*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_laws_in_Indiana

It is illegal to carry a concealed weapon, even sporting arms, on school property (K-12 and day care) or on a school bus. Lawful gun owners may have guns in their vehicles on school property provided the driver is only transporting someone to, or from, a school event.

Ohio: *May not carry weapon on church property without permission.*

The law sets forth several places where your permit does not allow you to carry a handgun. Under the law, you may not carry a concealed handgun into the following places (see Ohio Attorney General website below for complete list):

- *Places of worship, unless the place of worship gives specific permission to individuals*
- *Child day-care centers*
<http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/OhioAttorneyGeneral/files/00/0014c1ed-a150-4726-82fc-686c9062e9d6.pdf>
- <http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/2923.12>

Businesses that provide Gun Safety and Security Training

PM Security Services, Tactical Weapons Training Group, 26355 Jelloway Road, Danville, OH 43014; 330-317-8607; <http://pmsecurityservicestwtg.com/>

OSS International, 425 S. Sandusky Street, Delaware, OH 43015; 740-363-6774; <http://oss-international.net/>

Books:

Chin, Carl. *Evil Invades Sanctuary*, Snowfall Press; 2012

Cirtin, Robert. *Church Safety and Security: A Practical Guide*. CSS Publishing Company; 2005

Aguiar, Ron. *Keeping Your Church Safe*. Brienigsville, Penn.: Xulon; 2008

Welch, Robert H. *Serving by Safeguarding Your Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 2002.

Other Helpful Sites:

<http://www.churchlawandtax.com/> <http://theresurgence.com/2010/01/12/church-safety>

<http://www.churchsecurityalliance.com/members/churchsecurity>

<http://www.christiansecuritynetwork.org> <http://www.right2defend.com/church-security-conference/>

<http://christianfamilyservice.com/workshops/church-security-workshop/>

<http://www.facebook.com/SFTAC>