



Keeping Your Place of Worship Safe and Secure

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You're watching TV or reading the newspaper and a headline catches your attention. "Violence breaks out at XYZ church – two people killed, several more injured." You wonder to yourself how such a thing is possible. How could an act of violence occur at a place of worship? At God's home -the focal point of all things good?

Unfortunately, all you have to do is search the internet and you will find many examples of worship center violence:

- August 5, 2012, a mass shooting took place at a Sikh temple Oak Creek, WI, with a single gunman killing six people and wounding four others.
- March 8, 2009, 27-year-old Terry Sedlacek shot and killed Senior Pastor Fred Winters in front of his congregation at First Baptist Church of Maryville, IL.
- July 27, 2008, Jim David Adkisson entered the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville and fired a shotgun at members of the congregation during a youth performance of a musical, killing two people and wounding seven others.
- August 12, 2007, a gunman opened fire in the sanctuary of First Congregational Church in Neosho, MO., killing a pastor and two worshipers and wounding several others.
- May 21, 2006, Anthony Bell kills four of his in-laws during a church service at the Ministry of Jesus Christ Church in Baton Rouge, LA. He abducts his wife and kills her.
- September 15, 1999, Larry Ashbrook, known as "Crazy Larry" by neighbors, walks into Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, TX, during a service for teenagers and opens fire, killing seven, wounding seven and then killing himself.

The list continues and is far too long to imagine, and certainly, to make any sense of it all. Suffice it to say that a place of worship is not exempt from the everyday violence that occurs elsewhere in America. Worship centers are in fact a microcosm of society – all of the criminal acts that occur on our streets and in our homes do in fact happen at worship centers, including, murder, rape, robbery, assault, unthinkable crimes against children, and property crime. Although violence is realistically a small percentage of crime-related issues facing our places of worship, it is the one category that captures the most attention.

Although not every act of violence can be prevented, statistics show that persons who act out violently at worship centers usually have some relationship or connection to the worship center. As in most school shootings, people who commit violence at places of worship don't just "snap" one day and start hurting people. They typically begin a walk down the "pathway to violence" when there is some initial "triggering injustice" committed by the worship center as a whole or by one of its members, progresses to the formation of a plan to "get even" with the worship center and/or a member, the obtaining of a weapon or weapons to inflict maximum harm, and finally the implementation of the plan and resulting act of violence. The "good news," if there is such a thing in these cases, is that there is usually time between the perceived grievance and the act of violence for us to recognize the escalation of behaviors and become aware of the potential threat and take appropriate steps to possibly prevent the act of violence from occurring.



So, what are we to do? These are uncomfortable topics that must be addressed by all places of worship sooner than later. Now is the time for action. If we don't take steps to keep our worship centers safe and secure, it is only a matter of time before our worship center is listed in the annals of criminal incidents.

5 Steps to keeping your place of worship safe and secure:

1. Create a Safety and Security Team. This is a team of worship center members who may come from a variety of backgrounds yet have one thing in common – a passion for serving their God in the ministry of safety and security. These individuals are the “go to” people for most things safety and security-related. The Safety and Security Team’s mission is to help create a culture of safety and security in everything the worship center does, both onsite and off. With this said, the team should recognize their limitations and elicit help from third party experts and local law enforcement whenever appropriate.
2. Establish a baseline of where your worship center is **now** in the areas of safety and security by conducting an assessment of the property, facility, policies and procedures and training capabilities. If the Team identifies security deficiencies, the Team should prioritize the areas of concern and set out to make the place of worship more safe and secure. It is likely that the Team will recognize “low hanging fruit” opportunities to improve the safety and security and implement corrective actions that have an immediate positive impact. The Team may choose to work with local subject matter experts on more technical mitigation action items such as security technology design and installation, or specialized training and policy and procedure development.
3. Develop and implement security-related education and training for your staff members and the general congregation. Work with local security training companies, nonprofit organizations, fire departments or law enforcement agencies to enable you to offer training such as first aid, CPR, fire safety, active shooter response and emergency preparedness. The more people at your worship center who have basic training in these areas, the more likely you are to have someone around to prevent, mitigate or respond to an emergency if/when it occurs.
4. Establish policies, procedures and protocols for your worship center staff to follow in cases of emergencies such as fire, medical, weather, active shooter, and verbal and physical disturbances. Don't forget to include policies and procedures on how to handling indigent persons, security of money and valuables, opening and closing operations, special events/off-site functions and most importantly, policies related to those who come in contact with our children and youth. Hold staff accountable for adhering to these policies, procedures and protocols.
5. Focus on making your worship center less vulnerable by evaluating potential threats as soon as they come to your attention. All personnel should be trained to immediately report all threats whether they are received telephonically, in person, by snail mail, or via email to a specific staff member. Immediately reporting the concern will allow the Safety and Security Team to evaluate the viability of the threat, notify local officials if appropriate, and implement the necessary steps to mitigate the threat. The Safety and Security Team and worship center staff should feel comfortable working with outside professionals, such as local threat assessment experts, law enforcement and mental health officials, to ensure all threats are given the appropriate amount of attention they deserve. Never underestimate a threat, act as though your life or the life of a loved-one depends on your response.

Creating a culture of safety and security at every place of worship is a must in today's world. Your center's health, well-being, reputation, and financial standing depend on it. Take steps to shore up your



property to protect your members and secure your assets. Implement policies and procedures to help prevent a crisis from occurring in the first place. Be prepared to respond to an on-going crisis if one should occur to minimize injury and loss of life. And finally, have a plan in place to help you deal with the aftermath of a crisis, including the eventual recovery of your worship center, and most importantly, the mental and physical health of your people.

Remember - you won't be judged by whether an incident occurred at your place of worship, rather you will be judged by whether you took reasonable precautions to discourage it from happening in the first place and how you handle the crisis during and after the event. Ask yourself, has a lack of a serious incident at our worship center been as a result of pro-active safety and security measures that we have enacted, or have we just been lucky?