

the Deacon's Bench

ON THE WEB

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Spring 2010 | For America's Churches and Related Ministries from Brotherhood Mutual and Its Agents



Protecting Your People

Having a trained security team is essential

A security team can help your church respond appropriately, whether faced with a medical emergency or a violent situation.

Matthew Murray was prepared for mass murder. He carried two pistols, a semi-automatic rifle, and 1,400 rounds of ammunition on the Sunday he attacked New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. More weapons and ammunition were stashed in his car.

The 24-year-old gunned down people in the parking lot as he approached his target: the main building. Hearing shots in the children's hall, five people rushed toward the gunman. As Murray walked to the sanctuary, a female church security volunteer shot him. Then, Murray took his own life, ending the shooting spree that killed two people and wounded three others.

Protecting Your People *(continued)*

Earlier that day, the church's security team had been placed on alert because of a fatal shooting overnight at a missionary center about 75 miles away. If the security team hadn't been alert that day, "more people would have been killed," says John Casey, director of the church's volunteer security force at the time of the shooting.

Shootings such as this one have fanned discussions across the country about the need for better security within churches and whether firearms should be part of the equation.

Who needs a security team?

Even though violence at church is rare, every church needs a security team, Casey says.



Each church must determine individually whether its circumstances merits an armed security team.

“Churches shouldn’t focus on responding to one act of extreme violence. You need to prepare your church for any emergency.”

**—John Casey,
Former Director, Volunteer Security Force
New Life Church, Colorado Springs**

That's because churches may potentially face a number of crisis situations, such as medical emergencies, domestic violence, and disruptive or violent visitors.

“Churches shouldn't focus on responding to one act of extreme violence,” says Casey, a former law enforcement officer. “You need to prepare your church for any emergency.”

“We can't bury our heads in the sand and say it's not going to happen,” says Bob Johnson, director of safety and security for Christ's Church of the Valley, a large church outside Phoenix, Arizona. “Bad things are happening in churches across the country. Our members know it, and they expect us to protect them and keep them safe when they're in church.”

How many churches have teams?

A recent Barna poll commissioned by Brotherhood Mutual shows that only 19 percent of large churches across the country have a trained, volunteer security team. Most large churches have either no formal security program or have a volunteer team without any formal training, according to the October 2009 poll.

Generally, large churches were the first to realize that they needed security teams trained to respond to a variety of situations. Now, even small to mid-sized churches are starting to take proactive steps, notes Brock Bell, senior manager of loss control at Brotherhood Mutual.

In the past year, more than 80 percent of churches with 200 or more members had at least considered security issues

during church services, the poll found. Only 13 percent of churches hadn't discussed church security at all.

Some churches are still in denial, Bell says. "They think 'it's never going to happen to us.'"

Should our team use firearms?

Each church must determine individually whether its set of circumstances merits an armed security team.

"If you decide that armed guards are needed, the best practice is to enlist the help of off-duty police officers," says Adam Weitzel, an attorney with Rothgerber, Johnson & Lyons in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Weitzel represents churches and private schools in his practice. "They have extensive training, not only in handling firearms, but also in how to diffuse dangerous situations without deadly force. Hiring a private security company is another good option."

The worst scenario would be allowing people to carry concealed weapons to church, hoping that they would respond appropriately to security issues as they happen.

"This is a very, very bad option," Weitzel says. "Simply having a (gun) permit doesn't mean you were adequately trained to address any situation."

You can expose your church to liability if you are leaving security in the hands of untrained people who haven't worked together, he says.

Can we do it ourselves?

Developing an in-house, armed security team is one option. Written policies and procedures are required, and your church must have a thorough, well-documented program to ensure that gun holders are properly trained and qualified.

How Prepared Are You?

Assess your readiness for common crises

When security consultants perform threat and vulnerability assessments, they present common crisis scenarios and ask church leaders how they would respond. You can do the same thing in your next board meeting. Simply picture yourself in a given situation, and then answer the questions that arise. Here are two suggestions. You could develop dozens more tailored to your ministry.

Scenario 1: What would our church do if a man suddenly collapsed in the foyer a few minutes before services start?

Likely questions: Who would call 911? Where's the nearest phone? Should we use a cell phone? Is he breathing? Who would administer CPR? How would we deal with concerned bystanders? How would we get an ambulance to the proper entrance? If he were

in the balcony, how would we get him down on a stretcher?

Scenario 2: What would our childcare workers do if a man demanded to pick up his son, even though workers knew that he was estranged from his wife?

Likely questions: What if the man got argumentative? What if the child wanted to go with the parent? What procedures do we have for verifying this man's claim to his child? Should we call police?

Discussions like these can help your leadership decide whether your ministry is ready for an emergency. Even if you have an established safety team, it's helpful to conduct tabletop training sessions like these every six months.

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—Bob Johnson,
Director of Safety and Security
Christ’s Church of the Valley

Protecting Your People *(continued)*

Christ’s Church of the Valley, which allows its volunteer security guards to carry guns, modeled its firearms training program after the standardized officers training used by the Arizona state police.

“It’s a personal choice, but if you’re qualified and undergo the training, I want you to carry a weapon,” says Johnson, a retired Phoenix police officer who has directed security at the church for more than four years.

You Can Be Prepared

Even though Murray’s rampage ended just 90 seconds after it started, his actions left a family grieving two daughters, killed at ages 16 and 18. Church members’ feelings ranged from disbelief that such a thing could have happened to gratitude that more lives weren’t lost.

Though not all violent acts are preventable, every church can take steps to prepare for the possibility of danger and strive to protect its people from harm. 🏰

Where do we start?



The process for creating a security team is basically the same as creating a disaster or medical response team, except that you prepare to respond to a wider variety of threats. Some examples include:

- Dealing with violent, abusive, or disruptive individuals
- Handling medical emergencies
- Finding lost children
- Preventing kidnappings
- Responding to bomb threats
- Avoiding a mass casualty incident

You’ll find free articles and checklists to help you get started at www.SafetyCentralOnline.com, our library of risk management resources. Start with “Preparing for the Unthinkable, Violence in the Church.” You can also turn to your local law enforcement agency, large churches with security teams, or Brotherhood Mutual’s loss control professionals for help.

Security Team Resources



What can we do without firearms?

Churches can employ a number of security measures that don't require safety and security team members to carry firearms.

- **Encourage police relations.** Invite local law enforcement officers to visit your church, attend your events, and park in your lot to do paperwork. They will get acquainted with your ministry and may become better able to respond to incidents.
- **Hire off-duty officers to assist with parking.** You get improved traffic flow, plus a visible security presence in your parking lot.
- **Train greeters and church members to be observant.** Communication is a key part of any security plan. Train your congregation to be aware of potential threats and how to alert the security team.
- **Notify law enforcement immediately.** Instruct your security team that its job is to identify threats and notify local law enforcement right away.



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The Deacon's Bench is a quarterly newsletter created for churches and related ministries. It's published by the Corporate Communications Department of Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company.

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The Deacon's Bench, Vol. 22, Issue 1
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PROTECTING YOUR PEOPLE
 Prepare your ministry for any emergency

HOW PREPARED ARE YOU?
 Place yourself in these scenarios

SECURITY WITHOUT GUNS
 Increase safety without ammunition

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