

HOW TO BALANCE HOSPITALITY AND CHURCH SECURITY

When Jack picked up his car after repairs at the local dealership, he noticed instructions securely taped on the main desk where all customers could easily read it.

What to do if an alarm goes off:

Everyone **MUST** leave the building immediately. Provide assistance to people to find exits. Designate where people are to gather outside, so a volunteer leader can do a head count.

EXIT away from rooms with hazardous materials.

Do **NOT** use the elevator if your building has one.

Do not allow people to enter the building until instructed by the fire/police department or a staff member.

Jack immediately thought of his church and wondered if such a clear plan existed and, if so, could staff and visitors follow such instructions. As a governing board member, he felt some responsibility to follow up on possible steps the church might take to be better prepared for an emergency.

Reducing Risk and Maximizing Hospitality

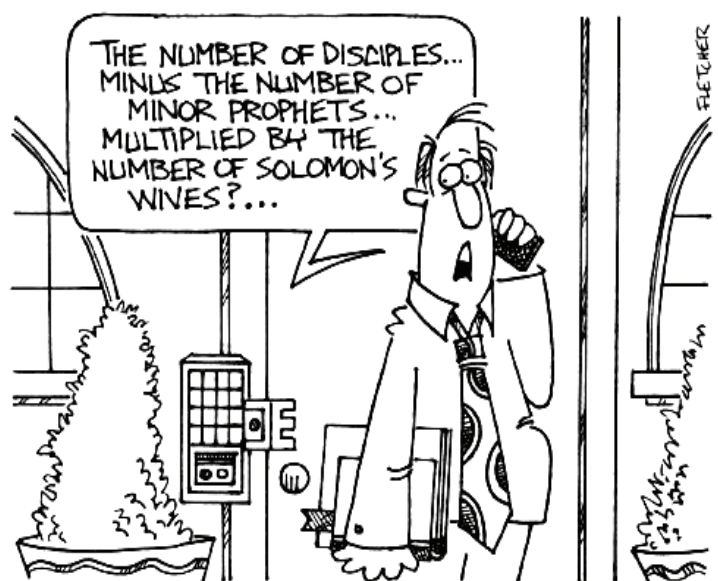
Churches live on the frontier of hospitality. They see their building and spaces as safe places to worship, grow in faith, and serve others. Churches wish to offer comfort and support to those who come in for any number of reasons. Weather-related emergencies arise (snowstorms, hurricanes, tornadoes) as well as events related to accidents (fires, flooding, toxic fumes), and people will often approach churches when they face difficult economic circumstances or challenging personal issues. Because of this commitment to serve all people, thinking about safety and security on church properties is far more complex than for most businesses, hospitals, and schools.

Nevertheless, some persons may pose a threat because they are desperate or have mental health issues that distort their view of the church, its staff, and its members. And unfortunately, sometimes people precipitate an emergency (illness, violence) in the church because they abuse the mission of hospitality. Even with

this knowledge, leaders do not make emergency plans, believing “it couldn’t happen here.” But preparation not only enhances hospitality by constructing a safe environment, it can also help avoid crisis situations.

Prepare a plan. If the congregation does not currently have an emergency plan, form a special task group or committee to develop one. An existing committee typically does not have the diverse expertise needed to assess risks and compare solutions. Recruit someone from the property committee, one or more staff members, and any member with emergency management, insurance, or law enforcement experience. This team can contact:

- the church’s insurer and ask for guidance. When was the last time an on-site assessment was conducted?
- local law enforcement. What suggestions do they have for general security and what risk patterns do they see in the community?
- local security firms or locksmiths. What new ideas do they have for low-cost, effective technology?



WHEN THE PASTOR DETERMINES THE CHURCH'S SECURITY CODE.

Examine church property. Collect information to answer these and other questions: Do all doors have secure locks? Are exits marked and are exit signs and doors properly lit? Are there alarms on some or all the doors? Are they functioning properly? If there are no alarms, should you have alarms on certain doors to alert staff when they are opened? Are all first-floor windows locked and secure? Are there remote sections of buildings that can be used to gain entry away from view? Are there security cameras and what can they see? Have there been past issues with theft, breaches of security, break-ins, or threatening visitors? What steps were taken to address these problems? One reoccurring problem is the theft of personal property (purses, wallets, coats) while a group is meeting, when volunteers are serving, or during worship services. Consider providing a secure closet or space where volunteers, members, and choir members can leave valuables.

Specialize the plan for the church's schedule. An effective plan takes into account the day of the week and day vs. evening activities. Planning for emergencies during Sunday worship may be different from planning for the rest of the weekdays in at active church. Talk through the specific safety needs of the following groups and situations:

- Church staff and volunteers who are often alone in the building
- Groups using the building during week days, such as committee meetings, classes, adult support groups (Alcoholics Anonymous), children and youth groups (Boy Scouts), after school programs (music lessons, tutoring)
- Day care or preschool programs
- Church-hosted community feeding programs, food pantry, clothing closets
- Groups using the building for week-day evening sessions (church youth activities, choir practice, governing board meetings)
- Sunday worship and classes or meetings

Who has a key? Because of high volunteer turnover, people pass along their keys to others or have them duplicated. Establish a policy that all key holders (exempting church staff) must pay a \$100 deposit, which is returned when the key is returned. Also ask them to sign an agreement that outlines their responsibilities for securing church property. Make sure that the church keys cannot be duplicated (consult a local locksmith for details). Other options include various digital locks, key pads, key cards or fobs, and software packages that generate audits on each device.

Change the church locks every three years as a matter of policy. A written and established policy depersonalizes the action and avoids pointing fingers at former staff or volunteers who are negligent.

The role of ushers and greeters. These church volunteers represent the congregation and are typically the first to welcome visitors. In terms of enhancing security, their main task is to observe people and assess situations as they unfold. Any time an usher or greeter has a concern about the potential for harm, he or she should alert others and seek help. Getting assistance is a wiser strategy than trying to handle a situation alone. One church organized a team to walk through halls and classrooms after services begin as an additional security check.¹

Plan, train, share. Developing a plan is only the first step. Staff and volunteers need training about how to respond to different types of emergencies. How many ways can the church share information about what people in the building should do in case of an emergency? For example, could there be a set of instructions and floor plan on the back of every door, just as there is in a hotel room? Or does the church have the capacity to send a text message alert?

Other Resources

Consider reviewing these excellent resources for additional ideas:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency's publication: "Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship," <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/33007>
- Church Law and Tax website, <http://store.churchlawtodaystore.com/emergencies.html>
- Developing Emergency Plans: Acts of Violence on Church Property, <http://images.acswebnetworks.com/1/2832/ChurchEmergencyPlanforViolence.pdf>
- Security Concerns for Churches: The Role of Greeters and Ushers by Tina Lewis Rowe, <http://storage.cloversites.com/theriverconference/documents/The%20Greeter%20and%20Usher%20Role%20In%20Church%20Security.pdf>

1. Tina Lewis Rowe, "Security Concerns for Churches: The Role of Greeters and Ushers," <http://storage.cloversites.com/theriverconference/documents/The%20Greeter%20and%20Usher%20Role%20In%20Church%20Security.pdf>.