**4 Effective Methods to Prepare for Gun Violence at Church**

How church leaders can consider financial costs and practicality in their response planning.

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The recent shootings at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, which left 26 dead and several others injured, have once again focused attention on church safety, with many church leaders asking what steps they should implement to protect their congregations. Most churches in America are safe places. While incidents of shootings on church property are shocking, they are rare. But "open access" policies of most churches make them susceptible to violent acts. While such acts cannot be completely prevented, there are steps that church leaders can take to reduce the risk. Let’s review some of them.

**Four possible options**

Here are four possible response options that leaders of churches of all sizes and settings should consider:

**1.Off-duty officers.** The optimal response to the threat of an armed assailant on church property is to have two or more uniformed off-duty law enforcement officers on site during services, with a police car parked in a highly visible location outside the church. Such persons should be thoroughly screened before being hired, receive extensive training in dealing with volatile situations and the use of firearms, and receive continuing training in the use of firearms and job-related skills. They will serve as a deterrent to crime because of their uniform and vehicle. Further, according to some courts, these individuals become on-duty police officers, even while otherwise acting as private security guards, when responding to criminal activity, which can reduce a church’s liability based on negligence for their actions. Churches considering the use of uniformed off-duty police officers should check with the local police department regarding the recruitment of such persons as security guards, and the number that are needed. There is a cost involved with using police officers to provide security, but those costs are diminished by the fact that you will not be using them for more than a few hours per week.

**2.Private security.** Churches also may consider hiring uniformed private security guards. This is a far-less effective response than using uniformed law enforcement officers, since private security guards typically have less training in both firearms and crisis response. Further, unlike law enforcement personnel, they do not become “on duty” when responding to a crime, and so the church faces a higher risk of being liable for their negligent response. And, the cost of hiring private security guards often will be comparable to using police officers.

**3.Tap church members.** A third option is to use church members who are legally authorized to carry a concealed weapon. They would not wear uniforms, but would instead blend in with the congregation as plain-clothed security guards. The problem here is the wide range of competency among permit holders in handling firearms. Some permit holders have a very minimal ability in the use of firearms, resulting in a significant risk of collateral damage. Others have extensive training and ability. As a result, church leaders should not treat all permit holders equally. Churches can help to bolster the competency of such persons in the protection of church members by taking the following actions:

* place a reasonable limit on the number of concealed weapons permit holders that the church will use as part of its response to armed shooters;
* perform a thorough background check on each person, including references;
* use a written application that includes a description of the applicant's weapons training;
* periodically confirm that the individual’s permit is active;
* only use concealed weapons permit holders who have passed the same firearms training course that is prescribed for local law enforcement personnel in your community; and
* only use these persons as auxiliaries who at all times are under the control and direction of law enforcement personnel.

**4. Implement technology.** The use of technology is another viable option. In evaluating the feasibility of various technologies to prevent or reduce the risk of shootings in public schools, the United States Department of Justice noted that the effectiveness, affordability, and acceptability of each technology must be considered. Devices that often are employed by churches and commercial businesses to prevent or reduce the risk of criminal acts include surveillance cameras, entry control devices, and metal detectors (see “Facts About Metal Detectors”). In each case, church leaders should consider how the device will work, how much it will cost, and how well their congregations will accept the use of them.

**Observations to consider prior to taking action**

First, let me repeat that church shootings, and other violent crimes on church premises, are rare.

Second, the law imposes upon any place of public accommodation, including a church, a duty to protect occupants against foreseeable criminal acts. The level of protection is directly proportional to the degree of foreseeability. Many courts assess foreseeability on the basis of the following factors: whether any criminal conduct previously occurred on or near the property; how recently and how often similar crimes occurred; how similar the previous crimes were to the conduct in question; and what publicity was given the previous crimes to indicate that the church knew or should have known about them. If shootings or other violent crimes on church property are highly foreseeable based on these factors, then a church has a heightened duty to implement measures to protect occupants from such acts.

Third, many church leaders and congregations, guided and informed by their theological and ethical values, feel compelled to take steps to protect human life from acts of violence whether or not they have a legal duty to do so.

Fourth, in making decisions regarding which protective measures to implement, church leaders should consult with local law enforcement professionals, the church insurance agent, and legal counsel. These same persons should also review the church’s emergency response plan

**Facts About Metal Detectors**

* Metal detectors work very well. They are considered a mature technology and can accurately detect the presence of most types of firearms and knives.
* However, metal detectors work very poorly if the church is not aware of their limitations before beginning a weapon detection program and is not prepared for the amount of trained and motivated manpower required to operate these devices successfully.
* When a questionable item or material is detected by such a device, the detector produces an alarm signal; this signal can be audible, visible (lights), or both. Unfortunately, a metal detector alone cannot distinguish between a gun and a large metal belt buckle. This shortcoming is what makes weapon detection programs impractical in many contexts. Trained employees are needed to make these determinations.
* Metal detectors are usually not effective when used on purses, bookbags, briefcases, or suitcases. There is usually a large number of different objects or materials located in, or as part of, the composition of these carried items that would cause an alarm.
* The difficulty in interpreting the results of metal detector scans will require many persons to be pulled aside, as at an airport, for more thorough screening, including pat downs. The end result will be clogged lines of parishioners, shoes in hand, impatiently waiting to enter their church. One can easily imagine the firestorm this would elicit.
* Walk-through metal detectors are expensive. An additional cost would be the use of trained operators. In a research report issued by the Department of Justice, it noted the numerous logistical challenges encountered by the New York City Board of Education with implementing its metal detector program. For one school of 2,000 students, the program requires nine security officers for two hours every morning. “The initial purchase price of a portal metal detector is almost insignificant compared with the ongoing personnel costs to operate the equipment in a complete weapon detection program,” the report noted.
* A greater problem is that churches usually have multiple entry points. Few churches can afford to have multiple entry setups with complete metal detection equipment and trained operators. The cost of the equipment would be quite high, but not nearly as prohibitive as the manpower to run these multiple systems.
* Metal detectors would not stop a dedicated and armed assailant, who could overpower the screeners.
* Handheld scanners are available, but generally are used as a supplement to portal metal detectors. As in airport procedures, the handheld detectors allow the security staff to more accurately locate the source of an alarm on a person’s body, after he or she has already walked through a portal system and triggered an alarm.
* Most church leaders, even in high crime areas, would consider metal detectors at church entrances offensive to congregational members and visitors and fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the church as a sanctuary. Even if metal detectors at church entrances would be an effective deterrent to violent crime, and affordable, they would be considered unacceptable by most church members. This would especially be so for churches in low crime areas, and with no history of shootings or other violent crimes on or near church property.

*Extended coverage on this topic will be included in the March/April 2018 issue of Church Law & Tax Report.*

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