

Guard your church without locking the gates

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Two years ago, a man claiming he wanted to save people from idol worship began smashing statues in a historic cathedral in San Antonio. Stunned, worshippers at San Fernando Cathedral stood frozen as the man toppled seven statues from their pedestals, breaking them into pieces. He later told police that he was God and was saving souls by destroying the idols that sinners worship.

While such extreme acts of vandalism are rare, parish administrator Bob Esparza says he deals with milder acts of vandalism at the downtown cathedral at least once a month, such as homeless people fishing for dollars in donation boxes or using confessionals as urinals. Such incidents have forced Esparza and church leaders across the country to wrestle with the same question: How can we protect ourselves while staying open to the public?

You need a plan

Security professionals say that the first step is to acknowledge that all churches need a security plan.

“People like to think that churches are havens of safety and security; but they’re not, and they should be,” says Steve Wilder, president and COO of Sorensen, Wilder & Associates, a security firm based in Bradley, IL. “Sometimes we need to deal with the criminal element in churches, just as we do in society.”

Vandalism, thefts, burglaries — even murders — occur regularly in America’s churches. More than 5,000 church burglaries and thefts are reported each year in the 24 states that submit data to the FBI’s National Incident-Based Reporting System. Experts believe vandalism is more common but less reported.

You need not spend thousands of dollars to develop a security plan. In fact, law enforcement officers within the church or community may be willing to help develop one at little or no cost.

Most cities and counties have crime prevention officers who do security assessments. If the police can’t help, look at what big businesses in your vicinity are doing, recommends Charles R. Carroll, president and CEO of ASET Corporation, a security company based in Dayton, OH. If any church members work for a large company, they can ask the security professional there to advise the church for little or no cost, Carroll says. Some security consultants will also reduce fees or give free advice to churches that can demonstrate financial hardship.

Assess your risks

If you’re not sure that your church really needs a security plan, do a risk assessment or hire someone to do one for you. You should:

- Determine the type and frequency of crimes occurring in your area. Is your neighborhood’s crime rate higher or lower than the state and national average? What types of crimes are being committed in your neighborhood?

- Examine your facility, both outside and in. Do you have adequate lighting on your walkways and parking areas? Are valuables always secured?
- Examine your policies and procedures. Are any of them leaving you vulnerable, such as leaving a door open at all hours for people wishing to pray?

The results of a crime analysis alone can be eye opening. “When clients see their numerical score (based on their local crime rate), they realize they’re not doing anything wrong if they improve their security,” Wilder says. “They realize they’re in an area where the crime rate is higher than the average, and they need to take preventive steps.”

Reduce your risks

Knowing your church’s risks and vulnerabilities gives you the wisdom to address them effectively. Here are some common security measures professionals recommend, from improving your facility to training your staff and congregation.

Control access: Ideally, all churches would restrict public access to their buildings when services aren’t in session. “I believe the days of leaving your church doors open and unattended are over,” Carroll says. “Not only has there been a decrease in respect for human life, but there has been a decrease in respect for authority.”

There are ways to provide building access while offering protection to people and property inside. Options for controlling access include:

- Locks and keys
- Keypad entry systems
- Magnetic proximity card readers
- Video cameras at entrances
- Magnetic locks controlled by secretary/receptionist

Some leaders firmly believe that church doors shouldn’t be locked. Some churches, such as the San Fernando Cathedral, are historic sites or tourist destinations. There are steps leaders can take to improve security while keeping their buildings open to the public. Options include:

- Establish operating hours.
- Allow people to ring for escorted admittance when doors are locked.
- Have a security person present while doors are unlocked.
- Monitor the area remotely with video cameras.

All valuables or artifacts should be secured, and visitors should be unable to access other parts of the building, such as offices, classrooms or day-care areas.

During Sunday or midweek worship services, interior church doors should be secured unless a specific function is going on in that room or wing, recommends Chuck Chadwick, founder and director of Gatekeepers Alliance. Sensitive areas of the church should have an access control

system that allows only authorized people to enter, he says.

Improve lighting: Provide at least 3- to 5-foot candles of illumination for walkways and parking lots (use a light meter to check). Mount lights at least 10 feet above the ground to minimize shadows.

Install fencing: Erect an ornamental fence at least 6 feet tall to help keep graffiti artists and vandals at bay.

Remove hiding places: Trim plants near entrances, windows or sidewalks to a height of 2 to 3 feet or keep them just below window level.

Install alarms: Choose a security alarm system certified by Underwriters Laboratories and have it professionally installed. Ideally, the alarm should alert a call center operated by a security company (not an answering service).

Use video surveillance: Monitor the building with video cameras during worship gatherings so you can watch for suspicious behavior. Cameras are smaller and more affordable than they were a decade ago, and digital technology provides amazing flexibility for viewing, storing and retrieving images. Cameras can be concealed within fixtures, such as exit lights or smoke detectors, so they don't detract from a church's appearance. The area's crime rate and church's experience will help determine whether to monitor the cameras during off-peak hours.

Use security officers: Hire police or security guards to patrol the building and parking lot, or use a volunteer force of off-duty officers and trained, unarmed lay people.

Train your people: Train staff members and a volunteer security force how to recognize signs of trouble and respond appropriately. A trained security team improves the overall security and demonstrates to insurance companies that you're trying to control property and liability exposures.

You have options

Could the idol-smashing incident at San Fernando Cathedral have been prevented? Possibly. A church deacon was quoted in a newspaper saying the man was agitated and started yelling that he was going to save the people in the church and was going to start by smashing the statues. Security officers are trained to keep an eye on people who appear nervous or agitated — indicators of potential trouble.

Esparza isn't convinced that a security guard would have averted the man's rampage, but he believes a guard may have subdued him by the second or third statue.

Churches, by nature, are places of refuge. You wouldn't want to lock the gates and wrap the buildings in barbed wire, but you do need to protect your property and the people your ministry serves. There are many options to consider. Investigate them. Educate yourself. Inform your congregation. Find what works for you, and share your experience with others.

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A security plan should include:

- An objective: What are you trying to achieve? In what time frame?
- A risk assessment: What is the neighborhood's crime rate? How is the church vulnerable?
- A security assessment: How can the problems be solved? What problems take first priority?
- Training: Is staff trained in security awareness? What role should staff members and volunteers play in an emergency situation?
- Implementation: What steps will we take to improve security in the next one to five years?

Resources:

- **Gatekeepers Alliance:** Offers security conferences, resources, and training tools. | www.gatekeepersalliance.org
 - **Sorensen, Wilder & Associates:** Offers security services. | www.swa4safety.com
 - **ASET Corporation:** Offers security services. | www.asetcorp.com Church Security Services: Offers training resources, online advice. | www.churchsecurityservices.com
 - **CAP Index:** Offers crime and loss analysis. | www.capindex.com
 - **FBI Uniform Crime Reports:** Offers national and state crime statistics. | www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm
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