

Protecting the Ministry

by Rod Fulenwider

IT IS UNFORTUNATE that we even have to address the issue of protecting the ministry. Many people find it very difficult to understand that we have violent issues that occur within the confines of the church. We do not have to look far (i.e., the news, the Internet, etc.), and we hear about a sexual predator taking out his evil on someone attending church or of someone coming into a church and firing a weapon with the desire to kill and harm others. Let us not kid ourselves: we live in a time where there are those that have chosen to seek to harm or kill specific people (church members) within a specific location (the church). Basically, the church is a target. We should not be surprised by this, the Bible tells us that Satan seeks to “steal, kill, and destroy.”

There are those within our churches that do not like one bit that we have created policies and procedures as a means to protect the church and to reduce risk. While none of us want to do this, the reality is that we must put in place the “correct” policies and procedures as a means to protect the ministry. It is critical that once we have implemented policies and procedures that we adhere to them religiously. First, we want to take a look at a quick history of some of the more publicized incidents. Secondly, we want to take a look at some of the ways to protect the ministry, and, finally, we want to review a few of the elements that all churches need to have in place. While bringing attention to negative situations that have occurred might cause embarrassment for some churches, it is to bring forth the information without stating certain pieces of information.

Here is a quick review of some of the church shootings that have occurred over the past several years:

- *July 28, 2008* Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. Man killed two and injured seven before being overpowered by congregants.
- *December 9, 2007* (Arvada, Colorado) A gunman at an Arvada missionary training facility killed two people and wounded two others. The gunman went into the building early Sunday morning December 9, 2007, and opened fire. Witnesses told police that the gunman had a handgun and left on foot. Twelve hours later, the same gunman was wounded by a security guard and then killed himself after opening fire at New Life Church in Colorado Springs.



- *August 12, 2007* (Missouri) First Congregational Church (Micronesian). Pastor and two worshipers were killed.
- *May 21, 2006* (Louisiana) Jesus Christ Church. Four people were killed including the shooter's wife.
- *February 26, 2006* (Michigan) Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church. Two people were killed by a gunman who reportedly went to the church looking for his girlfriend, and later killed himself.
- *March 12, 2005* (Wisconsin) Living Church of God (Evangelical group). Seven churchgoers were killed by a gunman who concluded by killing himself.
- *July 30, 2005* (New York) World Changers Church International. A man was shot five times by a police officer after charging the officer, following violent behavior.
- *September 15, 1999* (Texas) Wedgewood Baptist Church. Seven people were killed by a gunman whose diary writings revealed he was "a very emotionally disturbed person."

Below you will find a few headlines of recent news articles related to sexual abuse within the church:

- *August 19, 2008* Police say sex offender assaulted 2 girls at same Farmers Branch church 8 years apart
- *June 11, 2008* Bishop criticizes church for response to clergy sexual abuse
- *May 17, 2008* Baptist minister arrested in sex sting
- *May 13, 2008* Women claim child sexual abuse against church.
- Huge Southern Baptist church rocked by sexual abuse charges.

Most of us are aware of other situations that churches have been forced to deal with related to violent incidents occurring on their premises. The headlines above do not even mention bombs, arsons or other serious situations that have also happened. Given these situations, let us look some of the issues related to protecting the ministry. These are elements that need to be addressed.

Ask some questions when discussing physical security at the church. Do we need to put in cameras? Why do we need to change the locks on our doors? We already have a good identification system for parents to pick up their children, what else can we do? What all is involved in physical security? All of these are good questions and are good points to consider. Here are a few other questions to ask.

HAS YOUR CHURCH PERFORMED A PHYSICAL SECURITY ASSESSMENT?

Most importantly—have you had an outside professional provide this review? You look at your processes and facilities on a daily basis. An outsider will view things differently and approach this from a different view point. A professionally conducted assessment should cover a number of variables. For instance, when is the church most open to attack? In reviewing many of the incidents that have occurred in recent years, we learn quickly that many of the attackers have chosen to attack during the worship service. This is the time that most churches have the most people congregated in one location; as a result it is the time frame with which to cause the most harm. This is also the time that the church is most open; most exterior doors are open for ease of access. It is during this time that generally we have the fewest people moving throughout the church. This is also the time when most people in the worship service have their heads all pointed in one direction—towards the front and therefore fewer people to see a threat coming from the back. Combine these factors and other factors and you have a soft target. A study of past incidents tells us that this optimal time of attack continues to be repeated; therefore, we can conclude that these acts

Summary

- We live in a time where there are those that have chosen to seek to harm or kill specific people (church members) within a specific location (the church). Basically, the church is a target. We have to create policies and procedures as the means to protect the church and to reduce risk.
- There are questions to ask when discussing physical security at church.
 - When is the church most open to attack?
 - What are the real risks and/or exposures at our church?
 - Should we have armed personnel at our church?
 - What do we do when a convicted known sex offender begins to attend our church?
- The article provides a list of some of the elements that every church should have in place to help to protect the ministry:
- Remember, the church is one of the places that people and families should feel safe.

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are not someone just "going off." These acts are pre-planned, pre-meditated acts of violence designed to have the most direct impact. In some of the cases that were mentioned earlier, the attacker left a note intending not only to do physical harm and destruction but also intending to create fear and chaos in an otherwise orderly place (the church).

Some churches are considering installing metal detectors as one-step in providing more physical security. Many churches, however, say that they will not do this because churches are supposed to be open and warm and these devices make things cold and scary. There are ways to protect your congregation without installing these devices. The important thing here is to have an overall security plan. A security assessment will assist you to determine if you need cameras and, if so, how many. An assessment will also help determine if you need to change your locks as well as address multiple other issues for you. The best way to maximize your plan is to have performed a professional physical security assessment. This tool will allow you to stay focused on what your trying to achieve (optimal ministry), while protecting the ministry and while being good stewards of God's money.

WHAT ARE THE REAL RISKS AND/OR EXPOSURES AT YOUR CHURCH?

Most of these should be addressed in a physical security assessment; however, there are other elements that should also be discussed. For instance, in an article from *The Dallas Morning News* dated August 19, 2008 an offender was a repeat offender; more importantly, he was on probation when he allegedly committed the offense, and his first sexual offense was committed at the same church. One of the elements to consider when making a plan is to look at criminal history at your location and at locations in the immediate area. There are tools that already exist that can assist in this part of your plan. There are generally low costs associated with the use of these tools. The better the information available, the better the ability of your team to create a great plan.

Let us not kid ourselves: we live in a time where there are those that have chosen to seek to harm or kill specific people (church members) within a specific location (the church).

As churches have become more and more technically savvy, are there things we can do to protect against the threat posed by the Internet?

You must also review all access to the Internet via every device at the church. Today many churches have software packages that are used to screen for viruses and other possible breaches. This is also an element that should be reviewed periodically by an outside professional. There is too much risk and too many ways to beat the system today not to have this element reviewed. Some people will spend more of their awake hours at work (the church) than at home or elsewhere. While many of us cringe at the thought of tracking all computer usage and Internet usage of our church employees, volunteers and visitors it is a necessary element in protecting the ministry. We have learned over the past many months that the Internet is one of those tools that sexual predators use in committing their evil.

SHOULD WE HAVE ARMED PERSONNEL AT OUR CHURCH?

Many churches are looking at this issue right now. Churches have police officers who attend their services when they are not working. Some pastors have pulled these officers aside and directed them how to respond in the event of a shooting. Some churches have chosen to hire outside professional security companies to provide a level of protection for their church. Other churches have staff members who are working to attain concealed handgun licenses so that they will be armed in the event of an incident. Some churches say that they will not engage in wanting weapons in the church (other than those that are required by law en-

forcement offices who are required to carry them when off duty). Whatever your policy, it is important that you do your due diligence and seek legal counsel, then document your actions.

WHAT DO WE DO WHEN A CONVICTED KNOWN SEX OFFENDER BEGINS TO ATTEND OUR CHURCH?

The challenge is balancing a person's past with the mercy and grace provided by Christ. Keep this in mind: the church has a responsibility to keep people safe on their premises; therefore, you cannot just ignore the issue. In this day and age there are very few secrets that can be kept. Between public information requirements and the Internet, it is not very hard to know information about people that they want to keep hidden. Churches have found different ways to deal with this issue.

Some churches have created very in-depth procedures that do not allow the offender to have any contact or movement within the children's area or youth area of the church.

Some churches actually confront the person (professionally and in private) and have him sign an agreement of what he will and will not do on church property.

Other churches have developed plans that also include sponsors for these offenders—people that the offender must check in with any time that he is on church property. Once again, whatever actions you take be sure to seek legal counsel and document your actions.

Some of the above questions and/or situations may not apply to your church. Here is a list of some of the elements that every church should have in place to help to protect the ministry:

- **An appropriate and professional background screening process.** This process should include staff members, employees, volunteers and vendors on the property. Do not cut corners on this element. It is crucial that you do this correctly. This is not limited

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

just to criminal background and sex offender checks. Reference checks are important, as are other elements. For instance, Motor Vehicle Record (MVR) checks need to be performed for anyone driving on church business.

- **Childcare procedures.** Your church needs to have adequate check-in and check-out procedures in place. Some churches have badge systems that they use. For example, some churches use special badges to identify teachers and volunteers and even have the badges marked that person has cleared a background check.
- **A reporting system for identifying suspected abuse or neglect.**
- **Training for ushers.** This training should include specific elements that your ushers are able to identify.
- **A systematic approach to handle children wondering in the halls.** This would include children not being left alone to go to bathroom—their parents need to take responsibility for this and your ushers may be the ones who have to take the children back to mom or dad. This is one of the key points that allowed the August 19, 2008, incident to occur.
- **A “two-adult rule” when driving for the church when children are in the vehicle.**

Remember, the church is one of the places that people and families should feel safe. Most churches are trying to find that balance between providing the best quality of ministry while also protecting the ministry. 



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