

Responding to an Active Shooter Situation

by William S. Carcara, CPP

THE APRIL 20, 1999, active shooter incident at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado where two students killed twelve other students and a teacher and then committed suicide not only shocked the nation but questioned law enforcement's response to active shooter situations. This event has caused a paradigm shift in law enforcement training and tactics and also changed how institutions prepare themselves to survive this type of situation.

An *active shooter* is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, *active shooters* use firearms and there is no pattern or method to their

selection of victims. *Active shooter* situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. It is important to remember that an *active shooter* situation is a unique threat and not all shooting crimes are considered an active shooter event.

A number of tragic shooting incidents in public institutions and churches around the country have heightened community concern and awareness about what steps to take if ever confronted with a similar situation. These incidents have demonstrated that preparedness, alertness, quick action, immediate notification, and rapid response are imperative.

Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes, and before law enforcement arrives on the

scene, churches must be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation. In general, how you respond to an active shooter will be dictated by the specific circumstances of the encounter, bearing in mind there could be more than one shooter involved in the same situation.

Although Columbine High School has become synonymous with *active shooter* incidents, it is not the only active shooter event.

- November 5, 2009: Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a psychiatrist practicing at Darnall Army Medical Center at Fort Hood, Texas, opened fire at a military processing center at Fort Hood, killing one civilian and twelve soldiers.



- April 16, 2007: Seung-Hui Cho opened fire inside a Virginia Tech dormitory and two hours later in a classroom. By the time the incident was over a total of 31 people had been killed in what has been classified as the most lethal active shooter incident in American history.
- December 5, 2007: At the Von Maur department store in the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Nebraska, nineteen-year-old Robert A. Hawkins killed nine people (including himself) and wounded four, two of them critically.
- May 20, 2007: A sniper sprayed dozens of bullets on a courthouse, killing a police officer and wounding a sheriff's deputy and a civilian, then, apparently killed a caretaker and himself Sunday in a nearby church in Moscow, Idaho.
- October 2, 2006: An active shooter killed five students and then turned the gun on himself in a school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
- March 21, 2005: At an Indian reservation high school in Minnesota, a 16-year-old male killed five students, a teacher, a guard, and then himself.

History has proven that houses of worship are not immune from active shooter incidents:

- July 27, 2008: Unemployed truck driver, Jim Adkisson, walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, during Sunday morning worship, shouting "hateful things" and firing at random. Two victims died and seven others were wounded.
- August 12, 2007: Eiken Elam Saimon shot and killed the pastor and two deacons and wounded five others at the First Congregational Church in Neosho, Missouri.
- October 2, 2006: A gunman killed five girls and then himself. While not a church, it occurred at an Amish school

targeted as a religious site in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

- November, 2008: A gunman at the St. Thomas Syrian Orthodox Church in Clifton, New Jersey, shot his estranged wife, another man, and critically injured a third person.
- March 10, 2009: Terry Sedlacek entered a church in Maryville, IL, and killed the pastor during a service. He had enough ammunition for shooting another thirty people, but his gun jammed after the fourth shot.

HOW TO RESPOND WHEN AN ACTIVE SHOOTER IS IN YOUR CHURCH

Clearly, response to an active shooter is one of the most dynamic situations that anyone will ever face. It is important to recognize that past active shooter incidents have shown that, in these situations, there is no time, room, or intention for negotiation on the part of perpetrators. The perpetrator is there to cause as much injury as possible in the least amount of time possible. In most cases, perpetrators use firearms and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims; these situations are dynamic and evolve rapidly, hence quick action is crucial.

Generally, shooting incidents begin and end in such a short period of time and are so spontaneous that the situation can change dramatically in an instant. The average duration of a typical violent encounter is less than two minutes. In a survey of 63 cities in the United States conducted by the International City and County Municipal Association, (a professional and educational organization for municipal administrators), the average response time of police was 6 minutes and 15 seconds. Thus, your actions before, after, and during are extremely important in minimizing the harm that can occur.

If you find yourself in an active shooter situation, how you respond will be dictated by the specific circumstances of the encounter. The security professionals

at Crime Prevention Training Concepts, advocate that it is critical to develop a survival mindset: a belief that you can take control and survive an active shooter situation.

"THE FIVE Os" FOR SURVIVAL

1. Figure Out

Assess the situation and determine the most reasonable way to protect your own life and those around you. First and foremost, try to remain calm. This is easier said than accomplished, but panic will only escalate the situation and could provide more targets for the gunman. Quickly determine the most reasonable way to protect your own life. Remember that the congregation and visitors are likely to follow the lead of church leaders and the minister during an active shooter situation. There's a term that law enforcement officials refer to as "situational awareness." You need to be aware and cognizant of your surroundings.

Attempt to determine how many shooters are involved, the location of the shooter, and where the shooter may be heading.

Have an escape route and plan in mind. Find the nearest escape route. Most people have attended their church on a regular basis, but are not cognizant of the exits. Position yourself and others away from the person. Your goal is to get out of the area. This strategy will be enhanced if the church has progressively planned for events of this magnitude and has trained the staff and congregation. Additionally, a portable internal communication system is advantageous. Inexpensive portable communication is readily available throughout the United States.

Take note of the aggressor's characteristics (armed, gender, race, height, weight, build, what they were wearing, hair color, clothing, accessories, and distinguishing features such as scars or facial hair). Listen for verbal clues and search for a meaning behind the words.

Summary

- An active shooter is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area.
- Active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. It is important to remember that an active shooter situation is a unique threat and not all shooting crimes are considered an active shooter event.
- Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes, before law enforcement arrives on the scene, churches must be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation.
- How you respond will be dictated by the specific circumstances of the encounter. Remember that the congregation and visitors are likely to follow the lead of church leaders and the minister during an active shooter situation.
- Key Points include the following:
 - Help others escape, if possible.
 - Prevent individuals from entering an area where the active shooter may be.
 - Follow the instructions of any police officers.
 - Do not attempt to move wounded people.
- There are Five Os for Survival
 - Figure Out—Assess the situation and determine the most reasonable way to protect your own life and those around you.
 - Get Out—Evacuate...If there is an accessible escape path, attempt to evacuate the premises.
 - Hide Out—Hide in an area out of the active shooter's view.
 - Take Out—As a last resort, and only when the threat to life is imminent, take action against the shooter.
- Help Out—At the first opportunity, call 911 and advise the dispatcher of the occurrence.
- This article gives specific guidance for how to respond and react when law enforcement arrives.
- To prepare your staff best for an active shooter situation, create an Emergency Action Plan (EAP), and conduct training exercises. Additional ways to prepare for and prevent active shooter situations are also discussed in the article.

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Make additional mental notations about the intruder's mental condition (i.e., intoxication, psychotic, under the influence of drugs).

Act quickly and decisively; do not be concerned with personal or church property. Leave belongings behind; property can be replaced!

Do not pull a fire alarm or respond to one during an active shooter incident. A fire alarm signal will only heighten the panic level.

2. Get Out

Evacuate...If there is an accessible escape path, attempt to evacuate the premises. Run away from the sounds, putting as much distance between you and the attacker as possible.

Survivors of active shooting incidents report that determining an unknown noise to be gun fire was instrumental in their quick actions that led to their

survival. Individuals who do not know the sounds of gun fire are at a distinct disadvantage because they did not immediately react to the threat.

Always know the quickest route of exit from your church, and should you decide to run from the building, do it without hesitation. Once you have made a successful evacuation of the building, continue to flee the area until you have arrived at a point as far from your building as possible. Keep in mind that parents will immediately head to the nursery area to protect their children. Nursery staff and volunteers must be well versed in planning.

If the attacker is in the church, and it is safe to do so, evacuate the particular area that the shooter may be in and attempt to isolate the event by limiting the shooter's ability to access other areas of the church. This can be accomplished by locking interior doorways or by blocking access points.

Key Points:

- Have an escape route and plan in mind.
- Evacuate regardless of whether others agree to follow.
- Leave your belongings behind.
- Help others escape, if possible.
- Consider persons with special needs and disabilities.
- Prevent individuals from entering an area where the active shooter may be.
- Keep your hands visible.
- Follow the instructions of any police officers.
- Do not attempt to move wounded people.
- Call 911 when you are safe.

3. Hide Out

Hide in an area out of the active shooter's view. If circumstances dictate that you can not physically hide from the shooter, try to make yourself a "small target." Lying down or taking refuge under a pew may increase the chances of surviving an incident. Research indi-



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cates that although a vast majority of active shooters have knowledge concerning firearms, they are not expert marksmen. Making yourself and others smaller targets can increase your probability of surviving an attack.

Lock doorways so the shooter cannot have access to all areas of the church. Block any entry to your hiding places. Security experts recommend that day care, Sunday school or nurseries have the ability to lock the classroom or entry door from the inside during an emergency. Analysis of past active school shootings indicates that shooters do not take the time to kick in or break into a locked room. Keep people away from the door since this same analysis revealed that a shooter will indiscriminately shoot into a door if he believes he can hit someone.

If you are in a hallway when the shooting begins, immediately try to find a room that can be secured and barricade the door. Although any hiding spot will suffice, attempt to find a hiding location that does not trap or restrict your options for movement.

Be aware that the assailant may bang on the door, yell for help, or otherwise attempt to entice you to open the door of a secured area. If there is any doubt about the safety of the individuals inside a room, the area needs to remain secure.

If the active shooting situation occurs outside the church, find cover behind any object that can stop a bullet such as a tree, parked vehicles, or wall.

Lastly, consider what your response will be if the shooter finds you. Are you going to submit or resist the shooter?

4. Take Out

As a last resort, and only when the threat to life is imminent, take action against the shooter. If there is no other choice but to defend yourself, try to obtain anything that could serve as

a weapon (i.e., knife, scissors, letter opener, etc.) and use this weapon on vital areas such as the eyes, neck and groin area. Continue your attack until the intruder is subdued or runs away.

Key Points:

- Act as aggressively as possible against the shooterthis is no time to be meek!
- Throw items at the attacker and improvise weapons from whatever you can obtain. Any readily available item should be considered; if in the sanctuary, use hymnals and Bibles.
- Yell, scream, and shout! By startling the attacker, you may gain a second or two to attack.
- Commit to your actions...there is no room for second guessing!
- If two or more people can attack the shooter, a coordinated attack that involves rushing the shooter from different directions or angles should be attempted. By launching a counter attack from different directions, the shooter will not be able to shoot at all the attackers simultaneously.

5. Help Out

At the first opportunity, call 911 and advise the dispatcher of the occurrence.

When calling 911, stay on the line until it is answered; do not hang up! Be prepared to provide the operator with as much information as possible such as:

- What is occurring?
- Where you are located, including building name and room number
- Number of people at your specific location
- Injuries, if any, including the number of injured and types of injuries
- Your name and other information as requested
- Try to provide information in a calm manner so that your information can be quickly relayed to responding law enforcement and emergency personnel.

Report as much as possible about the assailant, including:

- Specific location/direction of the assailant
- Number of assailants
- Gender, race, and age of the assailant
- Language or commands used by the assailant
- Clothing color and style and description of any backpack or bag
- Physical features; i.e. height, weight, hair, glasses, etc.
- Weapons; i.e. handgun, rifle, shotgun, knife, explosives
- Do you recognize the assailant and or know their name?
- What did you hear—i.e. explosions, gunshots, etc?

Treat the injured as best you can until the area is secure. Remember basic first aid. For bleeding, apply pressure and elevate. **Many items can be used for this purpose—i.e. clothing, paper towels, feminine hygiene products, newspapers, etc.**

When help is on the way it is important for you:

- STAY WHERE YOU ARE. The safest place for you is inside a secure room.
- The assailant may not flee when law enforcement enters the building; instead, he may target arriving officers.
- Initial responding officers will not treat injured or begin evacuation until the threat is neutralized and the area is secure.
- You may need to explain this to others in order to keep them calm.
- Once the threat is neutralized, officers will begin treatment and evacuation.
- Responding officers will establish safe corridors for persons to evacuate. This may be time consuming; you need to remain in your secure area until instructed otherwise.
- You may be instructed to keep your hands on your head and you may be searched.



- You may be escorted out of the building by law enforcement—follow their directions.
- After evacuation, you may be taken to a staging or holding area for medical care, interviewing, counseling, etc.
- Once you have been evacuated, you will not be permitted to retrieve any personal items.

How to RESPOND when law enforcement arrives:

- Law enforcement's purpose is to stop the active shooter as soon as possible. Officers will proceed directly to the area in which the last shots were heard.
- Officers usually arrive in teams of four.
- Officers may wear regular patrol uniforms or external bulletproof vests, Kevlar helmets, and other tactical equipment.
- Officers may be armed with rifles, shotguns, handguns.
- Officers may use pepper spray or tear gas to control the situation.
- Officers may shout commands and may push individuals to the ground for their safety.

How to REACT when law enforcement arrives:

- Remain calm and follow officers' instructions.
- Put down any items in your hands (i.e., bags, jackets).
- Immediately raise hands and spread fingers.
- Keep hands visible at all times.
- Avoid making quick movements toward officers such as attempting to hold on to them for safety.
- Avoid pointing, screaming, and/or yelling.
- Do not stop to ask officers for help or direction when evacuating; just proceed in the direction from which officers are entering the premises.

The first officers to arrive to the scene will not stop to help injured persons. Expect rescue teams comprised of additional officers and emergency medical personnel to follow the initial officers. These rescue teams will treat and remove any injured persons. They may also call upon able-bodied individuals to assist in removing the wounded from the premises.

Once you have reached a safe location or an assembly point, you will likely be held in that area by law enforcement

until the situation is under control and all witnesses have been identified and questioned. Do not leave the safe location or assembly point until law enforcement authorities have instructed you to do so.

TRAINING THE CHURCH STAFF FOR AN ACTIVE SHOOTER SITUATION

To prepare your staff best for an active shooter situation, create an Emergency Action Plan (EAP), and conduct training exercises. Together, the EAP and training exercises will prepare your staff to respond effectively and help minimize loss of life.

COMPONENTS OF AN EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

Create the EAP with input from several stakeholders including your human resources department, your training department (if one exists), your property manager, and local law enforcement and/or emergency responders.

An effective EAP includes

- A preferred method for reporting fires and other emergencies
- An evacuation policy and procedure
- Emergency escape procedures and route assignments (i.e., floor plans, safe areas)

- Contact information for, and responsibilities of, individuals to be contacted under the EAP
- Information concerning local area hospitals (i.e., name, telephone number, and distance from your location)
- An emergency notification system to alert various parties of an emergency including
 - Individuals at remote locations within premises
 - Local law enforcement
 - Local area hospitals

ADDITIONAL WAYS TO PREPARE FOR AND PREVENT AN ACTIVE SHOOTER SITUATION

- **Preparedness**
 - Ensure that your facility has at least two evacuation routes.
 - Post evacuation routes in conspicuous locations throughout your facility.
 - Include local law enforcement and first responders during training exercises.

- Encourage law enforcement, emergency responders, SWAT teams, K-9 teams, and bomb squads to train for an active shooter scenario at your location.

- **Prevention**

- Foster a respectful workplace.
- Be aware of indications of workplace violence and take remedial actions accordingly.

- **Distribute critical items to appropriate supervisors/employees:**


- Floor plans
- Keys
- Facility personnel lists and telephone numbers

- **Assemble crisis kits:**

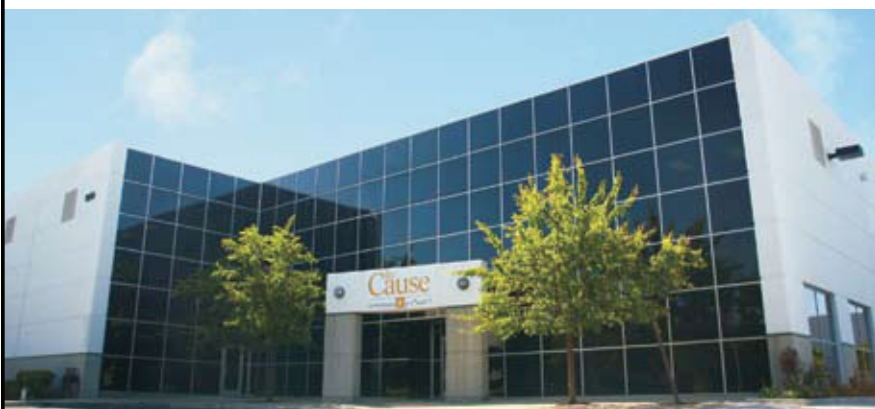
- Radios
- Floor plans
- Staff roster, and staff emergency contact numbers
- First aid kits
- Flashlights

- **Place removable floor plans near entrances and exits for emergency responders.**
- **Activate the emergency notification system when an emergency situation occurs.**

The probability of being involved in an active shooter situation at your church is less than being struck by lightning. Unfortunately, people die annually from lightning. Surviving an active shooter situation requires more than playing the odds...preparation is the only sure bet!

For more information concerning critical incident management refer to Crime Prevention Training Concepts, Critical Incident Management For Houses of Worship Handbook, *Complete Guide for Crisis Prevention, Planning, & Response*. Ordering information can be found at www.cpt-online.com. 

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