

What Exactly Is Suspicious Activity?

by William S. Carcara, and David T. Riggs

WE HAVE ALL HEARD that recognizing and reporting suspicious behavior is a fundamental first step in any proactive crime prevention initiative. At some point, we may have even told our staff, greeters, and ushers to “keep an eye out” for anything that looks suspicious, but do we know what suspicious behavior actually looks like?

Most comprehensive church security plans include the element of training ushers and greeters to recognize suspicious behavior and report that observation. Unfortunately, the determination of what is suspicious is often left to a person's intuition. Suspicious behavior is sometimes difficult to define, but is one of those things that most people “know when they see it.” It is something that is out of place, not quite right, or just makes you feel “weird” about it. Reliance on these intangible variables is not reliable. Although trusting your instincts is an important element of recognizing suspicious activity or behavior, a more substantial recognition process is necessary. Recognizing and reporting suspicious behavior cannot be a haphazard process.

RECOGNIZING SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY

Identifying suspicious activity is not a precise science. Security experts concur that trusting your judgment....that internal belief that something is wrong is the best precautionary warning signal. Your suspicion of a “threat” could be confirmed with one incident or event. Sometimes it could take a series of incidents, such as a

con artist attempting to obtain benevolent assistance. In the long run, it comes down to

- Experience
- Judgment
- Common sense

The following formal examples may not always justify reporting or lead to criminal activity. By definition “suspicion” is not a certainty. It is always better to err on the side of caution. Trust your instincts!

SUSPICIOUS THINGS

Appearance of objects or things in places where they should not be placed, located, or parked. Such “things” like packages, brief cases, trucks, or cars are a few examples. Examples of suspicious things being in places where they should not be located are unaccountable or possibly unaccounted-for objects left near an air-intake system, an unknown vehicle idling in the church parking lot prior to a person taking the collection deposit to the bank, or an unexpected package showing up without appropriate delivery processes.

SUSPICIOUS PEOPLE

A suspicious person usually exhibits three manifestations:

- Strange behavior...doing something unexpected, such as visiting or working in an area where work is not generally done. Persons wearing clothing not consistent with weather conditions (a person wearing full length trench coats with boots in 70 degree weather). This variable is the first and most obvious indicator of suspicion. Additionally the person may attempt to conceal his

face by turning away when someone approaches (e.g., rapidly turning and pretending to read something on a bulletin board).

- An unfamiliar person is somewhere where only people you do know should be... persons monitoring areas, entrances to buildings, or inside the buildings; persons wandering in halls or areas of the church where they have no legitimate purpose; or unauthorized persons in restricted or sensitive areas. Within a church setting this could include an unknown person loitering about the nursery, children and youth areas, mother's day out area, or family life center. When questioned or confronted, the person might become evasive, attempt to change the subject, or give too many details that are unrelated to the conversation.
- Repeated sightings...seeing the same people in different places and times. This variable may include the potential crime of stalking, especially at the church offices where female employees may be working.

Recognizing suspicious people transcends demographic factors; it is focused upon their behavior not who they are. In the retail sector, profiling a shoplifter by demographics is impossible due to the fact that such a wide range of people shoplift. Loss prevention experts instruct store personnel to profile behaviors...how a person is dressed, how they walk through the store, where they are focusing their attention, and what they are carrying.

The same philosophy exists in the church setting.

UNUSUAL REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

Unusual requests for information can be a warning sign of potential criminal activity:

- A telephone request at the church office asking about the security system
- Questions about the habits of your minister
- A mail survey asking for comments on the response time and habits of emergency personnel

Although possibly legitimate, these are also techniques used by terrorists to gather information while planning an attack. Do not give out sensitive information unless you know the party you are talking to and there is a legitimate need for that information.

UNUSUAL INTEREST IN "OFF-LIMITS" TARGETS

Maybe you are at a national monument or traditional tourist location and you notice a person nearby taking a lot of photos. Not unusual. But then you notice that he is only taking photos of the surveillance cameras, perimeter barriers, or security guard postings..., is that normal for a tourist? Is this normal for anyone? Absolutely not!

The following should cause a heightened sense of concern if a person is taking an atypical interest in the physical structure or security features in and around your church building:

- unusual or abnormal interest
- surveillance
- inappropriate photographs or videos
- note-taking
- drawing of diagrams
- annotating maps
- using binoculars or night vision devices

UNUSUAL ACTIVITY

Unusual activity does not necessarily mean that criminal activity may

occur, but it does not hurt to be aware of the following:

- People acting furtively and suspiciously
- People avoiding eye contact
- People departing quickly when seen or approached
- People in places they do not belong
- A strong odor coming from a building or vehicle
- An overloaded vehicle
- Fluid leaking from a vehicle, other than the engine or gas tank
- People over-dressed for the weather
- Carrying items that do not fit in with what they are doing

FRAUDULENT IDENTIFICATION

Many of the 9/11 terrorists that were in the country illegally were using fraudulent IDs. Masking one's true identity is not a new phenomena or related to only terrorist activities. Altering or using false government identification in any way and

for any purpose is against the law. This includes the following:

- Drivers license
- Social security card
- Passport
- Birth certificate
- INS identification
- Police badges or identification

If you believe someone is using or has altered government identification, notify the police. Do not request to see a person's ID when not appropriate. Let the police do the investigating.

Fraudulent identification is a favorite tactic of con artists that may be targeting your church.

NUMEROUS VISITS

Potential criminals often visit their intended crime site to obtain information that will assist them in carrying out their attack. This is particularly troublesome for

Summary

- The determination of what is suspicious is often left to a person's intuition. Comprehensive church security plans include the element of training ushers and greeters to recognize suspicious behavior and report that observation.
- Although trusting your instincts is an important element of recognizing suspicious activity or behavior, a more substantial recognition process is necessary. Recognizing and reporting suspicious behavior cannot be a haphazard process.
- Being cognizant of unusual activity and behaviors is important. What to watch for is cited in this article.
- Recognizing suspicious behavior is critically important to a church's security planning. Determining what is and what is not suspicious behavior is a perplexing component for churches since the mission of a church often is in conflict with sound security practices.

- Recognizing suspicious people transcends demographic factors; it is focused upon their behavior not who they are.

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churches since the facility is not only open to visitors but visiting is encouraged. Not all visitors have righteous intentions. Pay attention to visitors:

- Arriving and leaving at unusual hours
- Trying not to be noticed
- Acting in a suspicious manner
- Parking an unusual distance from the meeting location

DELIVERIES

Deliveries are a common method for criminals to carry out attacks.

You should be aware of these potentially dangerous situations:

- A vehicle with hazardous material parked or driving in an inappropriate area
- Unusual deliveries of chemicals or fertilizer
- Unattended bags or boxes in a public access place

- Fire extinguishers that may have been moved or tampered with
- Unusual or unexpected mail


WHAT TO DO IF YOU SEE A SUSPICIOUS PERSON

If you see someone that you believe is suspicious, note the following and report your observations to an appropriate authority (this could be the police, minister, or person in charge):

- What the person is wearing
- What the person looks like (height, build, hair color, skin complexion, etc.)
- Where the person is
- The direction the person is heading (if he is moving)
- Any vehicles the person is using (include type, color, and license plate, if possible)
- What the person is doing

In the wake of almost every disastrous event, when the post mortem analysis is conducted, the experts concur that sufficient information was available prior to the attack or event to prevent the situation from occurring. Unfortunately, the suspicious behavior that was observed by a variety of individuals was not acted on or reported.

Recognizing suspicious behavior is critically important to a church's security planning. Determining what is and what is not suspicious behavior is a perplexing component for churches since the mission of a church often is in conflict with sound security practices. Alienating a first-time visitor who may have legitimately gotten lost and ended up in the nursery area runs the risk of having that person leave the church because of embarrassment. This consciousness, however, will visually demonstrate to visitors and members alike that their security is of utmost importance.

To do nothing is not acceptable and will increase the church's liability if the incident results in legal action against the church. 

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