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Protecting Our Churches

By Vaughn Baker

Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church; New Life Church, Colorado Springs; First Congregational Church Neosho, Missouri; Ministry of Jesus Christ Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit...the list goes on of churches that should be places of refuge and comfort but instead are associated with violent acts.

Almost all members of churches, for the most part, take their family's safety for granted when entering a church for worship. This is exactly the environment we would like to provide to our church congregation—they should take their safety for granted if we as church leaders are preparing in advance for the security and safety of our churches. The last thing you want as a church is your congregation members wondering if they or their children are going to be safe during the service or Sunday School. If members are distracted with these troubling thoughts, then churches are no longer the places of refuge, comfort, and worship that God intended them to be.

Unfortunately, targeted acts of extreme violence, extremist behavior, and secular/religiously motivated hate crimes are now confronting church leaders with this question: Are we as church pastors and leaders biblically and ethically obligated to create a security presence that will allow an immediate and effective response against these types of targeted acts of violence that are on the increase in the United States?

First look at this question from a biblical point of view. Is there biblical authority for protecting the "Body of Christ?" Matthew 10:22 states, "You will be hated for my names sake." Matthew 10:16 states, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

This clearly provides warning that as Bible preaching and practicing Christians, we must be prepared for persecutions. In other words, "pray for the best but prepare for the worst." The past few years have seen a dramatic increase in shootings at churches and religious places of worship. Just from 2007-2008, church shootings in the United States increased more than 175 percent. Reasons for this increase are twofold:

1. Increased media attention of church shootings
2. Copycat acts by those who are very troubled and have a desire to set the "new record"

What we do know is that those who commit these violent acts most of the time have the desire to end their life and, at the same time, have a hatred of someone who attends the church in which the attack takes place or church/Christians in general. This is particularly the case if your church preaches biblical truths in relation to abortion, same sex marriage, homosexuality, etc.

What are some of the reasons that the attacker selects churches to commit these acts?

1. The reality or their perception that the church environment represents a "soft target" in which they can successfully carry out the attack with maximum results
2. The person(s) that they are targeting either attends the church or is a staff member or leader at the church. We do know however that many times the attacker has some previous connection to the church either directly or indirectly.

Legally and from a liability point of view, what should be considered when deciding to make a decision for your church to establish a security/safety ministry? Usually, the first question that gets asked by church leaders or elders when asked about starting a security ministry is, "What are the costs of doing something?" From a stewardship point of view, this is a question that must be answered; however, it is not the most important question.

The question we should be asking is, "What are the costs of doing nothing?" This is not only from a liability point of view, but also a public relations point of view. A violent act occurring at your church will be a tragedy that will have lasting effects on members, attendance, and stewardship.

The significant liability of "doing nothing" is important to recognize as well. Liability and civil judgments are determined using various factors, but to simplify it for the purpose of this article, I have broken it into a few areas:

1. A "reasonably anticipated need" has been identified in advance, and despite that need being identified, nothing was done to prepare for that need. What this means is that other similar churches with similar geographic and demographic risk indicators have identified a "reasonable need" and they chose to prepare for that "anticipated need."
2. "Responsible preparation" in advance for this need is the standard by which civil liability is measured. Failure to make this preparation results in additional liability exposure.



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3. The size of a civil judgment based on the "reasonably anticipated need" and the lack of "responsible preparation" for that need are then based on the "four prongs of negligence" which include:

- * Duty to Act
- * Breach of that Duty to Act
- * Proximate Cause - Injury or result of that breach of duty to act
- * Damages suffered or negative results as result

Several other needed functions that a security/safety ministry can perform for your church once established include but are not limited to offering/tithing protection and transport, medical ministry needs, nursery/Sunday School security/safety protocols, pastoral protection, and management of disruptive members or demonstrators/protestors.

Successfully creating and implementing a safety/security ministry at your church will require education and coordination between several ministry areas, such as greeters, counselors, ushers, parking attendants, nursery/Sunday school personnel, and church leadership. Whether your church desires an informal or professional safety/security presence, it is highly recommended that your church receives professional education and advice as well as consultation with your church's insurance company prior to implementing this most important ministry.

Vaughn Baker is the president and co-owner of Strategos International, www.strategosintl.com. His law enforcement experiences include 20 years of patrol, investigations, and special operations training and experience. Strategos International was founded in 2002 and since that time has trained more than 6,500 law enforcement, military, corporate, governmental, and church professionals. For more information regarding "Inter-Faith Church Security & Intruder Response" seminars and consulting for your church, visit www.intruderresponse.com.