

SAFETY STRATEGIES -- FOR CONGREGATIONS

Steps to reduce the risk of violence in churches

(6-09)

As news events make clear, violence in the form of threats or direct behavior can and does occur, even in the church.

Violent acts such as the May, 2009 murder of Dr. Tiller during worship at Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita or the murder of Pr. Fred Winters during worship at First Baptist Church in Maryville, Illinois, earlier in 2009 cannot be fully anticipated nor can they often be prevented.

Fortunately, violent acts in churches and other places of worship are still rare. However, that they happen at all suggests that each congregation can benefit from taking steps to reduce its risk and to prepare to respond to an emergency.

The size, location, overall program and the combined knowledge and skills of the members will determine much of the detail of a congregation's safety strategy. The following suggestions are offered to help you get started.

1. **Establish a safety committee** to develop and implement a congregational safety strategy. Areas of concern might include:
 - § Communication – a) between congregation leadership, b) with the members, c) with local law enforcement, emergency services providers and d) with your insurance provider and legal advisor.
 - § Means for evacuating the facility or, on the other hand, locking down the facility. This should include identification of safe places.
 - § Reducing risk to staff or members who may be working alone or in isolated areas of the church.
 - § Training in human behavior and behavioral warning signs for staff, ushers and greeters.
2. **Talk with local law enforcement and emergency services.** Invite them to the church to learn about the congregation and its facility. Find out how they would respond to various emergency situations.
3. **Consider an alarm system** which may include panic alarm options.
4. **Develop incident response protocols** for responding to various emergencies - what needs to be done; who does what; and, when.
5. **Contact your insurance advisor** for suggestions and training resources.
6. **Consider speaking with an attorney** regarding legal issues that may arise from various emergencies and any actions you should take before emergencies happen.
7. Keep in mind that **hospitality includes providing a safe place.**

In Matthew 10 Jesus sends out the disciple by saying in part, "*Stay alert. This is hazardous work I'm assigning you. You're going to be like sheep running through a wolf pack . . .*"

God is at work in our communities and has a church--us, to be part of that work. Leaving ourselves open to the people for whom God cares means exposing ourselves to some risk, but it does not mean carrying out our work unprepared, or unaware, or placing ourselves thoughtlessly in risky positions.

As we reflect on the reality of violence in our world, Jesus expresses the tension in which we live when he goes on in his instructions to the disciples, "*Be cunning as a snake, inoffensive as a dove.*"

God is at work in our communities. It is at times risky work. The risk can be reduced, but not eliminated. As we live as the church we live confidently with these words of Jesus from the end of Matthew: "*I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.*"

RESOURCES used in preparation of this article:

1. Biblical quotations are from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* © 2002 Eugene H. Peterson, published by Navpress, Colorado Springs, Colorado.
2. Cobble, James F., *Safety & Inspection Checklists for Church & School*, Christian Ministry Resources, Matthews, North Carolina, 2001. www.ChurchLawTodayStore.com
3. Cobble, James F. And Hammar, Richard R., *Risk Management Handbook for Church and Schools*, Your Church Resources, Carol Stream, Illinois. www.yourchurchresources.com
4. Church Mutual Insurance Company, *Crime-Proof Your Worship Center* (DVD), available at www.ChurchMutual.com.

Please contact Rev. John D. Kreidler, Bishop's Associate for Administration, if you have questions regarding this article or the resources mentioned.

Useful information is also available through the ELCA website at: www.elca.org.

In the search box, type: "Legal issues for congregations" and choose the first entry. The full address is:

<http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/Congregation-Administration/Legal-Issues-for-Congregations.aspx>.