[Editorial Forward: Master Instructor Lt. Mike Brown began his career serving in the United States Air Force, then the Columbus (Indiana) police department for 24 years, arriving at ILEA in February 2005. Recently he established a security plan for his church, and the wisdom of his research and experience surely benefits anyone facing such a task.]

The Challenges of Establishing a Church Security Team

By

Lt. Mike Brown

The threat of an active shooter event increases in our society every day. Carl Chinn said: “Deadly incidents are on the rise. From 1999 to present his research reveals that 617 people have died as a result of shootings at faith-based properties such as mosques, temples, and churches of all denominations.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite the availability of this information, faith-based organizations and houses of worship continue to struggle with the need for security while maintaining a welcoming and friendly environment for those in attendance.

I attend the First Christian Church in Columbus. For many years the First Christian Church could be accessed from any entrance with no security protocols in place. The church experienced a few thefts and other minor incidents over recent years but no one imagined anything worse. The mindset seemed to be ‘we live in the Midwest; our city is a safe place; and our church is safe.’ This attitude fosters a state of complacency and the belief that ‘it will not happen here.’

Resistance arose from some within the church leadership but also from some congregants as well. Fortunately, several in leadership roles resolved to change the mindset of the membership. Research and discussion yielded a checklist of priorities to be addressed, which consisted of the following:

1. Secure the building during normal business hours with one main entrance.

2. Establish protocols/procedures for dealing with emergency situations to include active shooter/intruder.

3. Increase the size of our security team, which would be dependent on ergonomics of the facility, number of services, and number of members.

4. Purchase cameras and other recording equipment to monitor activities during the day and night.

5. Purchase of communication equipment for team members

6. Implement training for all team members to include firearms training, first aid, physical tactics, and verbal de-escalation.

7. Provide training and answer questions to all volunteer door greeters.

All leaders involved in establishing a security team for the First Christian Church agreed that the biggest challenge was changing the mindset of congregants. The following steps outline how this issue was successfully addressed.

The leaders brought in Major Curt Beverage, Columbus Police Department, to consult. Major Beverage is extremely knowledgeable in active shooter and threat assessment and conducted a ‘walkthrough’ of the Church. After his assessment he concluded that the single largest safety detractor was failing to have a monitored single-entry point during day to day operations.

Sanow emphasized the importance of establishing a single point of entry.[[2]](#footnote-2) He also found other safety issues.

Major Beverage’s findings were embraced by Church leaders and staff. The leaders determined to establish one single entry point, which entry point was best suited for personnel and programs, and the beginnings of a security plan began to take shape. While it was a slow process to establish a single point of entry during normal business hours, the Church now has a single-point of entry constantly monitored by a staff member or volunteers. The doors are locked and access to the building can be gained either by utilizing swipe cards that have been issued to critical personnel or by contacting the person manning the desk via an intercom system. For further security, a panic alarm was installed as an emergency alert for whomever is staffing the desk to alert personnel working upstairs in the office if necessary.

Along with restricting access to a single entry point, the Church leaders also acquired several cameras with recording capabilities. With the help of members from the security team as well as other Church volunteers, cameras were placed at all access points, hallways, office areas, kids’ area, and other areas that were deemed vulnerable.

The next order of business in the process was establishing protocols and procedures for dealing with emergency situations that included an active shooter/ intruder situation. Using existing intelligence, Church leaders created a manual covering many emergency situations, from active shooter, to tornadoes, to fires, and more. All full-time staff received a copy and copies were also been placed in locations accessible to volunteers during Sunday worship.

Church members were sought to establish a response team. Special care in vetting the members of this team were employed, with first choices being currently active or retired law enforcement officers or military members. Such congregants bring experience and mind-set to the equation. For those churches lacking sufficient individuals with that background, great discernment will be required to locate and convince persons to join a security team. Persons approached must believe in the goals of the security team, the expectations, and the responsibilities of being a part of the team. These responsibilities include submission to a background check, periodic and frequent firearms training, emergency response training, first aid training, and any other training deemed necessary by church leadership.

Firearm proficiency is, perhaps, the single most important skill for a security team member, and meeting or exceeding the firearms qualification requirements for a full-time law enforcement officer is strongly recommended. All team members must be intimately familiar with the specific building layout and areas of vulnerability; periodic drills on responding to a threat situation to different areas of the building increase confidence and competence.

Strategic deployment of security team members must occur in each and every situation. An armed team member should be assigned to each point of entry to the church. All other team members should be positioned strategically in the worship center allowing for the best visual coverage of the entire area.

Closely related in tactical needs is communication. For those churches that can be accessed from several entrances, and consequently monitored by a security team member, the purchase of communication devices (radios) becomes necessary. Being able to communicate easily with one another is essential should any type of emergency arise. Team members assigned to provide door security should check out a radio every Sunday, along with a personal earpiece that must be required to be worn.

While communications between team members during Sunday worship time is mission critical, it is just as important for any full or part-time staff who works at the church daily to be able to have immediate access to radio communication. All radios programmed to a specific room or area in the building must include an override emergency channel. All fulltime staff must be trained on good communication skills and techniques to be effective every day.

Even though a competent and dedicated security team is in place, a heightened security level must be accepted by the congregants. While the security team does its best to protect parishioners, unconvinced congregants may likely find another house of worship.

The experience of the First Christian Church members was quite positive. Although not all agreed, overall, the implementation of the security team was positively received. Only one family left the Church because of the decision to have an armed security team. Senior Pastor Steve Yeaton shared his thoughts on the issue:

“There’s a lot of disagreement among Christians about armed security in local churches. Some believe the presence of armed guards violate God’s command to ‘turn the other cheek, to love your neighbor and the command not to kill’. While I respect the opinions of my Christian brothers and sisters who share that view, I do not agree with their conclusions. I believe the presence of armed security is one way of showing love to your neighbor (defending their life). That includes the attacker. Trained security not only limit the harm an attacker may bring to others, they might also limit harm the attacker might do to him or herself. In my opinion, those in the church who are willing to serve as armed security do not do so out of a lust for blood, but out of love for the lives and well-being of all people. Certainly, such servants need to be highly trained, but their presence in a violent age like ours serves the cause of peace. It does not compromise it nor violate it.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Having unarmed greeters as a first line of defense is imperative for the safety of the congregation. Greeters can act as a deterrent for those coming into the church with ill intent. They play a much more important role than the security team, a bright smile, welcoming voice, and a handshake or hug can go a long way in changing a person’s attitude or behavior. Greeters can help avoid the escalation of emotions among angry or disturbed persons and may even avoid the necessity for a security team to act.

In summary, creating a successful security team takes a collaborated effort from church leadership, the congregation, and security team members. While many obstacles must be faced, churches are safer with a security team and adequate training than without. For the safety of the parishioners, and the long-term viability of the church, creation of a safety team, training, and implementation of protocols and policies is imperative.

1. Earls, Aaron. (May 21, 2018). How Common are U.S. Church Shootings? Retrieved from http://Factsandtrends.net/2018/05/21/how-likely-are-u-s-church-shootings. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sanow, Ed. (April 2019). The Complete Security Program: Christian Standard Magazine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yeaton, Steve. (March 23, 2020). Personal Interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)