INTRODUCTION

Although the probability of facing an armed gunman during a Sunday church service is relatively small, it is by no means an impossibility. Churches are, in fact, far more likely to have an unarmed trespasser or troublemaker try to enter their buildings during non-service times when there are far fewer people around. In recent years, however, gun violence in churches has dramatically increased, despite the fact that churches are supposed to be a sanctuary—a safe place. Whether it be a simple plan of action for responding to a disruptive church member or developing a response to an armed gunman, it will be in the church’s best interest to be proactive in this area.

Most ministries will want to start with implementing a security policy that educates the staff and congregation on procedures that will minimize the risk of violence as well as on how to respond in the event of an emergency. It is always more prudent to take steps to prevent violence from occurring than to delay until a situation arises requiring a reaction to violence. The best protection for a church, whether a large “mega-church” in a metropolitan area or a small country church, is to have an established strategy in which church leadership is regularly trained and of which church members are regularly given notice.

It’s important for churches to understand that they are not places of public accommodation, as are places like restaurants and grocery stores. Churches are considered private clubs under the law, and therefore may deny access to anyone for any reason, with or without an explanation. A church may even deny access to disruptive members. Trespass laws control this area of church access. Since the church is private property, anyone may be ejected for trespass after being given a warning to leave. The police may be called for assistance, if necessary.

The National Center for Life and Liberty has developed this guide to help you evaluate your church’s specific needs and to address potential legal and liability issues as you develop your own church security plan and team.
STEP 1: FORM A SECURITY TEAM

A church’s security team should be comprised of members from church leadership, lay members, and those who will actually be responsible for responding to potential violence. Your team should not be large and will vary depending on the size of your church—average teams consist of five (5) to eight (8) members. If you have responsible church members who have experience in law enforcement and/or emergency response, they would make ideal members of the security team.

STEP 2: ANALYZE THE CHURCH’S POTENTIAL RISKS

Know what ministries are active at your church and when. Evaluate whether your church, pastor, or any individual members are considered “high profile.”

STEP 3: DEVELOP A RESPONSE-TO-VIOLENCE PLAN

Begin by developing a basic plan addressing the most common risks, who will respond and in what way. Address issues such as communication, evacuating rooms/buildings, lockdowns and first aid. Remember to practice your plan. As the plan develops, your church will be better equipped to address issues such as whether to provide armed security.

KEEP IN MIND

The questions of how to develop a security plan and how to respond to potential violence must be evaluated keeping the following concepts in mind:

- Evaluate your church’s risk level; no church, regardless of size and/or location, is completely immune from violence and/or armed attack.
- Your state’s laws may prohibit anyone but law enforcement officers from carrying weapons at church or school.
- If a church is providing armed security, make sure all security guards abide by all applicable local and state laws, including, but not limited to training, security guard and/or weapons licensing, background checks, etc.
- Create a plan and practice the plan!
- Make sure you have at least two (2) individuals whose sole responsibility is to dial 911 in the event of an emergency.
- Remember there is a difference between how situations should be handled on a weekday and how they should be handled during a church service.
- Members of your security team should be intimately familiar with the entire church property, including but not limited to all points of access, maps of infrastructure, escape routes, and location of telephones, remembering always to take special precautions for children’s areas.
- Evaluate the cost of installing such items as security cameras, and purchasing handheld communication devices such as walkie-talkies.
- Verify that your church has adequate nighttime and outdoor lighting.
• Ensure that all locks on church buildings are in working order and that areas such as nurseries, church offices and Sunday school rooms remain secure at all times.
• Protect your staff by requiring that at least two (2) staff be present on church grounds.
• Briefly explain security protocol to church members so that if a situation arises, church members know that a plan is already in place.
• Maintain protocol on how to contact family members, the police, surrounding community, and media in the event of an emergency situation (insurance carriers should be contacted and your attorney should be present if a public statement is given).
• Local law enforcement agencies can serve as invaluable resources for your church—churches should coordinate with local law enforcement, including providing them with layouts of your church so that they may better respond.
• Check on possible training sessions provided by local law enforcement.
• If you feel your church is at a greater risk, hire a consultant who develops responses to such situations (check for referrals from local law enforcement, other churches or schools in the area).
• Perform background checks on ALL members of your security team.

ARMED SECURITY

Before considering the option of armed security, make sure your church has an established security team and plan in place, and remember that armed security is just one aspect of your church’s response to potential violence.

With all policies providing for armed security, the following scenarios must be taken into consideration:
• Potential of lawsuit filed against church, church leadership and armed security members
• Potential for open fire in sanctuary
• Potential for loss of life—even innocent life
• Potential for negative effect on church membership

Remember, liability is a two-way street. Churches may not only be held liable for the negligent acts of its armed security, but also for failing to provide security once it is promised to its members.

When preparing to respond to the threat of an armed gunman, church leadership has four (4) options to consider:
1. **Option 1: law enforcement**

Maintain armed security guards comprised of law enforcement personnel who are members of the church.

**Pros:** Law enforcement personnel receive invaluable on-the-job training and experience that cannot be duplicated, enabling them to effectively respond to the dangerous situation created by an armed gunman. Many churches have law enforcement personnel as members, creating a low-cost means of providing security if these members are willing to serve.

**Cons:** Providing your own security is certainly less expensive but carries a greater liability for the church as the church would be responsible for their actions. (However, in many states, off-duty law enforcement officers who respond to violence do so as police officers, thereby reducing the church’s liability. Check with your local law enforcement to determine how an off-duty police officer’s response to church violence would be handled.)

2. **Option 2: concealed carry**

Maintain armed security guards comprised of church members with concealed weapons permits.

**Pros:** Church members acting as security may be better able than non-member security to recognize people who “don’t belong” or who are known disruptive members. The first and most important step in formulating a policy for armed security is to check your state’s laws to determine if handguns or other weapons are permitted in a place of worship. Remember, most states forbid weapons on or near school grounds unless carried by law enforcement officers.

**Cons:** Providing your own security comprised of church members with concealed weapons permits is certainly less expensive but carries with it the greatest liability for the church, as the church would be responsible for the security team’s actions. Church members who have concealed weapons permits do not possess the same training and experience as law enforcement and are not trained on how and when to (and when not to) respond to an armed gunman. Additionally, many states forbid individuals from carrying concealed weapons into places of worship.

3. **Option 3: professional security**

Hire a professional security company that is licensed and insured to provide security on church grounds. The church must verify that the security company meets all state standards and requirements.

**Pros:** Because the church is not in direct control of the hiring and training of individual security guards employed through a professional security company that is licensed and insured, the liability of the church is reduced.
**Cons:** Churches maintain less control over security guards hired through a professional security company. Issues such as dress and outward appearance of security guards on church property should be addressed by church leadership when considering this option. Given the lack in consistency of state regulations and standards regulating private security companies, the church will need to verify that it is receiving acceptable security coverage.

**4. Option 4: unarmed security**

Provide unarmed security on church grounds. Church security team members monitor the grounds and buildings during church services and events but do not carry weapons. Team members are assigned to watch and be alert, trained when to call 911, and authorized to remove from the premises any persons who pose a security threat.

**Pros:** Church still provides a security presence but will not be held liable for circumstances that could arise should the church have provided armed security, such as an innocent victim being shot.

**Cons:** In the unlikely event that an armed gunman enters onto church property, a church would not be able to respond with equal force.