

7 STEPS TO PROTECT YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY



By Simon Osamoh, Kingswood Security

Nine People Lose Their Lives in a Violent Attack at a Weeknight Bible Study. In 2015, at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a 21 year old went on a killing spree hoping to start a race war. This and several other high profile episodes of violence in places of worship have brought about a culture change in church security. Faith-based organizations are waking up to the very real security risks they face. As a seasoned security professional, the first question they ask me is “where do we begin?” The process can be both time consuming and overwhelming for those new to security. I’ve created a simple guide to help safety managers in worship develop a strong foundation for a security program. There are many components to successfully implementing an effective safety program. Kingswood wants you to be prepared for security situations that may arise in your place of worship.

Step 1: Identify your Security Culture

- Canvas the views of your church, vestry, sexton, vergers, lay leadership, pastors, and executive directors to name a few. Obtaining leadership views on safety and security before commencing any change is critical. This will help you identify the support and limitations you have.
- Now that you have the views of church leadership, create a “mission statement” to support and reflect the attitudes of your church on security.

Step 2: Form a Safety Committee

- Running security for a busy ministry can be a full time job. You cannot be successful without interdepartmental input; after all, they will execute the security procedures you later write. Find some likeminded individuals from different ministry departments to help start.
- Define your priorities and people’s roles. It is advantageous if a church leader is on the committee to help influence change or put forward budgetary projections.
- Meet monthly and talk through the mission statement. Discuss security priorities and work as a team to influence change.
- Ask the committee to meet after security incidents at your church as well as security events around the country to debrief and learn.

Step 3: Protect your Perimeter

- We are two steps in and haven't touched on physical security. At this stage we want you to walk, not run. Protection of your perimeter is physical security 101.
- Use what you have in place, educate all staff on the importance of shutting all doors and windows. Use good “hospitality” to talk with those they don’t recognize. This method is simple, highly effective and doesn't cost anything!
- Check doors locks and windows. Do you have the appropriate hardware on doors? What protocols are in place at your preschool to protect God’s vulnerable children?
- Restrict door access. Can you divert all entering foot traffic past a team member or receptionist?

Step 4: Conduct a Risk Assessment (*Define the threats, the probability and potential impact*)

- Some argue a risk assessment should be your first step, but I place it at step 4 because you can achieve steps 1 through 3 without any budget or specific skill.
- Still, a risk assessment is vital to your success in securing your place of worship. You can do it yourself or hire a professional. There are pros and cons either way.
- Advice and templates are available online. Perhaps someone in your congregation has experience in this area.
- A holistic risk assessment conducted by an industry professional is an investment not an expenditure. Remember, failure to act could result in legal liability.
- If a consultant gives you a 140-page document with 60 recommendations, contact your insurer to understand the liability if you are not equipped to execute their plan or immediately respond.

Step 5: Write Policies and Procedures

- Identify critical policies and procedures. Start with protecting the most vulnerable; children, elderly, money movement etc. Think in terms of all hazards; fire, severe weather, lost children, suspicious people and active shooter.
- Equally as important as writing the procedures, is checking they make sense. Can they be performed *under stress*? Ask the question- “Do people taking action have the right skills in emergency procedures response?”
- Make sure staff understand your security response and work to the level of their gifts and abilities.
- Consider professional help in writing your procedures. If written poorly they may expose you to costly litigation.
- Share your Emergency Action Plan (EAP) with city emergency managers and Law Enforcement
- When you see, and hear of security incidents at houses of worship bring together your safety committee. Discuss how you would respond to this event if it happened at your church.

Step 6: Awareness - Train Staff and Volunteers

- Start with those in critical positions such as sextons, verger, pastors, ushers, greeters, volunteers, etc.
- Educate on suspicious behavior. Find some interesting cases on the internet and work out how you could have prevented them in your worship center.
- Educate staff on the risk factors for violence and encourage your community, “If you see something, say something.”
- Plan at least quarterly training and use table top exercises to test.

Step 7: Implement a Safety Team

- Find the right people to start a safety team. Will they be paid staff or volunteers?
- Hold an informational evening, walk through the department roles you require.
- Don't be afraid to interview prospective team members, even if volunteers.
- What training and equipment will they be provided?
- Understand and review the liability in having a safety team.

About the Author, Simon Osamoh is founder and director of Kingswood Security Consulting, a Minneapolis based security risk management firm that focuses on training faith based organizations in situational awareness and emergency preparedness. He is a recognized organized crime and terrorism specialist, having spent 14 years as a Detective in England working serious and organized crime. He is a former Security Manager at Mall of America, Minnesota. Where he oversaw counterterrorism and the highly-recognized behavior detection unit. Simon holds an Individualized B.A focused on British American criminal justice. He is a member of Westwood Community Church in Excelsior Minnesota, where he also serves as security advisor.

simon@kingswoodsc.com