



A Church Executive Web Exclusive

Churches don't have to be easy prey for violence

By Patrick V. Fiel, public safety advisor, ADT Security Services

On Sunday, February 14, three hooded men walked into the New Gethsemane Church of God in Christ church in Richmond, CA during mid-day services and opened fire. Two victims of the shooting were hospitalized and are expected to survive. This is just one of too many recent acts of violence to disrupt places that should be sanctuaries for peace.

A recent report from The Christian Security Network showed this frightening act was like one of many that kept law enforcement departments occupied with thousands of crimes reported at churches this past year. The network reported more than 1,200 crimes in churches during 2009, ranging from homicides to burglary. The total loss in property damage topped \$24 million.

In addition to robberies and burglaries, there were 12 homicides, three sexual assaults, three kidnappings and 98 arsons reported on church grounds last year. These numbers are frightening for a place many people consider to be a safe sanctuary.

Most churches welcome unknown visitors every day and often make their facilities available to various community organizations when not in use for services. Clergy and parishioners generally are not used to working closely with the police and security providers to harden their churches against criminals. But this kind of cooperation can help prevent violence and theft in churches throughout the country.

Criminals view churches as opportune targets and churches with larger congregations are constantly welcoming new faces—making it easier for potential criminals to go unnoticed on church grounds.

It is no longer enough to pray for a safe and secure environment. Church leaders and congregations have to enable all of their resources, including technology, to take control of their facility's security. There are a number of security solutions that can help ensure families, funds and church facilities are secure.

Churches need to start looking at security and the safety of their members the same way a government organization or private corporation does.

Most churches still use key locks to guard sanctuaries, offices, classrooms and other facilities and over time, keys are lost, shared and copied so that there is no way of knowing who controls one. An electronic access system with card keys can limit access and the cards can be easily removed from the system if reported lost or stolen.

A church can also issue cards that allow temporary or restricted access to vendors or groups using the facility. Access control cards can be especially helpful in protecting children on church campuses. Entrance to playgrounds and school areas can easily be restricted by limiting entrance privileges to badged teachers, caregivers and parents only.

Cameras placed to watch parking lots, building perimeters, playgrounds and interior offices – especially any place where money or high-value items are kept – can deter criminals and recorded video can provide valuable information to share with law enforcement when a crime is committed.

Most importantly, church leaders should enlist the help of a security integrator in order to assess the different security challenges their congregation may face. The options to provide added protection vary; some can even be implemented immediately.

Some security measures can be placed discreetly and unobtrusively so as to not interfere with the aesthetics of the church. There are also a number of easy-to-implement solutions, such as lighting, fencing and landscape modifications that can improve security.

Lighting should be a priority for every church facility. Well-lit facilities will discourage criminals looking for an easy target. It is also important to maintain landscaping around the perimeter of the church in order to eliminate potential hiding places and create a clear line of sight into and around the church for law enforcement, emergency personnel and most importantly your members.

Church officials need to take crime very seriously and work closely with their local law enforcement officials and security experts to make sure they are no longer considered ‘soft’ targets. And that can begin by asking for a free security risk analysis.