

Church Safety: Making the Case

A Leadership Guide for Starting the Conversation

Churches prepare for a lot of things.

We prepare the message. We prepare classrooms for children. We prepare volunteers to serve. We maintain facilities, plan services, organize events, and make sure people know where they are supposed to be.

Safety deserves that same intentional attention.

For the church, that preparation should be understood as part of faithfully serving God and caring for the people He has entrusted to us. Safety is not separate from ministry; done rightly, it supports ministry by helping us prepare to care for people when circumstances require it.

That does not mean every church needs the same safety program. It does not mean every church needs a formal security team. And it does not mean every church should have armed personnel.

It does mean leadership should intentionally consider how the church will protect and care for the people entrusted to it.

Why This Discussion Matters

Safety concerns in a church can take many forms. Someone may experience a medical emergency. A child may be released to the wrong person. Severe weather may require quick decisions. A disagreement may begin escalating. An unfamiliar person may enter a restricted area. A domestic situation may follow someone onto church property. A fire may require evacuation. Someone may make a threat.

And, although much less common than many of these situations, a church may face an act of serious violence.

The question is not whether leadership can anticipate everything that could happen. It cannot. The better question is whether the church has given enough thought to reasonably foreseeable situations that its people are not left trying to determine responsibility, authority, communication, and response for the first time under pressure.

What Leadership Is Being Asked to Consider

- What safety responsibilities already exist in our church?
- Which responsibilities have been intentionally assigned, and which are simply assumed?
- What situations are we reasonably prepared to handle?
- Where are our most important gaps?
- Who has responsibility and authority when something happens?
- What should we address next?

What This Guide Is Not Asking Leadership to Decide

This guide does not conclude that your church needs an armed security team.

The decision to intentionally address church safety and the decision to authorize armed personnel are two different decisions.

Does our church have an intentional and appropriate approach to protecting and caring for the people entrusted to us?

That is where the conversation should begin.

Why Church Safety Deserves Leadership Attention

Prayer and Preparation Belong Together

Church safety should begin from the same place as every other area of ministry: our responsibility to faithfully serve God and care for people.

“Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.”

Nehemiah 4:9, NKJV

They prayed.

They also prepared.

Those were not competing responses.

That principle matters when we talk about church safety. Preparation is not an admission that we expect something bad to happen. It is not a replacement for prayer, faith, ministry, or dependence upon God.

It is part of taking seriously the responsibilities already entrusted to us.

Churches routinely prepare for needs before they arise. We maintain fire extinguishers without expecting a fire. We keep first-aid supplies without expecting an injury. Children's ministries establish check-in and release practices without assuming someone will attempt to take a child.

Preparation recognizes that some decisions are better made before the moment when they are needed.

The Leadership Responsibility

Leadership does not have to personally perform every safety function.

But leadership should understand how significant safety responsibilities are being handled.

Consider a few basic questions:

- Who makes decisions during an emergency?
- Do our people understand when and how emergency services should be summoned?
- Who assists with a medical emergency?
- Who addresses disruptive behavior?
- Who determines whether an area should be evacuated or secured?
- Who responds when a children's ministry concern develops?
- Who documents a significant incident afterward?

If the answers depend mostly on who happens to be present, leadership may have something worth examining.

The goal is not to build a complicated security operation.

The goal is to make sure that important responsibilities have received intentional thought before circumstances force the issue.

Church Safety Is Bigger Than Security

Start With the Whole Picture

When church safety is discussed, the conversation can quickly move toward violence, firearms, security officers, or active threats.

Those subjects may need to be considered. They are not the whole picture.

A church safety program may need to prepare for situations such as:

Medical Emergencies

A member, visitor, volunteer, or child becomes seriously ill or injured.

Children's Ministry Concerns

A release dispute, missing child, unauthorized adult, custody concern, or other situation affects a child in the church's care.

Disruptive or Escalating Behavior

A person becomes angry, confrontational, emotionally distressed, or increasingly difficult to manage.

Fire, Severe Weather, or Evacuation

Conditions require people to move, shelter, evacuate, or receive clear instructions.

Access and Facility Concerns

A person enters an area where they should not be, a door that should be secured is left open, or an unsafe condition develops on the property.

Domestic or Personal Conflict

A conflict outside the church follows someone onto church property or affects a ministry activity.

Suspicious Activity or Concerning Behavior

Something occurs that deserves attention even though its meaning or seriousness is not yet clear.

Serious Violence or an Active Threat

Circumstances require immediate protective action to preserve life.

These situations are different. They do not all call for the same response.

That is one reason a safety program should not be built around only the worst thing leadership can imagine happening.

Safety Supports Ministry

The purpose of safety is not to turn the church into a fortress.

People should still be welcomed. Ministry should still happen. Someone who is hurting, confused, angry, or behaving unusually should not automatically be treated as a threat.

At the same time, being ministry-minded does not require ignoring behavior or circumstances that deserve attention.

A mature approach makes room for both.

We can welcome people and maintain appropriate boundaries.

We can extend grace and still respond when behavior becomes unsafe.

We can prepare for emergencies without treating ordinary ministry interactions like emergencies.

That is the kind of balance an intentional church safety program should support.

From Informal to Intentional

“Someone Will Handle It”

Many churches already have people who contribute to safety.

- An usher watches the lobby.
- A nurse attends the church.
- A police officer or firefighter is part of the congregation.
- Several members have security or military experience.
- Someone checks the building before locking up.
- People step in when something goes wrong.

Those can all be valuable.

But capable people being present is not necessarily the same thing as having an intentional safety program.

The difference becomes clearer when we ask a few additional questions.

- Does the nurse know leadership expects her to respond?
- Does anyone else know that?
- If an usher sees something concerning, who should he tell?
- If several people carry firearms, has leadership determined whether they have any authorized security role?
- If a police officer attends the church, is he there as a member of the congregation or has some responsibility actually been established?
- If a child cannot be located, who takes charge?
- If an angry person refuses to leave, who has authority to make the next decision?

If everyone assumes “someone” will handle these situations, several capable people may respond — or everyone may assume someone else is handling it.

Intentional Does Not Have to Mean Complicated

Responsibility - Who is expected to do what?

Authority - Who can make decisions when circumstances require them?

Communication - How does information get to the people who need it?

Preparation - Have the people expected to respond been equipped for the responsibilities they have been given?

Accountability - How does leadership know whether the system is working?

A small church and a large multisite church will not answer these questions in the same way. They should not have to.

The goal is not to copy another church's program. It is to deliberately establish an approach appropriate for the ministry environment, people, resources, and needs of your own church.

What an Intentional Safety Program May Include

Think in Terms of a System

A safety program is more than the people standing at the doors.

Depending on the church, leadership may need to consider several connected areas.

Leadership and Governance

Someone needs responsibility for the program, appropriate authority needs to be understood, and leadership needs a way to provide oversight.

Understanding Needs and Risks

Preparation should be based on the church's actual ministry environment rather than assumptions or whatever another church happens to be doing. Facilities, ministries, attendance patterns, children's activities, special events, known concerns, previous incidents, community conditions, and available resources may all affect what deserves attention.

People

Who should serve in safety-related roles? Character, judgment, temperament, ministry mindset, reliability, competency, and suitability for the assigned responsibility matter.

Everyday Readiness

Churches may need capability in areas such as medical response, children's safety, situational awareness, de-escalation, communications, facility access, evacuation, severe weather, and incident reporting.

Emergency Preparedness

Some circumstances require a rapid response. Leadership should consider how the church will communicate, protect people, contact emergency services, and coordinate when ordinary ministry activity becomes an emergency.

Training

Giving someone a responsibility without preparing them for it leaves an important gap. Training should fit the role. Not everyone needs the same training, and not every ministry worker needs to become part of a security team.

Documentation and Follow-Up

Significant incidents should not simply disappear when the immediate situation ends. Appropriate documentation allows leadership to understand what occurred, determine whether follow-up is needed, identify recurring concerns, and improve future preparation.

Review and Improvement

A safety program should be capable of learning. Changes in ministries, facilities, personnel, attendance, previous incidents, or other circumstances may reveal something that needs to be reconsidered.

The objective is not a perfect program. It is an intentional one that can mature over time.

The Armed Security Question

A Separate Leadership Decision

One of the first questions in some church-safety discussions is:

Should we have armed security?

That may be an important question. It should not be the first question.

Before deciding what role armed personnel may have, leadership should first understand what the church is trying to accomplish through its overall safety program.

An armed person does not resolve questions about medical readiness, children's ministry, severe weather, de-escalation, emergency communication, incident reporting, or many of the other responsibilities a church may need to address.

Armed security, where used, is one part of a much larger safety system.

Intentional Safety Does Not Automatically Mean Armed Security

Churches differ. Their facilities differ. Their ministries differ. Their resources differ. Their risks and circumstances differ. The laws and requirements that apply to them may also differ.

For those reasons, Gibborim Security does not treat the decision to establish an intentional safety program as an automatic decision to authorize armed personnel.

If leadership is considering armed security, that decision deserves its own deliberate review.

As applicable to the particular church and jurisdiction, leadership may need to investigate matters such as:

- applicable law and regulatory requirements;
- insurance requirements or considerations;
- organizational policy;
- authority and accountability;
- personnel suitability;
- training and qualification;
- clearly defined roles and expectations;
- coordination with church leadership and other responders;
- how armed personnel fit within the church's broader safety program.

The specific requirements and considerations that apply should be determined for the church's own circumstances rather than assumed from this general list.

Qualified legal counsel, insurance professionals, law enforcement, trainers, or other professionals may need to be involved depending upon the question and jurisdiction.

One Question Should Not Replace the Other

A church can spend considerable time debating whether people should be armed and still leave basic safety responsibilities unresolved.

The better sequence is:

First: Are we intentionally addressing church safety?

Then: What capabilities does our church actually need?

Then: What people, structure, training, policies, resources, and other measures are appropriate?

The armed-security question can then be considered within that larger picture rather than becoming the picture itself.

Questions Leadership Should Ask

Leadership Discussion Worksheet

This is not a scored risk assessment. Its purpose is to help leadership identify what has already been addressed, what deserves another look, and what may not yet have been considered.

For each area, mark: Already Addressed | Needs Review | Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Responsibility and Authority

Have we clearly identified who has leadership responsibility for church safety?

Is it clear who has authority to make safety-related decisions when leadership is not immediately available?

Do ministry leaders understand where their responsibilities begin and end?

☐ Already Addressed

☐ Needs Review

☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Existing Practices, Policies, and Procedures

Do we know what safety-related policies, procedures, or practices currently exist?

Are written expectations consistent with what actually happens?

☐ Already Addressed

☐ Needs Review

☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Known Concerns

Have we intentionally discussed recurring safety concerns, previous incidents, facility issues, or ministry-specific concerns?

☐ Already Addressed

☐ Needs Review

☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Children's Ministry

Are responsibilities for child check-in, release, missing children, custody concerns, unauthorized access, and significant incidents clearly understood?

☐ Already Addressed

☐ Needs Review

☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Medical Readiness

Do people know how to summon medical assistance, where emergency equipment is located, and who is expected to respond?

☐ Already Addressed

☐ Needs Review

☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Disruptive or Threatening Behavior

Do appropriate ministry workers know who to contact and what authority exists when someone's behavior begins escalating?

☐ Already Addressed

☐ Needs Review

☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Questions Leadership Should Ask - Continued

Emergency Communication and Response

Do we have practical ways to communicate during an emergency?

Do responsible people understand how emergency decisions are made and communicated?

☐ Already Addressed ☐ Needs Review ☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Incident Documentation

Do we have a consistent way to document significant incidents and bring appropriate matters to leadership's attention?

☐ Already Addressed ☐ Needs Review ☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Personnel and Training

Have people with safety-related responsibilities been intentionally selected for those roles and appropriately prepared for them?

☐ Already Addressed ☐ Needs Review ☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Review and Learning

When something happens, do we have a way to determine what went well, what needs attention, and whether anything should change?

☐ Already Addressed ☐ Needs Review ☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

Further Assessment

Are there areas where leadership does not currently have enough information to make a responsible decision?

☐ Already Addressed ☐ Needs Review ☐ Not Yet Addressed / Unknown

From Discussion to Next Step

For any matter identified as Needs Review or Not Yet Addressed / Unknown, determine what should happen next.

Area Identified: _____

Agreed Next Step:

Responsible Person/Role: _____

Area Identified: _____

Agreed Next Step:

Responsible Person/Role:

Additional Matters Requiring Further Evaluation:

Where Do We Go From Here?

You Do Not Have to Build Everything at Once

A leadership discussion about church safety can uncover a long list of things that could be improved.

That does not mean everything needs to be done immediately.

Start by determining what matters most.

Clarify Responsibility

Identify who will take responsibility for moving the safety discussion forward and who has authority to make the necessary decisions.

Understand What Already Exists

Before creating something new, identify current practices, policies, people, resources, and capabilities. Some things may already be working well. Others may exist informally and simply need to be clarified.

Identify the Most Important Gaps

Do not begin by trying to solve every possible problem. Determine which unresolved issues deserve leadership's attention first.

Determine Whether Further Assessment Is Needed

Leadership may discover that it does not yet have enough information to make certain decisions. That is useful information. A more formal assessment may be appropriate when the church needs a clearer understanding of its facilities, ministries, vulnerabilities, existing capabilities, or priorities.

Establish Appropriate Policies and Preparation

Once leadership understands what needs to be addressed, the church can begin establishing the policies, procedures, responsibilities, resources, and training appropriate to those needs.

Prepare the People Who Will Carry the Responsibility

A plan on paper is not enough. People need to understand their roles and be prepared to carry them out. That preparation may include ministry-first safety principles, situational awareness, de-escalation, emergency response, medical readiness, reporting, exercises, or other role-specific training.

Start With the Responsibility

There is no single church-safety model that fits every congregation.

A small rural church should not be expected to duplicate the program of a large urban church. A church with professional law-enforcement personnel in the congregation may have different resources from one without them. Different facilities, ministries, people, and circumstances require different decisions.

The objective is not to build the biggest security program. It is to build an appropriate one.

Prayer and preparation belong together.

Leadership does not need to predict everything that could happen. It does need to intentionally consider the people, responsibilities, and circumstances God has entrusted to its care.

Start the conversation. Ask the questions. Identify what needs attention. Then prepare wisely.

About Gibborim Security

Empowering Safety; Anchored in Faith.

Gibborim Security helps churches develop ministry-first approaches to safety through consulting, training, and practical resources.

Our work includes leadership and program development, situational awareness, de-escalation, active-threat preparedness, operational planning, and documentation resources designed for the church environment.

Additional professional assessment, consultation, policy-development support, or training may be appropriate when leadership determines that needs exist beyond the scope of this guide.

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