

Emergency Leader

THE COMPLEXITY OF CHURCH SECURITY

By Jim Willis

For many, church security is an either/or mindset. It is either a simple, single-function activity or a complicated, bureaucratic nightmare. The reality lies somewhere between these two extremes. Granted, church security is a complex issue, but not too complex. There are three keys to unravelling church security complexity: perspective, planning, and application.

Change the Perspective, Change the Outcome

Security should be viewed as an element of the church's comprehensive emergency response responsibility with a multidimensional role to play. Challenges arise when security is viewed as an isolated, single-function program. When viewed as a separate entity, church security is narrowed to a singular focus on violence prevention and response. While this is, and will remain a core concern, effective church security is more complex.

On the other hand, if viewed as a complicated bureaucracy, church security can become onerous and unwieldy. A bureaucratic viewpoint can create confusion and dampen enthusiasm. And it can manifest itself as an intimidating and unwelcoming atmosphere. However, if you step back and take a different perspective, your church security can flourish.

By taking a step back, you can see how your security team is a critical element of your overall emergency response. When you view security as an integral part of comprehensive emergency response, the "bandwidth" of the security team widens, and you increase your team's ability to respond to both violent and non-violent emergencies.

Look at the Odds

Statistically, for every violent encounter, odds are your church will face many more non-violent emergencies. This is due to factors such as the vulnerable groups within the church including children and elderly congregants, activities such as daycare and missions, and other details that are unique to your church.

One Team, Differing Roles

A change in perspective will help you to develop a diverse and comprehensive emergency response team that has greater effec-

tiveness. Along with the security element, your emergency response team should include people that can respond to medical emergencies; members of specialized ministries, such as nursery, youth, and elderly care, to assist with specific issues; and people knowledgeable of the buildings and grounds to deal with facility-related problems.

For example, in a medical emergency, if you have medically trained church members, they'll be expected to respond. Therefore, they should be incorporated into your emergency response program. However, these same people would not be expected to take an active role on the security team.

The security team, on the other hand, will be expected to assist with medical emergencies, but if they don't understand their role, they could hinder response efforts. For instance, in most cases, the entire team should not rush to the site of the emergency. Some security team members may need to remain at their post to maintain security while others prepare for the arrival of emergency vehicles and victim extraction. A change in perspective will help your security team members understand their role in various emergencies.

It is a fact that every emergency unfolds differently; however, by changing your perspective, you will improve your team's capacity to respond and increase their adaptability and effectiveness.

Planning Is Critical

The level of security complexity within a church is relative to size, location, and a host of other factors. It is never as simple as some believe, nor as complicated as others want to make it. This complexity starts with the environment of the church itself. For a variety of reasons, churches, small and large, are difficult to secure. Things such as location, building layout, and mission focus contribute to this complexity.

One fundamental element of complexity comes from the congregation itself. A large portion of a typical congregation is made up of entire families. And the members of these families can be found scattered throughout the facility. During an emergency, you can count on a frantic rush of parents trying to gather their family together.

The key to simplifying this complexity is planning. Working through different crisis scenarios will help you understand what you are facing and help you prepare to deal with the inevitable

chaos that erupts when the unexpected occurs.

Planning will uncover issues that need to be addressed, such as pinpointing evacuation choke points. Planning can also identify resources that can be brought into play to enhance safety and security, such as cameras, improved door locks, and ballistic materials.

Do not discount the role of tabletop exercises, which will make your planning more effective and improve situational adaptability. Tabletop exercises will bring

to light things that you haven't noticed and help identify and mitigate weaknesses and gaps in your emergency response plans.

Application Is Key

As important as perspective and planning are, the catalyst to unraveling church complexity is in the application.

With your fresh perspective, and planning in place, your next step is to incorporate this new knowledge into your emergency response/security program. This is where outside resources can play a vital

role in the process. Vendors, trainers, and consultants can be useful external resources in the application process.

Product vendors can provide product-specific details and explain capabilities, help you understand the nuances of equipment, and eliminate guesswork when it comes to procuring security-related items such as surveillance cameras, door locking systems, and ballistic materials. Vendors are a good source of item-specific information with one proviso. Remember that vendor's goal is to sell their product. This does not discount their expertise, but be sure to use the information they provide judiciously.

Trainers can enhance your team's effectiveness and introduce new skills. But make sure you choose the right trainer. Some training expertise can be found locally. However, you will also need to look for trainers with specific knowledge and expertise. During your search, keep in mind that there are many self-proclaimed security trainers, and while there are exceptionally good ones available, there are others claiming expertise that do not have the skillsets necessary for effective training.

A security consultant can be a wise investment. Whether you are just starting or have a long-standing program, the services offered by a professional security consultant can be beneficial. They not only provide a different point of view, but they also provide a wealth of knowledge and experience in training, program development, and security enhancement. A security consultant is often best suited to cut through the complexity and reach the core of effective emergency response for your church. However, like trainers, not everyone claiming to be a security expert is in fact an expert. Engaging a consultant is an investment, and good ones seldom work for free. To make a wise investment, look for a consultant with a proven background and experience dealing with the unique issues facing churches.

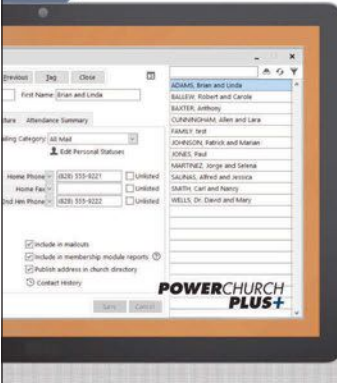
When procuring security equipment, invest in quality. When looking for training and consulting, look for a professional for the best results. Your congregation is your responsibility. They look to you to keep them safe and secure. Providing less than the best can have consequences. **RPN**

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