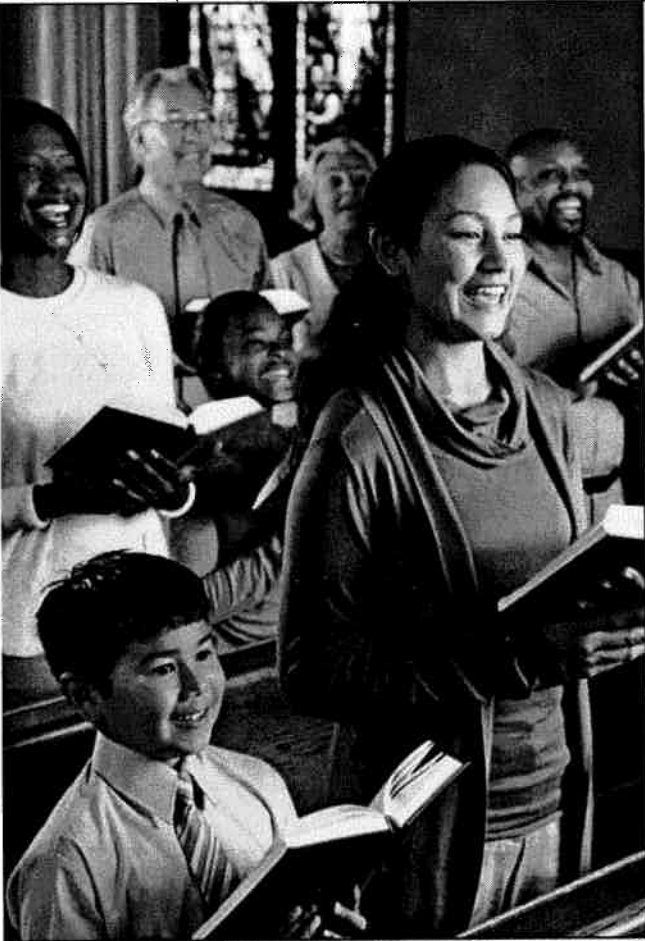


# risk reporter

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## What to do when violence strikes

Many assume that places of worship are a sanctuary for safety — free from tragedies associated with violence and terrorism. The newspaper headlines today tell a different story.

- A church service shooting in Wisconsin claims the lives of seven victims
- A husband shoots and kills his wife in a California church parking lot
- An Oregon man dumps gasoline on parishioners, carpet and pews, lighting them on fire during a worship service

Tragedies such as these seem unthinkable, but they are occurring in schools, businesses and places of worship with increasing frequency. Predicting when and where these events will occur is nearly impossible. However, it is possible to take steps to prevent and prepare for an emergency.

### Develop a plan

“Creating a violence response plan is the single most important step a congregation can take to prevent and prepare for an emergency,” said C.J. Couch, chief of public affairs for the Ohio Emergency Management Agency. “The plan should assess and address the individual needs of a worship center, from the size of the congregation, to the type of building and any special programs they offer, such as day care.”

The first step in creating a plan is forming a security team to identify and assess the risks and potential threats facing a congregation. The team should include staff and volunteers as well as congregation members with special expertise such as medical, military or law enforcement backgrounds.

Together, the team should brainstorm a list of potential events that could happen during service times, weekdays or nights, as well as threats specific to a school or day care on the premises.

“Systematically walk through the list and propose ways to prevent each event,” Couch said. “Begin by addressing prevention areas, followed by developing a plan for response.”

### Improve building security

Oftentimes preventing a tragic incident starts with improving building security.

Simple measures, such as keeping bushes around doors and windows trimmed, limiting access points by locking doors and windows when

(See what to do, page 2)

inside

#### Seasonal Spotlight

*Avoid winter plumbing woes*

#### Managing Your Risks

*Communicating during a crisis*

#### Q | A

*Risk Reporter talks with Mall of America's Director of Public Relations, Dan Jasper*



## ( what to do )

not in use and installing good lighting around buildings and entrances can reduce risk. In addition, monitor who has keys to buildings and change the locks every one to two years. Consider using a custodian to open and close the facilities and be present when your buildings are used by outside organizations.

New technology also is available to help safeguard buildings and people. Electronic card access systems now replace keys. The cards limit access to specific areas of the buildings and monitor who is coming and going at all times.

“Security equipment that can help prevent or reduce a violent incident is important,” Couch said. “Consider closed-circuit television cameras, metal detectors and modifying your building to create locked zones that provide a secure area during a crisis.”

Some congregations are large enough to warrant hiring a security service; however, establishing a relationship with local authorities also is beneficial.

“We coordinate our security efforts and emergency response with local officials,” said Sarah Pierik, director of media relations and a member of the crisis management team for Wheaton College, a Christian college in Wheaton, Ill. “When asked, local authorities will often add your location to their patrol routes and provide expert advice for creating response plans.”

### Include a personal connection

During worship or school hours, continual contact is a simple way to keep out unwanted visitors. Work with ushers or a volunteer security task force to be present at all access points as well as walk the halls and patrol the parking lots before, during and after worship services. Encourage them to make eye contact and acknowledge everyone they see.

Ask ushers to keep cell phones in their pockets or supply them with hand-held or discreet communication devices so they can communicate with one another and emergency services.

### Establish incident protocol

Many congregations have a plan in place to respond to weather or fire emergencies, but little thought is given to incidences of violence.

“When an event occurs, there is obviously going to be a sense of panic and confusion,” Couch said. “If plans are already in place and you have exercised the plan, the likelihood of confusion and chaos will be reduced. Work together with your security team to establish a plan or response protocol for all potential incidents.”

There are several key components of a response protocol:

- *Communication* — In the event of a violent situation, it is important to have a plan in place to notify staff, volunteers and members of important details. Wheaton College recently installed a “reverse 911” system. “The system enables the college to send out an automated message to all faculty and students whose cell phone numbers are entered,” Pierik said. “In addition to the reverse 911 system, we are researching a campus-wide broadcast system, similar to a loud speaker system, that would enable us to broadcast emergency information.” Law enforcement also needs to be notified of the situation. Designate a group of people to make the call, such as ushers during a worship service, or install a “panic button” in classrooms, day care centers and worship facilities to alert officials at the touch of a button.
- *Evacuation* — Establish a plan for evacuating members and staff, including evacuation routes, meeting places and who will care for those with disabilities. Post all evacuation routes.
- *First Aid* — Determine who will provide on-site first aid. Keep first-aid kits easily accessible and stocked in all rooms. Consider offering free first-aid and CPR training to all interested congregation members and staff.
- *Responsibilities* — In the event of an incident, assign a responsibility to each member of the security team. Identify who is responsible for communicating messages, organizing first-aid efforts and handling media inquiries.

### Training and awareness

Share the response plans with congregation members and encourage them to take an active role in promoting a safe worship or education environment.

“In Ohio, we have a campaign called ‘See Something, Say Something,’” Couch said. “If you see something that seems out of place, report it to an authority. We would much rather err on the side of caution and say something, than not say anything and have tragic results.”

Designate time after worship services to review and practice emergency response drills with the security team and congregation members.

Church Mutual offers Catastrophic Violence Response Coverage for all multi-peril policies.

- **For more information** or a coverage brochure, visit [www.churchmutual.com](http://www.churchmutual.com) and enter “catastrophic violence” in the search field. To order Church Mutual’s free booklet *Crime-Proof Your Worship Center*, visit the Web site, select “Safety Resources” and click on “Protection Series Booklets.”
- **For more information** on crisis management, visit [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov).

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