

What Can a Small Institution Do?

After the tragic church shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas recently, many religious institutions are trying to figure out why it happened, whether this type of thing could happen to them, and what they should or should not do in order to prevent an attack like that in their places of worship.



In Texas, early investigations seem to point to a troubled relationship between the shooter and the church and an even more troubled relationship between the shooter and family that attended. We may find out more as time passes.

I think most religious institutions in the United States would be considered small. For the purpose of this article, small will be defined as having a regular attendance of between 50 and 150 individuals.

Medium- and large-size institutions are more likely to have the financial resources, manpower, and physical equipment to create a safety or security team, hire private security, or even have an off-duty local law enforcement officer. But what about the small institution?

When a small house of worship begins to think about what they can do, there are some avenues of thought they need to follow.

The first avenue is finding out what are you able to do to provide medical care for your congregation given its size and financial situation.

Believe it or not, most church safety team members spend more time responding to *non-violent* situations. This could include situations such as someone getting hurt and needing first aid, someone falling ill while in service and possibly needing emergency rescue and treatment, or just a child needing a Band-Aid for a cut or bruise on his finger.

Houses of worship should also consider how they might provide medical assistance. Although it would be costly, the leaders should consider purchasing an AED, or an automated external defibrillator. Many a heart attack victims can be saved by using an AED while 911 is called and medical professionals respond.

Small houses of worship should consider having one person each worship service who has been trained in CPR, first aid, and using an AED. It could be an usher, a greeter, a teacher, or a leader whom you can count on being available. Getting someone certified can cost as little as \$100, and the return for your investment is priceless.

Another thing you can do is poll your institution's membership to see if there are any medical professionals who attend and who would be willing to come out of service to respond to a variety of medical situations. It could be a medical technician, a nurse, a physician assistant, a nurse practitioner, and even a medical doctor. If you find such people, it would be a good practice to have them check in with a contact person each time they attend a service and let someone know where they will be sitting in case they are needed.

The second avenue of thought is finding out how you are going to secure your house of worship.

Small institutions should consider having their local law enforcement agency come by and do a check of their property to assess any vulnerability for crime. Police can check things like adequate lighting, sound door locking systems, secure windows, and possibly talk about installing a simple camera on each external door of your building.

If finances allow, you could also consider contracting with a local alarm agency to monitor any unauthorized entry into your building and call law enforcement when those occur. Some companies are able to link together the alarm and cameras so that you can view both the alarm and the cameras remotely from a smart phone, tablet, or computer.

As part of your efforts to harden the security of your institution you might consider is implementing a Sentry program. A Sentry is posted near the primary entrance to your house of worship. That person would be a lookout for someone intending not to worship, but to create chaos. A Sentry does not have to be in only one location, but having them monitor entrances to your building and traffic that goes in and out of your children's area might deserve priority.

A Sentry is someone who can spot situations that need addressed and/or be the one who calls 911 or summons support from others in the congregation. If the Sentry chooses to respond and solicit help from the congregation, it's important to remember that the Sentry must choose a specific person to call 911. If they don't, people will think that someone else is already doing it. More often than not, a medical person is needed more than anything, and the Sentry can go to any medical professional in the audience and ask them to come out and assist.

A Sentry can be a great idea, but you should decide if that person should be armed. Carrying a firearm is a serious decision that should be made only after really thinking about the potential consequences. If you decide that the Sentry should carry, you need to think carefully about which member of your congregation is capable of handling that immense responsibility. That person will need to be able to respond appropriately to a violent situation and needs to be aware of the consequences of firing a gun. Should you decide that the Sentry be armed, you also need to plan when that person should be allowed to use the firearm. Something to think about would be choosing someone who is currently employed in law enforcement, in the military, or in security. If you have no one who matches those criteria, then consider someone who has had that background (a retired cop, a veteran, etc.) and would be willing to serve.

If you have no one at all, then you still have a couple of other options: hire an off-duty law enforcement officer to be present at your church while worship is going on or use someone at

your church who is willing to undergo some type of training that would prepare them for that role. Various gun ranges can offer training on responding to threats and operating firearms.

Lastly, I believe your institution should consider whether you would allow your congregation to carry concealed weapons into your building and sanctuary. As a last resort, people would at least be able to defend themselves against situations such as Sutherland Springs.

Sutherland Springs is a church of about 50 people. I've been thinking what they could have done to prevent that situation and my first thought was, "they could not have prevented that shooter from firing at the building and at its people."

But what if there had been a Sentry, or what if they had allowed their congregation to carry concealed weapons? The situation still could not have been prevented, but it could have been minimized with less damage and carnage. Maybe more lives could have been saved, and maybe fewer people would have been injured.

Places of worship have become soft targets for crime, and, as much as we want to believe that we are all safe while worshiping, the reality is that those days are over.

The shooting at Sutherland Springs was over in four minutes. Law enforcement arrived after the attack, and by then the shooter had fled.

That brings me to my final point. Whatever a church does and whomever it designates to be a primary responder to violence, the individual needs to remember that whatever you do, it only needs to last as long as it takes to call 911 and have professional law enforcement to arrive. On average, that could take up to seven minutes. In rural areas, the wait could be longer. Once they do arrive, the situation is turned over to them, and your people can turn their efforts towards those who have been hurt or traumatized by the situation.

A small institution can do many things without having a security team. But they need to have a plan and designated individuals with specific responsibilities for different situations.

This website is gearing up to help institutions of all sizes develop plans to help keep their members safe. Continue to visit us each month as new and additional resources are added for your house of worship to use.

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