ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ATTORNEY NETWORK

Protecting the Faithful: Church Security Is a Concern for Orthodox Parishes

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The recent mass shootings at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Grand Blanc Township, Michigan highlight the growing risk of violence targeting faith communities. It is a sad commentary that the Church, as a hospital for sinners and those who seek to repent, are no longer spared from those who opt to act out their anger and pain with violence.

The Family Research Council, which tracks acts of hostility toward churches in the United States, reported a record high of 485 hostile incidents against churches in 2023 and 415 incidents in 2024, compared to 50 incidents in 2018 and 83 incidents in 2019. The 2024 incidents include 28 gun-related incidents, 14 bomb threats, and 55 incidents of arson, with the rest consisting of vandalism and other types of threats.

Liability risk. As the level of violence escalates against houses of worship regardless of faith tradition, size, or location, all churches, including Orthodox parishes, must be prepared for any eventuality and actively consider how to protect their faithful. Failure to adequately prepare can result in tragedy as well as legal liability. Churches have a responsibility to exercise reasonable care for the safety of its members and attendees. Legal duty includes proper identification and mitigation of risks. Family members of victims of church violence can sue the church for failure to provide adequate security given the foreseeability of such violence.

Types of Threats. Acts of violence can be fueled by many motivations. Some appear to be motivated by anger toward a particular faith tradition, while others may be motivated by factors unrelated to faith, such as mental health problems, domestic and other personal disputes, or theft.

Some threats are real, while others are "hoax threats" designed to distract or harass. They may come via email, social media, phone, or other means. All threats should be treated seriously and reported to law enforcement who will evaluate and verify if the threat is real or not.

Acts of violence committed due to bias against religious background (among other traits) constitute a federal hate crime, which results in greater penalties for perpetrators. While minority religions in the U.S. have often been targets of hate crimes, Christian churches are increasingly also targets.

Action Steps. How can churches safeguard members from acts of violence? Below are some suggestions for consideration.

1. **Get educated; create a security team.** Churches should get educated on basic security issues and designate certain leaders or teams of people responsible for security enhancements and policies. The U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Homeland Security, as well as local law enforcement, community organizations, and insurance companies all offer valuable educational resources on security issues for faith communities.

2. **Communicate with parishioners; be aware** - Federal and state authorities tell us, *"If you see something, say something."* What may seem as spontaneous action on the part of perpetrators is often the result of advanced planning. Such planning may include observing church members' actions and patterns of behavior, and other routine activities of its leadership. Parishioners should be taught to identify and respond to suspicious behaviors. Suspicious activities encompass actions by a person that are not typically experienced in a faith community environment, such as strangers taking photographs or asking persistent or specific questions about church leadership, membership, or school programs. Parishioners should be alerted to report suspicious activities to church leadership or security personnel.

3. **Conduct security assessment; install appropriate physical security measures -** Churches should conduct full examinations of their facilities and consider measures such as installing security cameras, proper types of doors and windows, enhanced lighting inside and outside. Often local law police and other community organizations provide free security reviews.

4. **Seek professional consultation.** Many security companies can provide invaluable professional experience, insight, and direction for faith communities to become prepared or to enhance their security posture. Be sure to conduct due diligence prior to hiring outside resources. Seek companies that have proper law enforcement training and experience in helping faith communities.

5. **Obtain proper training; establish protocols** – Often churches seek assistance from within its own ranks people with current or previous law enforcement or military training and experience to provide security. This is a good start, but informal arrangements can be fraught with problems and liability risks. It is important to recruit people with appropriate experience and to develop proper protocols, guidelines, and communication policies based on established best practices.

   However, keep in mind that such policies and procedures can be used as evidence of negligence in legal proceedings. Failure to follow a policy is often used as an aspect of potential liability, so once a policy is established it is important to follow it.

6. **Train staff and volunteers.** Providing training on de-escalation and responding to intruders can minimize violence. Sometimes intruders are not active shooters, but want to cause disruption or harass certain persons in attendance. Often they may be prevented from harming others by calmly escorting them from the premises. Other times disruptive behavior should be immediately reported to 911.

7. **Consider hiring security** - Larger churches may wish to hire armed security personnel, whether uniformed or plain-clothed, to routinely patrol church parking lots, entryways, and corridors during worship services. Uniformed security guards can respond to active shooter incidents and preventively provide visual deterrence to would-be perpetrators.

   Some churches permit parishioners to carry firearms instead of hiring professional security. Different states have different laws on whether firearms can be carried in churches. As such actions can create more risk than they mitigate, firearm policies should be created with great care and with appropriate guidance. Also be sure to check the church's insurance policy regarding permitting carrying of guns in church.

Conclusion. While churches can never eliminate all risk, thoughtful preparation and vigilance (and prayer!) can help prevent tragedies and foster a sense of safety within the congregation. Taking preventive steps can create a secure environment that supports both spiritual and physical well-being.

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