



**NEW YORK CONFERENCE
OF
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS**

**POLICY FOR HANDLING HOSTILE SITUATIONS
AT CHURCH OR CHURCH FUNCTIONS**

As an organization
dedicated to helping
others, we welcome
many people into
our churches.

*Unfortunately, this makes us vulnerable to
conflict or volatile situations.*

The following are guidelines that have been voted and recommended by the Conference Executive Committee. This document will be revised as we continue to learn, grow and receive recommendations from legal counsel and our insurance company.

Church Safety

It's a complicated topic, especially given the very nature of churches:

- + Churches often have fixed schedules, making it easy to “case” situations in a manner that might go unnoticed.
- + Churches generally have multiple entry and exit points, which can help make it attractive to a person with violent intentions.
- + Church members generally frown on overt security, which leads to making the church, potentially, appear more vulnerable.

To successfully defuse the situation and protect your church members and staff, it's essential to have an actionable plan in place before an incident occurs. The steps you and other church leaders take will minimize the risk in your facilities while safeguarding your people if a dangerous situation does erupt.

Recommendation #1: Establish a security plan

A security plan is an outline of the response that will be made in the event of a dangerous person or hostile situation at church or at a church function. The plan will not only outline the response but will also assign certain responsibilities to certain church officers/members to ensure that the plan is executed as set out.

For example:

In an emergency –

Addressing/communicating with hostile person _____

Evacuating/directing members to the Rally Point _____

Contacting authorities _____

Taking headcount at Rally Point _____

Contacting the Conference _____

(The plan should be written and voted by the church board. A copy should be sent to the conference office for our records)

Hostile situations can be categorized into three types: **disruptive person, violent person, active shooter. A template is provided at the end of this document to be reviewed and adopted by the local church congregation.**

I. Handling Disruptive People

Imagine it's just before Sabbath service. A church member's estranged spouse enters your church and begins verbally harassing and acting aggressive toward the other spouse and church staff. What steps do you take to diffuse the situation?

- + Ask the person to come to a less crowded area such as a church office (but do not go alone).
- + Attempt to find out the nature of the problem.
- + Try to resolve the problem.
- + If possible, de-escalate the situation using a non-confrontational, calm manner.
- + If the person will not come peacefully, or acts aggressively toward others or toward church property, call 911. **Consider evacuation of the facility, if the situation warrants it.**

II. Handling Violent People

A church member experiencing mental health issues is behaving erratically during a Bible study group and is asked to leave. The conversation doesn't go well, and as he is removed from the building, he threatens to harm the staff member escorting him out. The following Sabbath, he's spotted driving dangerously fast into the parking lot and gets out of his car wearing a backpack and a long coat that is out of place for the climate. He quickly moves toward the main church building. What do you do?

- + Call 911.
- + If possible, remove people from the area and evacuate to predetermined rally point.
- + Lock doors to the building/other parts of the building such as children and youth areas.
- + If possible, find cover and wait for law enforcement to arrive.
- + Make your personal safety and the safety of those around you the highest priority.

III. Dealing with an Active Shooter

This is, of course, every church leader's worst nightmare. Shots suddenly ring out during a crowded prayer service. How should you and the members of your security team react?

- + RUN. Immediately implement your security plan so you and your ushers can help as many people safely escape as possible to the predetermined rally point. Call 911 as soon as reasonably possible.
- + HIDE. If no escape is available, take cover.
- + FIGHT. If there are no other options, you may have to take out the shooter. If forced to do so, use extreme aggression until the threat is neutralized.

In today's world, church security has become a top priority. But planning ahead — and periodically reviewing your church's security plan — can help you better protect yourself, church leaders, staff, volunteers and church members.

Security Plan for _____ _____ _____

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Rally Point (Where members evacuate to in the event of an emergency)

Re-unification Point (Location where members will be able to be re-united with loved ones)

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Evacuating/directing members to the Rally Point _____

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Taking headcount at Rally Point _____

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****Please refer all media inquiries to the Conference office****

Security Plan for _____

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Recommendation #2: Address weapons in church concern

When discussing church safety, the question on what role weapons should or should not play in that plan will come up. This is an area that is impacted by safety concerns as well as legal concerns. At this time the following two options are available for our churches to consider. Keep in mind that these guidelines apply to behavior on church property by lay members and visitors. The question of church employees and weapons are a different discussion due to the responsibilities, liability and distinction of roles.

Option #1 Never allow guns on church property

A church can adopt this approach for a couple of reasons. From a doctrinal standpoint, there is much support for believing that churches are to love their enemies, show the way of peace and be an example of non-violent resolution to conflicts. Aside from doctrine, there are practical considerations as well. Having weapons brings enormous liability to the church. The potential for accidents, unintentional injury to innocent bystanders, excessive use of force, and confusion when police arrive over who is a threat, are all downsides that can offset any benefits of additional security.

- + Avoids additional liability for accidents, unintentional injury to bystanders, emotional injury for brandishing a weapon, unlawful detention, etc.
- + Eliminates confusion in identifying the active shooter when police arrive.
- + Downside is the potential for loss of life and injury until law enforcement arrives.

Option #2—Hire/contract with trained security professionals

This can include professionally trained and equipped security agencies or off-duty law enforcement officers. Many churches in high risk areas have used this approach for years. The advantage is that churches shift liability away from themselves to the outside agency. These professionally trained security officers and off-duty officers are usually trained in such areas as crisis intervention, de-escalation, and proper non-lethal tactics. Most parishioners, even those with a concealed carry permit, do not have this level of training.

- +Transfers liability by contracting with a security agency or off-duty law enforcement.
- +Churches benefit from having highly trained professionals to handle their security needs.
- +Downside can be these officers may not represent the church's beliefs and values.
- +This option may be cost prohibitive for small congregations.

Creating good relationships with local law enforcement is important to consider when discussing ways in which to protect your church. Consider having a First Responder Recognition Sabbath, inviting Officers on duty to stop by and join your church for potluck. Make them a lunch 'to-go'.

Invite local law enforcement to do a safety review of your facilities. These individuals would likely be the same ones to respond to your church in the event of a dangerous or hostile situation.

***~~Option #3—Form an in-house security team~~**

***This is not an option,** at this time, as it will require more input and discussion with our Executive Committee, legal counsel and input from our insurance provider.

Note: There is one option we have not advocated here—that of voting to allow just anyone with a concealed weapon permit (CCW) to carry a weapon. Pause just a moment and ask yourself, “If there are many people in my congregation carrying weapons and something occurs, am I confident that each of them will make sound, correct decisions, and the end result will be something I can live with?” Making the wrong decision in a crisis can quickly make a bad situation worse.

Allowing or encouraging people to carry weapons into church with no written policy or specialized training creates a huge safety and liability issue and should be avoided.

Regardless of which option is chosen, church leaders should consider posting their policy regarding weapons in and around the church building.