

# KEEPING CHURCH SAFE

5 CHURCH SECURITY BASICS FOR  
PROTECTING YOUR CHURCH HOME



## THE RISE OF VIOLENT CRIME = A CHURCH PROBLEM

1 Thessalonians 5:3 declares that it is when “peace and safety” are being proclaimed that sudden calamity brings destruction.

Once upon a time, the lack of peace and safety church leaders worried about mostly happened somewhere else; occasionally in homes, often on the street, and mostly on the other side of the world. Now, the rise in deadly shootings and other crimes has disproportionately visited churches, driving the leaders of many houses of God to increase their preparedness for the unthinkable. Thankfully, the ranks of those who say “it couldn’t happen here” have begun to shrink.

In the 21st century, peace and safety have evolved from a normal state of affairs to a call to action.

## IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT DEADLY FORCE

While the likelihood of a deadly shooting at a church has increased dramatically in the last ten years, there are many other types of threats to church-goers, and especially children, that are more likely and, often, more preventable, including physical or sexual abuse, kidnapping, and theft of property or private information. Churches cannot afford to ignore this reality.

The creators of Fellowship One have been concerned about the security of children and adults, data and information, financial transactions, and even legal compliance since our origins in 2004, and have led the industry to grow in this area. We’ve worked with a variety of experts about security issues outside our core competency to identify the top 5 strategies to cover the majority of threats.

## Why Church Security is a Difficult Topic for Churches:

- + Leaders want to preserve a peaceful atmosphere, and overt security measures would threaten this goal
- + The gap between faith and action can be infused with fear, and the balancing act between the two is often a source of great personal and corporate tension
- + An undesired and uncomfortable debate on the use of deadly force in the protection of church-goers is likely to occur

Please do not let these challenges keep you from examining the risks, solutions and true stories of churches confronted with crimes of all types. Each church must decide for itself what steps to take, but we want to empower those decisions with vital information.

## BACKGROUND CHECKS

We strongly promote the use of secure background checks, and we've enabled the F1 database to integrate with a background check vendor for simple and seamless security. One of the easiest and most effective ways to secure church safety is with thorough background checks.

Churches are prime targets for crime due to the open nature, easy access and limited security measures of most churches. Criminals find their way past minimal or non-existent screening processes, and are able to infiltrate church ministries with relative ease. This is a problem in the area of children's security and safety, as research and statistics show that the number of registered sexual predators has increased by 50% in ten years, up from nearly 500,000 in 2002 to just under 750,000 in August 2012. (Source: NCMEC, Prevent Abuse Now, Criminal Justice Agency)

How do you stop these criminals from infiltrating your church haven? We interviewed the leaders of two background check firms and a law firm that focus on serving the church markets:

*"There are several free, publicly available, background check options on the Internet. These searches don't look beyond national databases into county criminal records, social security records or maiden name records. And most churches limit searches to one or two ministries, and often use free, online searches, which are not thorough enough."*

– **Chris Wilson, President of Clear Investigative Advantage (CIA)**

*"In our searches over the past seven years we have tabulated that 9% of church volunteers and staff have a flagged profile. 4% have criminal histories that should prevent them from engaging or interacting with children or youth. It takes more stringent searches to find this information."*

– **Steve Durie, CEO of SecureSearch**

*"Child abuse in churches is a huge problem, but getting church leaders to believe that fact is surprisingly hard to do. They need to make full background checks a mandatory part of both the staff hiring process and part of the volunteer application. However, with over 90% of sexual predators not being in any criminal database, this is only the beginning of really protecting children."*

– **Kim Norris, Attorney at Love & Norris and founder of MinistrySafe.com**

Extra steps for children's programs

- + Sexual abuse awareness training
- + Screening training for early identification
- + Tailored policies and procedures for each ministry of the church
- + Effective monitoring and oversight of all ministry programs

If you are not utilizing background checks at this time, please consider investigating this security resource. We are proud to partner with Protect My Ministry for automated background checks directly from your Fellowship One database. We also offer Volunteer Pipeline training that provides a proven structure for maximizing volunteers and minimizing security issues.

**Child abuse in churches** is a huge problem, but getting church leaders to believe that fact is surprisingly hard to do. *We recommend five basic steps for every children's program:*

- + *Sexual abuse awareness training*
- + *Screening training for early identification*
- + *Complete background checks*
- + *Tailored policies and procedures for each ministry of the church*
- + *Effective monitoring and oversight of all ministry programs*

- Kim Norris

Norris & Love Attorneys at Law

## CHECK-IN SYSTEM

Many security concerns can be alleviated with a robust, secure check-in system. Capturing attendance through a computer check-in system drives security by allowing church staff and volunteer leaders to know exactly where a child is located.

Well-designed nametags, policies and processes are the keys to a secure check-in process. Nametags should provide:

- + The child's name
- + Room assignment
- + Breakout group assignment
- + Any allergies, medical notes, or non-custodial parent notifications
- + A unique identifier that matches the parental receipt tag

For maximum security, the system should include a randomly generated code that is printed on the child's tag and the parental receipt tag. In this way, unauthorized pick-up is not allowed.

One of the premiere experts in church and children's security is Jeff Kowell, who heads up the Life Safety ministry at [New Life Church](#) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Their church has a simple policy for ensuring only authorized people pick up a child. *"It's easy for the people who work here because we have a simple rule: if you come to get the kids, you have to have a matching tag,"* reports Kowell.

In the event a tag is lost, the check-in system should have a list of authorized pick-up names for the children. Since the parental tag should only the alphanumeric code, not the child's name, security is ensured by not allowing someone to pick up the children by name alone.

Kowell notes that a secure children's check-in system also helps with difficult estranged-parent situations. "We have intervened on a number of situations where parents had provided us copies of restraining orders and so we were able to keep an eye on things by adding information to our check-in system."

A good check-in system allows administrators to know exactly where every child is at any given time.

On September 6, 2011, a shooting at the IHOP in Carson City, Nevada left 4 dead and 3 wounded. As many churches do in such cases, the Lifepoint Church in nearby Minden, Nevada held special services for the community to address the grief and tragedy. Minden is a small, close-knit community, but during this special service, while a teacher conducted an outdoor class for children, a man approached and grabbed a 10-year old boy, fleeing with him around the building.

Children's Ministry Security Team members were alerted and gave chase. The man was preparing to sexually assault the boy but they were able to wrestle him free. The suspect ran to a car and fled the scene. The security team followed and, using cell phones, was able to apprise the police of the suspect's location. He was apprehended and charged with several crimes.

Later, while interviewing the Children's Pastor, the local news filmed the church's check-in stations, and was impressed with the steps the church takes to keep its children safe and secure. "Fellowship One is a wonderful, effective product that makes security highly visible but still user friendly," says Tammy Thayer, Lifepoint's Communications Director. "Creating a safe and secure culture here is part of what lead to the heroic efforts on the part of our Children's Ministry team. While our team is well-trained on security procedures—which clearly work—Check-In is a big part of that culture. This incident goes to show that a predator will look for every opportunity, but by using Check-In, we've closed the door to most of the opportunities a predator would look for."

## COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Communication plays a major part in all aspects of safety, but it is crucial to your church's security to have a solid communications plan with reliable technology in place.

Cell phones are everywhere, but they are not always the best choice for internal communication. They are only as good as the accuracy of the list of phone numbers and cell tower coverage, and can only facilitate communication between two people at a time. Simple two-way radios, such as those found at Radio Shack, are the most effective way to share information and coordinate people during emergencies. They are affordable even for churches with a limited budget.

### Planning for the unplanned

In this series, we have repeatedly stressed the importance of clearly-defined and understood plans and procedures. Communications may be the most important area for a plan, because all other plans involve communication. Even on a good day, communications are easily complicated by misunderstandings. Add a little panic and mayhem to the mix, and things can fall apart quickly.

Emergency response teams should have a clear command structure, knowing who will be responsible for communicating with teams throughout the facility. In large churches, it is important to have specific "zones" identified so that each team knows the specific evacuation plans or, in certain situations, lock-down protocols to keep people safe.

Prior to any event or service, the security teams, medical teams and lead ushers meet to distribute radios and ensure every person has reported in for their volunteer assignment. Once assembled, the teams do a check of all radios and go over the areas of responsibility for each team member. If the building does not have an emergency communication system for public announcements, providing bullhorns to key security team leaders is also recommended.

### It can happen to anyone

"Security and safety must happen in all churches, not just large mega-churches," warns Chuck Chadwick, president of [Gatekeepers Security Services](#) and founder of the National Organization of Church Security and Safety Management. Churches need to educate their staff, train volunteers and determine how they can be diligent in the protection of their congregants.

Kim Norris of Love & Norris says that statistics reveal that all churches are at risk when it comes to protecting children. "Studies show 1 out of 3 female children and 1 out of 6 male children will be sexually assaulted before 18 years of age. There is no socio-economic, social or spiritual differential for these statistics. In other words, it's not 'from those other churches,'" concludes Norris. The churches that are finally "getting it" are, unfortunately, those who have had been sued.

“ We prayed to our God  
and posted a guard... ”

– Nehemiah 4:9

## EMERGENCY ACTION PLANS

Every church needs to take steps towards making their facilities and people more secure. From simple initiatives like adding “ERT Kits” to implementing comprehensive background checks, churches of every size have the resources to fully protect their people. Providing a safe environment for adults and children is absolutely imperative.

How will your leaders and volunteers respond to an emergency? Many churches have not given enough thought to this important question.

### Designing a plan

Creating emergency action plans, documenting procedures, and training staff and volunteers on what to do—or not do—in a wide variety of circumstances and scenarios can keep people calm and save lives. An emergency action plan should cover these types of incidents:

- + Medical Emergencies
- + Power Outages
- + Evacuation Plans
- + Bomb Threats
- + Fire Drills
- + Lock Down Procedures
- + Security Coordination Training

When New Life Church in Colorado Springs experienced deadly force at their church—a pastor’s worst nightmare—their security team was critical in saving lives. Two girls died in the parking lot, but the gunman’s open fire in the children’s hallway with an assault-type rifle triggered the response team into action, preventing further injury.

### Preparing for the worst

Emergencies require reaction, but a plan, by nature, is proactive. Proactive reactivity beats panic, hands down, every time. After the shooting at New Life, Jeff Kowell, the director of security, took their “security team” to “life safety team” by adding medical teams, trained ushers, verbal de-escalation techniques and prioritized lists of which areas of the facility would be staffed first, according to volunteer availability. In the event of an emergency, an Incident Command Team immediately engages to coordinate communication, with ready access to emergency response kits placed throughout the facility.

This level of planning requires the development of unique policies and procedures, systems and tools for every level of operation (from usher to children’s workers). Organizations such as Gatekeepers Security Services, whose president Chuck Chadwick is founder of the National Organization of Church Security and Safety Management, help churches create programs that scales to their needs.

The [National Organization of Church Security and Safety Management \(NOCSSM\)](#) provides a number of downloadable documents for members to help with establishing a security team and processes.

“ If you knew or should have known that a person had the potential and/or history of harming children, you may be liable. Beyond that man-made legal mandate is the far more important God-given order to look after those little ones with sincerity. ”

– Carl Chinn, curator of the largest database of church-related crime

## TRIAGE TEAMS

Triage is the process of determining the priority of patients' treatments based on the severity of their condition when resources are limited. It also calms the overall situation, as bystanders are less likely to panic or make incorrect decisions.

With simple first-aid training, churches should be able to attend to burns and minor cuts. However, they are not set up to handle full-blown medical emergencies. Small volunteer teams of doctors, nurses and paramedics can quickly identify when it is necessary to call 9-1-1. They will be able to provide critical care until the arrival of paramedics, firemen or police. In the absence of a team of professionals, volunteers can, with training, be able to assess the severity of the emergency more easily.

### Designating triage duties

The triage team should have a leader (and a back-up, in case the leader is absent) who determines if a call to 9-1-1 is warranted. If so, one team member can be assigned to stay with the person experiencing the medical issue and another team member can meet the emergency response team at the entrance to the campus in order to direct them to the injured person. This saves time and cuts down on confusion of emergency workers trying to find the emergency.

Some churches have a dedicated medical room and a "crash cart" to help move injured people if the need arises, but churches can be held liable if something goes wrong, so this level of care should only be implemented if medical professionals are involved. The rule of thumb is that injured persons who cannot walk should not be moved by non-professionals unless there is other imminent danger, such as fire.

The last thing churches want to do is make an emergency situation even worse by their lack of preparedness. By creating clear communications, action plans and awareness of who and how people are entering the church, the risk of harm decreases dramatically.

## PARTNERING TO MAKE CHURCH A SAFER PLACE TO BE

Churches don't have to figure out a successful church security strategy by themselves! There is a network of reputable companies that specializes in products and services like secure background checks, well-designed database and identification technology, courses in intruder awareness and response, and security team training and best practices. Partnerships with these companies can allow churches to maintain their "open-door" policies!



**GET  
STARTED**

Learn more about church security tools.



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“ For You alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety. ”

– Psalm 4:8

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