

Parish security: pray for the best, prepare for the worst

As a ritual people, we have a good deal of experience in preparation. We have entire seasons devoted to preparing for the celebration of Christmas and Easter. We have periods of preparation to form us to enter into the sacraments. Our sacraments of initiation prepare us for the experience of a Christian life. We even have rituals of preparation within other rites. But when it comes to preparing for the possibility of emergencies and disaster, we think of our churches as safe areas, immune to violence, criminal activity, or even the effects of severe weather, and we tend to neglect this opportunity for preparation.

How safe our churches are is usually much different from our assumptions. Criminal acts have impacted every parish where I have ministered. I cannot name a colleague whose experience differs, from inner city to affluent suburb to peaceful urban community. In the four years leading up to 2013 (the most recent year for which data exists), 723 incidents of deadly force were recorded at faith-based organizations in the United States (134 of those were robberies); 477 persons were injured; and 361 were killed. Of all attacks that took place, 15.2 percent were at Catholic institutions. That works out to 11 incidents resulting in death on Catholic property in 2012 alone. (See Carl Chinn, "Deadly Force Statistics," www.carlchinn.com/Church_Security_Concepts.html).

As chilling as these statistics are, they represent only one dimension of the threat posed to churches. "In addition to violent acts, fires, tornados, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and arson also affect houses of worship. With many incidents occurring with little to no warning, many houses of worship are developing and updating plans and procedures to ensure the safety and security of their congregations, staff, and facilities" (*Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship*, 1). I am not certain that "many" is the right way to describe the number of houses of worship that are developing or updating emergency operations plans (EOPs). Most of the time when I ask about a parish safety or disaster plan, I get a rather blank look and a response of "Well, we pray for the best, and we hope someday we'll have the resources to put together a plan." That always leaves me wondering what resources they might have after the church burns to the ground.

In 2008, a rare winter tornado leveled the Prayer House Assembly of God in Kenosha, Wisconsin (no one was in the building). That church had no response or recovery plan. In November 2013, tornado warnings again sounded throughout Racine County during Sunday services. This finally prompted local church leaders to recognize the need to develop a plan to respond to and recover from a disastrous weather event, and they gathered as a community to do just that. Too often, church communities "pray for the best" rather than prepare for the worst — until after the worst actually happens.

The following information will help churches begin to move in the direction of being prepared to respond to critical incidents, which is important not only for the worship community but also for the civic community. Churches are vital assets when they are prepared for and equipped to respond to the needs of a community when disaster strikes. We serve in a way that not only reduces the strain on first responders and other government agencies but also provides emotional and spiritual support to everyone affected. Making an EOP is not difficult, and it can be a very educational and rewarding experience for all.

Start right

Getting organized is the right way to start the process and guarantee success. Start by listing the tasks ahead; these will likely include identifying the reasons you need a plan, confirming support of the pastor and pastoral council, naming a person to lead the process (a Response Readiness Coordinator), establishing a Response Readiness Team, identifying your objectives, and considering training needs.

The reasons you need an EOP include the following:

- Increase risk awareness.
- Improve safety and security.
- Decrease building or technical vulnerability.
- Improve community outreach ability and safety.
- Improve response to weather and other critical events.

Obtaining a commitment from (at a minimum) the pastor and pastoral council affirms the value of the plan and should help to ensure cooperation from the staff and worship community. Developing this plan should be a priority; the purpose of the plan is to protect life, safety, and community property, so sufficient support (including financial) should be provided to honor that goal. (A plan does not have to be expensive.)

Enlisting the assistance of members of the worship community with backgrounds in law enforcement, emergency medical services, firefighting, building security, emergency management, and communications will help minimize costs while greatly maximizing results. Pastoral staff hoping to make an EOP will have to form a committee of such people, with at least one point person to lead the way. This Response Readiness Coordinator can help you build the Response Readiness Team, which in turn can help identify objectives and plan for training.

Evaluate potential impact

Once the decision has been made to move forward with an EOP and the Response Readiness Team has been formed, the next step is to conduct a church impact study. This will give you an idea of how your church might be affected in the event of a disaster.

What is your overall level of preparedness? The Response Readiness Team will want to gather the following information, whether by conducting personal or group interviews or by hiring consulting services specializing in helping worship communities work through this process.

- Identify any procedures already in place to mitigate impact and damage and any existing means to recover functionality. If your church has weathered previous disasters, consolidate the information about lessons learned from those. How does your church minister to parishioners and the community in ordinary day-to-day practice and in times of disaster? Can any outreach ministries, services to seniors, or other programs be used to assist others in the community in time of disaster? Are there parishioners who are particularly vulnerable to crime or disaster?
- Take a good look at your facility. Thoroughly check and inspect all church property, buildings, and physical contents, and identify any hazards related to location and structure. Survey all the various rooms on the grounds for safety and security. (A sample safety checklist is excerpted below; for the full checklist, go to http://emergencyopspecialists.vpweb.com/0_0_0_0_676_875_csupload_64028290.jpg?u=3903607866.)
- Make a log of activities occurring daily or weekly on the church property so that at any given moment you know who is where on the grounds. Update this log regularly.
- If you do not already have one, create a “phone tree” and procedures for contacting staff and other critical personnel in an emergency.

OK	FIX	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Make sure exterior of building is well lit; security lights with automatic mercury switch timers along with motion detection lights are optimal.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hedges or shrubbery should be kept low and well trimmed. Prune low trees. Do not provide a place for criminals to hide.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Install a surveillance system consisting of video cameras and a recording device. A visible system can act as a deterrent.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Install deadbolt locks with 1-inch throw on all outside doors (if local or state building codes permit). Make sure all outside doors are solid-core type with jimmy-proof frames. Hollow-core doors can be readily kicked in. Install locks on all windows.

Analyze threat and determine vulnerability

The Response Readiness Team’s next step is to conduct a risk or threat analysis to identify natural and man-made events with the potential to disrupt church activity. The challenge is to weigh the cost of losing resources and ministries against the cost of taking measures to reduce the threat or risk.

Gather information about critical assets to identify the risks or threats they are exposed to. Think about how your parish would be impacted if any particular ministry, function, asset (people can be assets!), or building were rendered unavailable by theft, arson, severe weather, or other disaster for any period of time. This will help you rank your assets in order of critical importance, and that rank can serve as a guide for budgeting time and resources.

With this in mind, think about the process of restoring these critical ministries and functions. Remember to include power, information systems and other technology, communication systems including voice mail, and other facility functions. Include any outreach or ministry services provide by the parish such as day care, soup kitchens, or senior services. Focus on what you have determined is critical.

Evaluate your overall preparedness:

- Do you have a generator? If not, should you have one?
- Do you routinely back up your parish data, and is there an alternate power source for that if needed?
- Do you have disaster supplies?
- Do you have panic buttons or other ways to summon help quickly in the event of criminal activity?
- Have locks, fences, windows, and fire extinguishers been checked?
- Are all keys accounted for?
- Is all lighting functional?
- Do your families have disaster kits or emergency plans?

These are just a few considerations for your Response Readiness Team, who may wish to seek the assistance of other emergency management professionals to help evaluate the parish as a whole and pinpoint areas of high, medium, and low risk. A sample building vulnerability worksheet is available at <http://emergencyopspecialists.vpweb.com/Products.html>.

Make your plan

With all of this information in hand, it’s time to start planning. The Response Readiness Team should summarize the actions needed to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and resume normal activity after an incident. Break those actions into manageable tasks and areas of responsibility. Include ways to test and update your plan. FEMA’s *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship* is a superb resource for this process:

It is recommended that planning teams responsible for developing and revising a house of worship’s EOP use this document to guide their efforts. The guide is organized in four sections:

- The principles of emergency operations planning
- A process for developing, implementing, and continually refining a house of worship's EOP with community partners
- A discussion of the form and function of a house of worship's EOP
- A closer look that discuss house of worship emergency planning in the event of an active shooter situation

This guide is designed to be scalable for use by small to large-sized houses of worship in order to help navigate the planning process. Used in its entirety, this guide provides information on the fundamentals of planning and their application. At a minimum, houses of worship are encouraged to complete the planning process and develop a basic plan. (2)

In your planning, you will want to include (at a minimum) critical operational functions and courses of action for the following.

Evacuation: Consider how to safely move persons from the worship space or other buildings to a designated shelter-in-place location (see below); how to evacuate children without a parent or guardian; how to evacuate individuals with disabilities and others with access, functional, and medical needs.

Lockdown: Consider how to lock all exterior doors and when it may not be prudent to do so; what to do when a criminal threat evolves inside the worship space; when to use the different variations of a lockdown (described in *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship*; see list of resources at end of article).

Shelter-in-place: This requires persons to remain indoors, sometimes in a particular room or area, sometimes for an extended period of time, until an external threat can be resolved. Plans must include what supplies will be needed to isolate the area and provide for personal needs; how this isolation might impact persons with disabilities and others with various needs such as medication; and the need for and integration of permanent "safe rooms" for use in the event of imminent extreme weather, such as a tornado, when evacuation is not an option.

Security: Consider what methods must be implemented on a routine basis to secure all parish property and persons connected with the parish from criminal threats.

Specific threats and hazards: Every community will have a different list of area-specific threats and hazards. See the sidebar on this page for FEMA's list to use as a starting point.

Recovery: Part of your plan should focus on how your worship community will recover from an emergency. The four primary types of recovery are services recovery, physical recovery, fiscal recovery, and spiritual-psychological-emotional recovery. The team should consider such issues as who has the authority to close and reopen the church and what temporary space may be used until buildings can be reopened. How can the parish work with utility and insurance companies before an emergency to support a quicker recovery? How will you address counseling needs of staff and families, both

short- and long-term? How will you handle memorial services and honor loss while resuming routines and schedules and maintaining hope for the future?

Training and maintaining: The best EOP in the world has little chance for success if it is not shared with everyone, exercised, reviewed, and revised on a regular basis. Everyone must know his or her role in the plan. So the Response Readiness Team can hold a meeting to familiarize everyone with what an EOP is generally and what your parish's plan is specifically. Do walkthroughs to demonstrate evacuation routes and sites. Make handouts with policies, parts of the plan, and procedures. Post key information throughout the building(s). Make age-appropriate versions for children. Bring in law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical service personnel to talk about the plan. If you have given specific roles to people, see to it that training is available not only to

THREAT/HAZARD TYPE	EXAMPLES
<p>Natural Hazards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earthquakes • Tornadoes • Lightning • Severe wind • Hurricanes • Floods • Wildfires • Extreme temperatures • Landslides or mudslides • Tsunamis • Volcanic eruptions • Winter precipitation
<p>Technological Hazards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explosions or accidental releases from industrial plants • Hazardous materials releases from major highways or railroads • Radiological releases from nuclear power stations • Dam failure • Power failure • Water failure
<p>Adversarial and Human-Caused Threats</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arson • Active shooter(s) • Criminal or gang violence • Violence related to domestic disputes • Bomb • Cyber attacks

those people but to anyone who wants it. The better informed people are, the more able they are to respond calmly and competently in an emergency.

Schedule several opportunities to introduce the EOP to your community. Start with a simple tabletop exercise in which you engage people in a discussion that walks them through a scenario guided by your plan. As you are ready, move to drills using the parish grounds to practice different scenarios; then hold functional exercises in which participants respond to realistic simulated events. At some point you may want to hold a full-scale exercise in which collaboration between multiple responding agencies is tested.

No right way

There is no right way to prepare for the worst. The important thing is to take that first step: recognize that there is a need and commit to the planning process. The good news is that there is no downside to this. Forming an EOP improves safety and security, builds teamwork, and increases the ability of the parish to serve the larger community in times of need. Here are just a few of the benefits of preparedness:

- Quick response times mitigate property damage, impact on parishioners, and ministry disruption.
- The process carefully examines and assesses your capacity to help, serve, and minister to the community in emergencies.
- The process allows you to network and participate in the community in tactical ways that will help lessen the impact of future disasters.
- Your demonstrated preparedness increases your level of credibility and influence among local officials.
- Taking time to prepare increases the pastor's, staff's, and parishioners' resilience to disaster.
- Making a plan mobilizes parishioners to serve others in need.
- Preparing for emergencies at the parish can encourage parishioners to prepare for emergencies at home with Family Preparedness Kits or Family Emergency Plans. Sample kits and plans are available at ready.gov (see resources list).
- Planning for emergencies teaches families, including children, what to do and how to do it.

There's nothing to lose and a great deal to gain by creating an EOP. Pray for the best, but always prepare for the worst.

Resources and references

Articles, manuals, and other guides

"Advising Houses of Worship on a Comprehensive and Balanced Security Plan." William S. Carcara, in *The Police Chief* 76, no. 8 (July 2009). http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1845&issue_id=72009. A retired police chief outlines a nine-step process to protect religious

institutions from criminal attack and victimization.

Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship (June 2013). rems.ed.gov/docs/Developing_EOPs_for_Houses_of_Worship_FINAL.pdf. Published by FEMA to provide information on planning for threats and hazards.

Light Our Way: A Guide for Spiritual Care in Times of Disaster for Disaster Response Volunteers, First Responders and Disaster Planners. www.nvoad.org/Light%20Our%20Way%202013.pdf. A booklet designed to inform, encourage, and affirm disaster responders.

Partnerships for the Common Good: A Partnership Guide for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Organizations. www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/faithbasedtoolkit.pdf. A toolkit full of resources and opportunities to partner with Centers for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships across government.

"Security and Risk Management for Churches." Don Knox, in *Religious Product News*. <http://www.religiousproductnews.com/articles/2010-September/Feature-Articles/Security-and-Risk-Management-for-Churches.htm>. A security consultant outlines three types of assessments that must be performed to complete a comprehensive risk analysis.

"Securing Your Church Facilities — A Practical Primer." Brian Patrick, in *Technologies for Worship* (March 2005). <http://www.tfwm.com/SecuringYourChurchFacilities1>. A security technologies expert outlines threat assessment as the first step toward protecting your facilities.

Programs and organizations

Convoy of Hope. <http://www.hopebeginshere.org/go/coh>.

Coordinating relief efforts and delivering life-sustaining aid to victims of disaster.

National Disaster Interfaiths Network. www.n-din.org. Training and tip sheets for U.S. religious leaders.

Open for Business. www.disastersafety.org/open-for-business. Continuity planning program for recovering from business interruptions.

Ready. www.ready.gov/make-a-plan. Everything a family needs to plan for emergencies, including what to include in disaster supply kits.

ReadyChurch Training. www.christianemergencynetwork.org/training-programs/readychurch. Training, supplies, and gear for emergency response.

Ready Faith. www.wheaton.edu/HDI/Resources. Disaster spiritual and emotional care resources from The Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College.

ReadySunday. www.readyalabama.gov/ReadySunday. Initiative encouraging faith-based organizations to educate their congregations on how to respond when disaster strikes.

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