

## **Security Concerns For Churches: The Role Of Greeters and Ushers**

The following material was first published in 2008 and has been updated several times since then. It focuses primarily on responses by Greeters and Ushers to potentially violent or disruptive situations. However, it can be adapted to many other roles and activities. It contains some specific scenarios and potential responses that can be helpful for security briefings and training with any staff members or volunteers.

Greeters and ushers can have a leadership role in safety, security and emergency planning related to many concerns in a place of worship. Their knowledge and experiences about church schedules, members and visitors and concerns or problems they have observed or handled, can make them invaluable contributors to the overall church security program.

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## **The Role of Greeters and Ushers: Establishing A Foundation For Church Security**

If you are like most greeters and ushers (G/Us), you have little or no background in emergency planning, protection or security activities. You may be a senior-aged member or have a disability or illness, or you may be youthful and inexperienced in dealing with people who are upset. You may be friendly in a quiet way or assertively outgoing. You probably thought your role as a greeter or usher would involve smiling, shaking hands, directing guests, passing the offering plate and helping during services. Fortunately, those will continue to be your primary tasks.

However, greeters, ushers, deacons, assistant ministers, teachers and the pastor, all share responsibility for the safety and security of the congregation. You are not expected to do it all yourself or act as a police officer or security guard but you *are* expected to continuously observe people and the environment, assess the situation to see if there is danger, and respond appropriately. ***Your challenge is to fulfill the dual roles of greeter and guardian.***

•**You must be balanced in your approach.** You must balance the need to provide a feeling of welcome and openness with being watchful and appropriately wary. Some G/Us are so unconcerned that they are rarely aware of what is happening around them, while others are so concerned that they are tense and on edge all the time.

•**You must be realistic about your church environment.** When people gather for worship, things are rarely as organized as they might be in some other meetings:

- People arrive early and late and in groups and alone.
- Members and guests may roam around the lobby or wander down halls.
- The lobby may be packed with people of all ages.
- Your church may not have a greeting area, or it may have a large lobby.
- If there is more than one service some people will arrive as others are leaving.
- Your post may be in the sanctuary and focused on seating people, or you may be at the front door or in the lobby, busy with greeting, conversing and handing out materials. In either case, you may not be able to contact every guest.

Your task is to keep these realities in mind as you look for even small ways to plan and prepare for an emergency. You may not have a perfect situation from the viewpoint of safety and security, but you can improve the situation you have.

•**You must be knowledgeable.** You need to know what to look for and what to do if you see something of concern. You do not need extensive training to be reasonably effective. Your life experiences and some review and discussion will provide you with most of the knowledge you need.

**Other ways to gain knowledge about your security role:**

- Read all of the written material you receive and review it regularly.
- Ask about anything you do not understand or with which you disagree.
- Talk to other greeters and ushers, perhaps even those in other churches, to develop plans for a variety of potential emergencies.
- Find other resources and share them—but be sure they fit the guidelines established by your church leadership.

•**You must be willing and able to fulfill your security responsibilities.** Your role is too important to treat it as a joke or something you do not intend to do because it is not comfortable for you. On the other hand, you must not react to people in a hostile, humiliating or excessively fearful way. Being balanced, knowledgeable and proactive is your goal.

**Your security challenge: Be balanced; Be knowledgeable; Be realistic;  
Be willing and able.**

## THE SECURITY ROLE OF GREETERS AND USHERS

**You serve as a representative of the church and the pastor.** You work as part of a church team and must be careful to not go outside guidelines you are given. You should not be more strict or more lenient than the guidelines, or base your actions on your personal likes or dislikes about people or behaviors. Your actions can have an impact on the reputation and welfare of the entire church. When in doubt, get another opinion and assistance, unless the matter is an emergency.

**Your primary security tasks are to observe and assess, then get assistance or take appropriate emergency action.** The best way for you to fulfill your role is to be aware, alert and ready to get assistance. Going beyond that role can make a situation worse, or get you or others killed or hurt in the case of a violent or threatening person.

- You should not carry guns, pepper spray, *tasers* or other devices without permission. If permission is given the devices must be carried and used within the law.

- Get assistance if you have a concern:** Ask one—preferably two—G/Us to assist you if you need to talk to someone whose behavior concerns you or if you are checking on a suspicious situation. Do not confront someone on your own unless you have no other choice. This protects you, may prevent a violent action, and provides a witness about anything that occurs. Stay alert to such situations so you can assist others quickly.

- Some G/Us have a well-meaning desire to counsel or pray with someone who is upset. However, while you are talking to a person who seems threatening, volatile or irrational, have another G/U call 911. There may be no time to get assistance if your attempts to communicate and counsel fail.

**Your security activities should focus on:**

- 1. Observation:** Observe people and the environment continuously and purposefully.
- 2. Assessment:** Make a reasonable evaluation of the potential for harm.
- 3. Action:** Get help, then warn and help others. You may be able to do something to prevent violence or keep it from getting worse, but you should first try to get help and warn and help others.

**The security role of greeters and ushers:**

- 1. You are a representative of the church.**
- 2. Your primary security tasks are to observe and assess people and situations and take appropriate action.**
- 3. Get assistance rather than trying to handle a situation on your own.**

## THE POTENTIALS

Among recent tragic events that have happened in places of worship in the United States have been:

- In December 2007 in Arvada and Colorado Springs, Colorado. Four young people were killed in two locations. If not for the actions of a volunteer security officer, Jeanne Assam, the attacker might have killed hundreds of people.
- On July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger were shot and killed in the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. Mr. McKendry, a board member and usher sacrificed his own life to shield others. Ms. Kraeger was a visitor who came to watch a play. Seven others were injured.
- On March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Senior Pastor Fred Winters of the First Baptist Church in Maryvale, Illinois, was shot in killed at the close of services, in front of his congregation.

Around the world similar and even worse acts of violence have occurred.

- By the time you receive this and read it, there will likely be other tragic events that could be added to a chronology of violence or disruption.

### **Other crimes and acts of violence:**

A scenario of someone on a hate-filled rampage is the one we tend to think of most often when we consider violence or disturbances in a church. However, other violent and criminal situations have occurred that could happen in your church as well.

- In Neosho, Missouri, two members and an assistant pastor were killed at the conclusion of a Sunday morning service, by a man who had argued the night before with the two members he shot, both who were relatives of his.
- In Arkansas, a man involved in a child-custody dispute came to his wife's church and shot her while she was getting out of her car in the parking lot.
- In Chicago a young church musician was unloading musical equipment when he was shot and killed by a gang member who had intended to shoot the first person he saw.
- In Florida a man was brought to church on a Wednesday night by a friend, so he could talk to someone about the fact that he murdered a female neighbor.
- In California a church building was damaged, the pastor's wife was injured, and services were disrupted, by protestors who objected to a scheduled guest speaker.
- In North Carolina a church worker who assisted a homeless man was stabbed to death by him in the church kitchen, after which he took her purse and fled.
- In Laurel, Maryland, a man entered a church during an evening meeting and sexually assaulted three girls, ages 6-12, who were playing in a basement area, then abducted a 4 year old and sexually assaulted her before releasing her. None of the three girls reported what happened to them until the mother realized the 4 year old was missing, almost an hour later.
- In 1963, the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed, killing four young girls. Since then other churches have been bombed or vandalized for a variety of reasons or for no discernible reason.

- In 1998, in Illinois, an Assembly of God church and a Methodist church were bombed, killing one and injuring many others. Two weeks later the prime suspect was killed while making a bomb in his garage.
- Several churches in recent years have had shootings during funerals.

In many of the cases above, a church building was viewed as more vulnerable than other locations. In some cases the church or a member was the specific target. It is clear that violence can happen, even at your church.

- No amount of planning can stop someone from wanting to harm others. Nevertheless, having a plan of prevention and response can make your church a more difficult target and can help reduce the harm if violence occurs. A frequent recommendation for effective planning is to prepare for *when* something happens rather than *if* it happens.

## **CONSIDERING THE RISKS**

Everyone involved in church leadership, including those who are often the frontline of security responses—greeters and ushers—should be involved in considering the risks that are present in a specific church. Do some of these issues fit your church?

- Churches in urban areas have a higher likelihood of random violence—although, no church is immune from the danger.
- Churches in isolated or rural areas may be viewed as easier targets or defenseless.
- Every church has beliefs that may be controversial to some and these can result in threats, vandalism or violence.
- Churches that are near highways and main thoroughfares provide escape routes for criminals.
- Churches with schools may be targets for that reason.
- If a church is thought to provide food, lodging or financial assistance it can attract people who are disturbed, resentful or desperate, as well as criminals. If a request for assistance is turned down, there may be a criminal or violent reaction.
- Churches who have had conflicts with individuals, groups or neighbors may be the subject of revenge or retaliation.
- People who have already committed criminal acts may go to a church to seek help, then become violent over the way they feel they were treated.
- Churches that attract attention, even for very positive reasons, can also attract the attention of those who want to commit a crime or do a violent act. The attention may be from publicity, special events, television ministries, church programs, sports, signs, crowds, music, well-known pastors, guest speakers, or any of dozens of other reasons.

### **Human risk factors:**

- If there is a family conflict, it may continue at church.
- If one member of a family is a new convert, a spouse, child or sibling may resent the role of the church in creating unwanted changes at home.
- Former church members may have grievances and become violent about them, even years later.

- Someone who was once asked to leave may come back to get revenge.
- Someone who feels rejected or criticized by even one church member may react violently toward the entire congregation.
- Divorces, separations and child custody issues may create violent conflicts.
- Someone whose church membership is well known can have a conflict away from church that results in someone following him or her there.
- People who are ill or on medication, or who have mental illnesses, can react violently for no logical reason, or because they think they are doing the right thing, getting revenge or simply making themselves famous.
- Churches may become the focal point of general grievances against society.
- When there is violence in one church, there is the likelihood of copycat violence.

•**What else might place *your* church at risk?** Talking about that with other G/Us and with your church leadership is the first step in prevention, planning and preparing.

•**A total comprehensive security program:** The security program of your church may involve:

- Locks and key systems
- Lighting
- Alarms
- Cameras
- Access methods
- Visitor screening
- Security teams, either professionals or volunteers
- Security audits
- Other systems and programs

Safety and security plans may include:

- Fire safety
- Burglary and theft prevention
- Computer security
- Child care and classroom safety
- Vehicle and parking lot safety
- Protection for other vulnerable or high-risk issues.

The comprehensive security program of your church may be developed with advice from a security firm, security consultant or the police, or through research by informed church members such as you and other G/Us. Your pastor may appoint a committee to provide oversight for the program and your insights would likely be very helpful.

***This document is focused solely on how you can effectively fulfill your security role as a greeter or usher, as part of the church team. You may not have control over other aspects of security, but you can do your part.***

## PLANNING FOR THE RISKS

Generally, decisions about the level of planning and preparation for any church security program are made by the pastor or his designee. The material in this document can be used by them to help train and guide greeters and ushers. Even if you are not in charge, you will probably be able to offer worthwhile input. Whether or not your church has a formal security plan, you can think about what *you* would do and mentally prepare for a variety of potential situations.

If you are ever tempted to think security planning is unnecessary, do this: The next time you are at church, look at the people of all ages who are laughing and talking in the lobby, kneeling in prayer in the sanctuary or enjoying refreshments in the fellowship hall. Ask yourself what you and the other G/Us would do if one of the violent events you have read or talked about were to happen right at that moment. It's a chilling thought!

•**Plan as a G/U team.** Purposely spend some time talking about what would be the best way to handle sample scenarios that all of you develop. Even though your G/U group may change every Sunday, or at least now and then, a core group can benefit from thinking about those questions.

What should the first G/U who becomes aware of a problem, do?  
Who will help the first G/U, and who will warn the pastor and congregation?  
Who will call 911?  
Who will lock the doors to keep an assailant out, and is that possible?  
Who will guide people to safety and how will they do it?

•**Know the locations of your G/U team members.** The ideal situation is for each G/U to have an assigned location and stay in that general area throughout the greeting time. G/Us in the sanctuary should stand or sit in the same general area throughout the service. If G/Us conduct a security walk-through of the building or outside, other G/Us should be informed. This allows everyone to be able to depend upon where a security resource will be most of the time. That level of planning may not be easy to accomplish and may be more than your team decides is necessary, but it is a good goal.

•If the parking area is not visible from inside the lobby, G/Us should work together to determine specific locations with the best view of the parking lot, to allow for occasional checks of the area. As with the lobby and sanctuary posts, this consistent outside post will let G/Us be better aware of the location of others and can increase safety.

•If your church has parking lot attendants or assistants, include them in your security conversations since they may be the first to observe a suspicious vehicle or person. They should call 911 immediately if that is necessary, or let the G/U team know that further observation might be a good idea.

## INCLUDING CHURCH MEMBERS IN THE SECURITY PROGRAM

Church members of all ages can help protect themselves and others if they are given tips about how to report their concerns immediately, and how to respond to situations that might occur. Let members know you depend upon them to help.

•**Children:** Even very small children can be taught to tell adults immediately about people or situations that are strange or scary. They should not play in isolated rooms or areas when trusted adults aren't around, and they should not play in the parking areas or away from the immediate view of teachers or other adults.

•**Adults and young adults:** Adult and teenage church members should be briefed on the overall security plan of the church and the role of greeters, ushers and others. They should also be given guidelines about common safety and security concerns and how to respond effectively. This can include information about fire and medical emergencies, the characteristics of dangerous devices, safety hazards and violent situations.

•**All members:** Everyone should be encouraged to be observant about people and situations in the parking lot, in areas adjacent to the church, in rooms and hallways inside the church, and before, during and after services and activities. They should write down license plate numbers or physical descriptions. If they feel concerned about any aspect of a situation—medical, criminal or other—they should immediately report it to a G/U or call 911 if it is an emergency.

•**Basic guidelines for church member response to a violent or threatening situation:**

1. Get down.
2. Get out if possible.
3. Get to a safe place and stay there if you can't leave immediately.
4. Get help by calling 911 or asking someone else to do it.
5. Guide others by directing children, the elderly, guests or others to get down, get out through the nearest exit, or get to a safe place and stay there.

•**Inform the pastor about potential problems:** Members should inform the pastor immediately if there is a risk issue, such as a potentially violent conflict involving the family, neighborhood or work, or about stalking, threats or child custody conflicts.

•**An alert word, phrase or signal:** Consider establishing an alert code word, phrase or signal for G/Us and members of the congregation to use if they want assistance or for 911 to be called, but cannot ask openly. This security technique can be helpful in a variety of situations if used correctly.

Any word, phrase or signal that will get attention but not alert a potentially violent person, can be effective if everyone knows it and responds without questioning the person using it. It should never be "tested" as a joke. Note: The "phone call" gesture with hand to ear, is too obvious a signal for calling 911, so don't use that!

## **Observation: Continuous and Purposeful**

The same diligence that is necessary to ensure that guests and members are made to feel welcome will also allow you to do a brief security observation of each person. It may be helpful to have one or two G/Us whose primary job is to observe and assist.

**Assigned responsibility:** Each door, group of doors, or general entrance area, should have an assigned G/U. One of the main causes of security failures is when everyone assumes someone else is doing a task. The attitude of, “If it’s going to be, it’s up to me” applies to the security function as well as to everything else.

- If your church does not have G/U post assignments, you will probably notice that you and others have a favorite location. Make sure the location you pick allows you maximum time to observe people who are walking up to the door, and lets you see areas adjacent to the door, if possible. In the sanctuary, you can stand at a slight angle to be able to see both the entrance and the congregation.

- If a door is used infrequently and there is no G/U posted there, it would be far safer to give keys to the few people using it rather than having it unlocked.

- Observe with purpose:** Visually scan and personally greet members and every non-member, if possible. This not only fulfills your greeting role, it allows you the chance to observe people close-up and establish a friendly relationship with them. A friendly greeting and good eye contact can make a difference in how someone reacts, even when angry or upset.

**Hands and body first:** Before you make eye contact, look at the hands, general appearance, items being carried or worn, and the overall actions and demeanor of the person you’re greeting. With practice, you can do this effectively in a few seconds while reaching out to shake hands or give the person a bulletin.

Remember the old adage: No one hits you with his face—so look at the hands and general behavior first. Then, you can make eye contact with a smile and say a friendly greeting. That is when you can observe the person’s facial expression and reaction. In addition, *really* looking at someone and smiling at them, is the best way to show warmth and welcome.

**Limited entry areas after services start:** Consider reducing the number of doors that are open and post a sign about which door should be used after that time. Fire department restrictions may affect which doors can be locked when people are present.

**Security walk-through:** Your church leadership may prefer that G/Us not engage in security patrols, so be certain of your responsibilities. However, if no one else is doing it, you may want to suggest that you and other G/Us could perform a quick walk-through, and still be done in time to be in the service and participate in worship.

**Purposeful observation during a security walk-through:**

- Check unused offices and rooms and lock those that should be locked. If *you* can walk in a room or office, someone who wants to commit a crime can do so as well.
- Unless there is a legitimate reason for people to remain in halls, rooms and offices, or to stand outside, courteously remind them that the service has started. If you have a reason for concern, linger in the area until the person either goes into the service or leaves. Do not leave someone in a place where he or she should not be.
- If there is a child-care area, check to ensure there are no outside doors propped open and that all the children are in the child-care area.
- Look for anything that could be a safety or security hazard or evidence of a crime. Among those things are suspicious packages, boxes left in unusual places, tools in areas where they should not be, items and equipment moved about, or unusual odors.
- If you think a crime has been committed, call the police immediately and notify the person responsible for the area. You may want to notify the person responsible before you call the police, to have them verify that something is wrong. Otherwise, it may be enough to lock the area and notify the person in charge after services.
- Quickly inspect the parking areas and other areas you can easily see around the church building. Your church campus may be too large to make this practical, but if it is possible, it is a good security check before the service starts.

**Maintain your role to maintain your effectiveness:** Your role in all of your security activities should be limited to looking for situations and areas of immediate concern and dealing with emergencies. You will be resented and will lose your effectiveness if you are viewed as being meddlesome, over-bearing or excessive. If you see that tendency developing in other G/Us, gently help them regain their focus or discuss it as a team.

**During services:** Some churches keep one more G/Us in the lobby at all times, while others prefer to have all members in the church service. Even if G/Us are in the lobby, at least two should sit at the back of the sanctuary, in a location where they can observe doors and the congregation most effectively. They can sit with their families or friends, but need to be alert for problems.

The degree to which you should be active during services will depend upon the guidelines you are given and the nature of the situation. The pastoral team is in charge of services and may want to deal with non-emergencies such as talking, emotional outbursts or someone standing or moving about unexpectedly. They may prefer that greeters, ushers or deacons handle those situations for them.

- If someone becomes ill, appears to be having an emergency emotional or physical crisis or is asking for assistance, you may need to respond to the area immediately, or step out and call 911.

- Get direction from your G/U leader about potential security problems related to people leaving the sanctuary during services—especially in unusual circumstances. People often need to leave to use the restroom or for other reasons, but usually they will return in a reasonable amount of time. Failure to do so could be a cause for concern.

### **Assessment: A Reasonable Evaluation of the Potential for Harm**

While you are observing a person or situation, you should be mentally assessing what you see. Is everything normal? Is there something that bothers you? Do they seem to need assistance in some way? Is there a potential for danger? If the danger is obvious you may need to quickly decide the degree of danger.

If you try to visualize someone committing an act of violence at your church you probably envision a man—probably a young-to-middle-aged man who does not attend your church. Statistically you would be correct in making that assumption. However, violent crimes have been committed by men and women of all ages, ethnicities and religions. Anyone—a member, a guest or someone walking by—could do something to harm people, buildings or assets. Remember also that violence can be caused by one person or by two or more people who have plotted to do harm.

The fact that there is no one type that commits violent acts doesn't mean you should think the worst of everyone, or that you can only call for assistance if you have proof of violent intent. However, it should remind you not to base your assessment solely on factors such as clothing, hair, race, age, or the fact that you do or don't know someone.

- Use your reasonable judgment.** Your reasonable judgment will usually be enough to help you decide whether to call the police or what other action you should take. You don't need to be a doctor or psychologist to be able to tell if someone seems to be drunk or drugged, or if he or she is already angry or talking in a depressed way. You don't need to be a police officer to see if someone has a weapon or if they are wearing or carrying something that might conceal a weapon.

The same reasonable judgment you would use to decide if your safety or the safety of your family is at risk is appropriate for your role in church security. Your biggest decision is whether to call the police. Sometimes that is obvious. If it is not, it is better to call than not to call if you have any concerns.

- The presence of the following behaviors and appearance do not make it likely that someone is going to do something harmful.* However, each has been observed in the behavior and appearance of those who have committed crimes and acts of violence and it is reasonable and appropriate to watch for them. Action to take if these indicators are present will be discussed in the next section.

## **1. Look for indicators of unusual emotion.**

- Anger or rage
- Crying
- Unusual laughter or hilarity
- Nervousness, furtiveness or evasiveness
- Fear or panic
- Out of control or “wild-eyed”
- An unusual absence of any emotion

## **2. Look for unusual behavior.**

- Standing or sitting in a vehicle for an extended length of time.
- Taking unidentifiable items out of a vehicle.
- Walking up to the door and looking around as though on the lookout.
- Running up to the door.
- A suspicious appearing person being dropped off but the car stays idling.
- Someone walking in with members who do not seem to know the person.
- Two or more unknown people entering together and going different directions.
- Obviously trying to go unnoticed, being furtive or looking for concealment.
- Confrontational or angrily questioning or arguing with you or someone else.
- Asking for monetary or other assistance, especially if you know it cannot be provided.
- Asking about a church member or about the pastor.
- Talking or muttering, or fidgeting or moving excessively.
- Indicating self-hatred or disgust with self.
- A grin or smile that seems inappropriate for the situation.
- Intoxicated, drugged, flustered or confused.
- Responding with anger to greetings or questions.
- Staring in an exaggerated way; especially, staring while moving toward someone.
- Standing very still when others are moving forward.
- Seeming to stall for time.
- Standing alone or facing the congregation in the sanctuary instead of sitting.
- Doing something that does not fit with the service at the time.
- Going into areas other than the sanctuary when no one else is present.
- Spending an excessive amount of time in the bathroom.
- Attempting to get a G/U or someone else to go away from the main area.
- Note: A frequent action of those who have a concealed weapon, explosives or drugs, is to touch the area, or keep a hand in the pocket or bag where the items are hidden.
- Walking awkwardly, as though having concealed weapons.

### **3. Look for clothing or characteristics that might be linked to problem behavior.**

It is becoming more the norm for people to wear casual clothes to church. Even though some clothing may seem inappropriate or offensive to you, clothing alone is not an indicator of problem behavior.

However, the characteristics of some attire seem to be linked to a potential for disruptive behavior. Observe more closely or talk to the person in a friendly way, to assess the situation.

- Wearing unusually inappropriate clothing for a church environment.
- Wearing military, hunting or camouflage clothing without a reason.
- Wearing menacing-appearing clothing: Pulled-down hats, all dark, long-coats, etc.
- Wearing clothing with wording or a photo to convey a hostile message.
- Being noticeably dirty or unkempt or having a very offensive or unusual odor.
- Carrying or wearing a bag or backpack, especially if it looks stuffed full.
- Wearing a coat or other clothing that looks as though something is being concealed.
- Looking much less heavy than the bulkiness of the clothes would indicate.

### **ACTING ON YOUR ASSESSMENT**

You will not have time to observe and assess much of anything if someone runs into the church lobby, sanctuary or other area with a weapon and begins to fire it at people. That frightening scenario would require immediate action in a panic situation. There are many other times when you can prevent a conflict or violent situation, or reduce the harm, by responding in an effective way.

### **A TOOLKIT OF RESPONSE OPTIONS**

Plans, suggestions, tips and ideas don't have to be followed exactly to be useful. Even a very good plan may not fit every emergency. However, plans, suggestions and tips can give you a toolkit of options for responding to situations.

The following guidelines are not in order and all of them may happen at once, according to the number of G/Us present and the situation. Some portions of these guidelines are written as though you are directly involved with a suspicious, threatening or violent person, but your actions will depend upon your role at the time. Adapt them to your personal situation, the layout of your church and the assistance you might receive. They are a starting point for your own planning.

### **SECURITY CONCERN: A PERSON WHO DOES OR SAYS SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU CONCERNED ABOUT HIS OR HER INTENT FOR BEING AT THE CHURCH.**

Most visitors will walk in the door, be greeted by you according to your church's protocol and continue into the sanctuary or other area. If you are in the sanctuary, you will find that most people walk in and look for a seat or get your assistance and sit down.

Occasionally someone will concern you for some reason. There is no harm in finding out more about the person. Your effort to establish a positive relationship may change the mind of someone who was going to create a problem. Your focused attention may make someone realize he or she could be easily identified. The best result is that your extra observation assures you there is no reason for concern.

**1. Observe and assess further to determine if a threat exists.** As part of your friendly welcome, step slightly to the side with the person and have a brief conversation. (“It’s great to have you visiting with us! I’m Bill Logan. Have you been here before?”) If you are in the sanctuary you might even sit next to the person for a moment as a way to have a more personal conversation.

You might say: “Do you know someone here?” “Is there something special that brought you here today?” “Have you visited a (type of church or denomination) before?” “Is there any way we can make today more meaningful for you?” “If you have questions after the service please ask me.”

**2. Signal to another G/U if you become more concerned during the conversation.** Use an alert code or other subtle method to let another G/U know to come over to stand by or to call the police if that seems necessary.

This is when a well-trained G/U team is helpful. It would not be good for a G/U to rush over and ask what the trouble is or if he should call the police! However, if he were to calmly walk over and allow you to introduce him to the person, he could provide reinforcement if something were to occur or be a witness to what is being said. Or, based on your signal to him, he could call for help.

**3. If you are still concerned, but nothing seems problematic, let a G/U in the sanctuary know about your concerns. If you are a G/U in the sanctuary, alert other G/Us so they can watch when you are busy.** This will not happen often, but it is better to stay aware than to not tell anyone of your concerns for fear of sounding foolish.

**What would you do?** You see a young man walk into the lobby from a side door that is not often used. He seems to purposely avoid making eye contact with anyone and heads for the sanctuary in a hurried manner.

**Some suggested actions:**

- Immediately catch up with the young man and get his attention verbally in a friendly but direct way. Visitors aren’t required to talk to greeters or ushers, but the fact that someone will blatantly avoid being noticed could be reason for concern, if combined with other factors. On the other hand, he may simply be shy or not want to be pressured. Your friendly greeting may help him see that there is no need to worry.
- Or, signal to another G/U to take your place before you leave your area to contact the young man. You might explain what happened and ask that G/U to contact the person.

- Even if a visitor who concerned you is already seated in the sanctuary and service has started, you can make a brief, friendly contact to allow you to do a quick visual and verbal assessment. Offer the visitor a hymnal, bulletin or Bible, or introduce yourself briefly and say you are available if the person has questions afterwards. You could also offer to introduce them to someone appropriate, such as a youth worker, women's leader or others.

**SECURITY CONCERN: A PERSON WHO SEEMS TO BE  
EMOTIONALLY OR MENTALLY DISTURBED, BUT IS NOT  
IMMEDIATELY VIOLENT OR VERBALLY THREATENING.**

- Some people are more emotional than others are. You may encounter people who seem highly emotional because of a spiritual or personal situation. This section specifically refers to someone who is acting unstable or disoriented, seems mentally or emotionally ill, seems irrational or has some other condition that makes him or her potentially harmful.

- A person who is emotionally or mentally disturbed may not consciously want to harm anyone, but may do so anyway. You must be very cautious in your dealings with such a person because their demeanor can change quickly and for no reason.

**1. Observe and assess the physical and mental state of the person and the immediate level of threat.** Is the person drunk or drugged? Is he or she crying or angry? Is there a weapon or something that could be used as a weapon? Is the person saying or doing anything that is unnerving or a cause for concern?

If a G/U is talking to a disturbed acting person, one or two other G/Us should assist or stand near enough to hear and see what is happening. In a normal, non-threatening situation, a female member of the church might be asked to assist with a female guest or member. But, when dealing with a problem person it may be safer to have only the G/Us or a member of the pastoral team involved.

One G/U should be prepared to call for police assistance immediately if necessary. This is another time when a code word or signal is useful.

**2. Separate the person of concern from others.** This safety space could be created by you and/or other G/Us standing between the person and other people, or by moving the person to the side of a lobby or sanctuary. You could also go to an adjacent space or office or take the person outside to talk.

One way to get someone to move to another area is to start walking while looking at the person and conversing with them. More often than not they will walk with you. Non-threatening phrases can be used: "Let's step over here so I can hear you better." "Why don't we move to this room so we can talk without being bothered."

**3. Talk in a normal and calm tone of voice and keep some distance between you and the other person.** Ask non-threatening questions: “What did you say your name is?” “Where did you park your car? Did you find a parking place OK?” “Where do you work?” “Do you live around here?” “Do you know someone in our church?” “I can tell something is bothering you. Can I help?”

Asking questions and having a conversation can help keep the person calm, and will also be helpful if you need to give information to the police later.

Do not try to grab or hold a disturbed or agitated person unless there is no other way to avoid harm. Keep some distance between you and them rather than standing right next to them. If someone gets increasingly upset, step back and away to allow more safety if he or she becomes more agitated or violent. You do not have to keep talking to someone who is threatening you or acting irrational. Step back and keep stepping back, all the way outside if you must, until help arrives.

**4. Call the police or have someone else call immediately, if the person:**

- Appears under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Says or does anything that indicates he or she may harm anyone, including comments that he or she doesn't *want* to harm anyone.
- Does not immediately cooperate with requests to leave or stay out of the sanctuary or other parts of the building, or to stay away from members of the congregation if he or she is disturbing them.
- Appears mentally ill or severely emotionally upset or for some other reason should be questioned by the police, given protective custody or evaluated further. The person may leave your church and harm himself or herself or others, so you cannot consider the situation over when the person leaves.

**5. Do not attempt to detain a person who wants to leave before the police arrive.**

Get a good description and write it down and watch or follow to see where he or she goes. There is an inclination to try to keep someone there until the police arrive, but that can create the violent situation you are trying to avoid.

**What would you do?** You see a young man walk down the street, then stop and stand in front of your church, staring at it for a few minutes before coming in the lobby. He is wearing a winter coat and has nothing in his hands. He looks around in a confused, disoriented way. His conversation is rambling and incoherent and he says he wants to talk to the congregation. You courteously explain that it will not be possible, but he is insistent that he wants to do so. Many people are in the lobby and some seem unnerved at his belligerent tone of voice.

- Did your assessment include some of these thoughts?
  - You do not want this person to feel he is being rejected, but you know he will not be allowed by the pastor to speak to the congregation.
  - Until he is more rational you do not think he can be reasoned with or assisted to his satisfaction.
  - You know your church wishes to help everyone, but this person seems to want and need more than brief counseling or prayer.
  - You realize a person who is disoriented and confused has the potential to be violent if he or she feels upset or threatened.
  - You have looked at the young man's hands and do not see a weapon, but he is wearing a coat in which something could be concealed.
  - You are concerned that he could come back and harm someone if he is treated badly this time, or he could leave and harm himself or others.
  - You notice that people are already unnerved by his demeanor.
  - You think this person would probably be disruptive to the service, but you also worry that he might react in a violent way if you tell him he cannot go into the sanctuary.
  - You worry that people standing around the two of you might be hurt or frightened if there is a verbal or physical altercation.

**Some suggested actions:**

- Your best response, unless there are other circumstances, would be to signal one or preferably two G/Us to your area and signal another G/U to call 911.
- You may wish to get the assistance of a member of the pastoral team, a deacon or some other person, if it seems safe to do. They might ask the person to come back for counseling or prayer or ask him to convey his message to them. You could get the young man's name and phone number and have someone contact him later.
- If the weather is good enough to allow it, consider telling the man you want to talk to him about his request and you would like to step outside to do it. This adds an extra layer of protection for church members. You may want ask the disturbed person to step to an adjacent office area if that is safe and you have assistance.
- In the meantime, a G/U or other person inside should calmly ask people to move from the lobby or entrance area into the sanctuary. There may not appear to be a need for serious concern, but the fewer people who are close to the situation the better, if something occurs.

Some greeters or ushers hesitate to call the police about an otherwise nice person who is mentally disturbed or disabled in some way, if no crime has occurred. However, the police may have information you do not have about the person or his or her previous actions. They may be able to contact relatives or transport the person home or to a

community resource. You need to call the police about anyone who is irrational, disoriented, confused or who seems to be in need of professional care.

**SECURITY CONCERN: SOMEONE OUTSIDE THE BUILDING IS COMMITTING A CRIME,  
OR APPEARS TO BE DANGEROUS OR READY TO DO VIOLENCE.**

The nature of the crime or threat will dictate some of your actions, but in every case 911 should be called and as much detail as possible provided about the situation. You can be on the phone while moving to take other action or directing others to safety.

- Know how to lock the doors quickly and be ready to do so the moment you see trouble developing. Your role generally is to prevent outside danger from coming inside to harm the entire congregation, then to do what you can to respond to the situation that is happening outside, if you can do it safely.

- Whether you should let a criminal or violent person know you have seen them will depend upon many factors: Your ability to protect yourself, the assistance you have, the number of criminals and weapons involved and the nature of the crime.

- Generally, if you see someone committing a crime or apparently intending to commit a crime, stay in a safe place and yell that the police have been called.

If you do not think you can safely yell at the criminal, you may be able to turn on outside lights or shine a flashlight at night to stop the criminal activity.

- Circumstances may compel you to intervene more directly to save a person's life or to prevent some other dire act such as the taking of a child. Otherwise, you should limit your role to calling the police, letting the criminal know he or she has been seen, getting good identification of people and vehicles, and observing from a safe distance.

- It is not worth being killed or injured to prevent a car from being stolen or to chase a purse-snatcher.

- **Outside:** Yell to others in the area of the criminal activity to get down and get to safety by coming into the church building, locking themselves in their cars and leaving if possible, or going to adjacent business or residential areas.

- **Inside:** Lock all the doors to prevent the criminal from coming in the building.

- If there is imminent danger, warn the congregation and pastor.

- If it is safe, stay at your observation post and tell someone else to take the appropriate action about warning or contacting others.

- According to the nature of the criminal activity, you or the pastor might tell everyone to stay where they are and be ready to get down. You and other G/Us might need to move people to areas of safety.

**What would you do?** Services have just begun and you have stepped outside for a last visual check. You see a man who is a member of your church walk angrily up to a car driven by his wife and begin to yell at her. He kicks at the door and picks up a rock and breaks the window.

**Suggested actions:**

- **Call 911.**
- If you are in a safe place, yell and let him know he has been seen and that the police have been called. You can do this even while on the phone to the 911 operator.
- Tell another G/U to let the pastor or other church leader know what is happening.
- Do not approach the man unless you feel you must do so to prevent a violent crime. This is where your judgment of the situation will be vital.
- The fact that he is a church member you know does not lessen the crime or make him less of a threat to you or others.

**What would you do?** Your church is having a local community leader as a speaker. You look out the door and see a group of apparently angry protestors approaching the church, waving signs and chanting. Many people are in the lobby and others are walking in at that time.

- That specific scenario might not be likely at your church, but something similar might occur. The key point is this: How should you react to a situation that involves people or groups that are not thought of as criminal, but that could be threatening or dangerous?

**Suggested actions:**

- **Call 911.**
- Tell those outside who can safely get inside to do so, otherwise tell them to leave immediately, go back to their cars and leave the area.
- Lock the doors, while telling another G/U to alert the pastor and congregation.
- Keep everyone away from the front doors and windows and stay away yourself to avoid agitating the group more, and also to avoid injuries if windows are broken.
- The pastor or speaker will likely decide what to do about confronting the group. Your role is to take immediate action to reduce the level of harm to the congregation until the police arrive, then to provide information about what happened.

## **SECURITY CONCERN: AN ARMED PERSON OR GROUP ENTERS THE CHURCH.**

This is the scenario that brings the most fear to everyone. You may only have a few seconds for your immediate response and you may or may not have other G/Us to assist you.

- A violent situation can involve many scenarios:
  - An assailant targets one or more people in your church, but does not target others.
  - An assailant shoots randomly, with no specific target.
  - The purpose is to kill, to take hostages, to commit other crimes, or a combination.
  - There is one assailant or more than one.
  - The assailant has one loaded weapon.
  - The assailant has many weapons and a large amount of ammunition.
  - The assailant only has firearms.
  - The assailant has other devices, such as explosives or tear gas.
  - Services may not yet have started.
  - Services may be in progress.
  - The church may be in meetings or Sunday School, instead of a regular service.
  - People may be in the sanctuary or in the fellowship hall or classrooms.
  
- By the time you can react, the assailant may have already shot people you know, or may have taken hostages and threatened to kill them. Your own family may be involved. This is when your preparation and self-control can help the most. Even though you may not be able to do much, there may be some things you can do that will save lives or stop the violence. It is in these extreme situations that having thought about such an event ahead of time can help you and others.
  - If you have discussed possible responses with other G/Us, you may be able to take coordinated action without much communication.
  - If you and your family have discussed how to respond in an emergency you may not need to direct them to exits or safe locations.
  - If you know the building in detail, you may not need lights to guide others to safety.
  - If you have spent some time checking the building, you may know the most sturdy protection in the sanctuary or lobby, or the most easily fortified rooms.
  - Even if your plan of action is not the absolute best one, by having a plan you maybe able to do something immediately rather than taking too long to decide.

**The knowledge, plans and preparation that are helpful for responding most effectively to violent events include:**

- Regular briefing of each key person about their roles: Pastor and pastoral team, ministers of programs, greeters and ushers, deacons, teachers, key adults, etc.
- Briefing the church membership about how to respond in emergencies.
- Knowing exits in every area of the building, including windows that can be used for exit in an emergency.
- Knowing areas and items of concealment and/or protection and how they can best be used. (Can pews, desks, chairs or tables be easily turned over, picked up or moved? Is the lectern or podium solid? How many people could hide in what locations?)
- Knowing the most easily secured inner areas of the church and how to lock the doors or barricade them quickly.
- Knowing the layout of the building, including overhead and crawl spaces.
- Being able to quickly direct guests who are unfamiliar with the building.
- Having methods for communicating with 911, other G/Us, the pastoral team, teachers, or people in other areas of the building or church campus.
- Knowing the location of fire extinguishers, phones, water valves, electrical and mechanical equipment, ladders, tools and other items and equipment.
- Having each G/U pre-assigned a primary responsibility for this and other emergencies. (Some may be assigned to help Sunday School classes get to safety while others are responsible for helping the handicapped or the elderly.)
- Having each G/U know some basic First Aid techniques.
- Reviewing emergency information regularly and at least walking through possible events, with a focus on observation, assessment, and suggested actions to help members and guests.

**If a shooting incident is threatened or occurs:**

- The minister or worship team should provide direction to the entire congregation if possible, by yelling “Get down and get out!”, or some other quick guidance. If it’s not possible for them to do so, you and other G/Us should direct those around you.
- Get in the most protected area you can and call 911, unless you know others have called. (Having several hundred calls made in a few minutes is not helpful, and your time could be better spent if the call has already been made.) If you have information about the assailant or the location of victims that other callers to 911 may not have had, you should call.
- You can’t help if you are injured, so you should attempt to stay down, be undetected and assess your options.
- The presence of children always creates an added risk and responsibility. If possible, have adults shield them and get them to exits or get them under pews.
- Even though you may have a responsibility as a greeter or usher, if you are with your family you will likely be most concerned about them. Discuss this with your family

members ahead of time and talk about how each of you might respond to protect your family or those around you in church.

- Sometimes staying down and staying put is the best solution. However, in some situations people had options to escape but were fearful to leave. The decision to try to leave or to stay in a concealed location will likely have to be made quickly, based on where the exits are located, the level of concealment available, and the actions of the assailant.

- Direct those around you to get down and get out if they can do so, or get to a safe place if they must stay inside. If you can go with them, do it and lock and barricade the door to the room, trying to ensure that as many people as possible are using the safe place. You may not be able to help everyone, only the group you are guiding, but you will have to do your best in the situation.

- Unless you know for sure it is safe to do it, do not call others in the building to check on them. Answering a phone is not the best use of their time! And, if they are concealed the ringing may give away their location. It may be possible to contact people if you know their phones are set on silent or vibrate.

- If you are directly confronted by someone with a weapon who is demanding you to do something, your response will depend upon the imminent threat. If the person threatens to shoot, but has not shot anyone so far, you may think it best to comply with the person's demands long enough to allow you to take other action. Or, you may feel the circumstances indicate you should not comply.

- If you are with several other people you may be able to work together to overpower an assailant. You will have to decide the risks and the likely outcome quickly. This kind of decision is not one that can be planned ahead. However, talking about your options *prior* to a violent event, and considering how you think you could respond, may allow you and others to act with much less obvious communication at the time.

- Remember that help may arrive quickly but not enter the building quickly. It may be many hours before you can move from a safe location.

If that happens, the reality is that children will cry, people will need to relieve themselves, some may be injured, some may become ill, sorrow may engulf the group, fear will be overpowering for many. Your leadership role will be best fulfilled by keeping everyone as quiet and calm as possible until you feel completely confident that the threat is over.

**What would you do?** In the middle of congregational singing a wild-eyed man kicks open a door to the sanctuary and opens fire with a long barreled weapon. Several people fall and the noise of the weapon, combined with screaming and yelling, seems deafening. You are standing with your family.

There is no way for you to know exactly what you would do in the tragic and frightening situation described above. However, having security information and plans in mind can help you be a better observer and be able to assess effectively and take action. The material in this document can help you with that planning and preparation.

Use this checklist to decide if you have the information you need to effectively fulfill your dual role as a greeter and guardian.

### Greeter/Usher Security Checklist

|  | Y/N |
|--|-----|
| 1. Do I know the policies of my pastor or other leaders about my security role?  |     |
| 2. Do I have a G/U post assignment?  |     |
| 3. Do I know where other G/Us are supposed to be?  |     |
| 4. Have I talked with other G/Us to develop plans about emergency responses?   |     |
| 5. Am I comfortable being assertive with a suspicious person or situation?   |     |
| 6. Do I know the best route to every exit in my church building?   |     |
| 7. Do I know how to covertly signal another G/U to call 911 or to assist me?   |     |
| 8. Do members of my church know my role if an emergency occurs?  |     |
| 9. Have I walked the route from my G/U post to every exit in my church building?   |     |
| 10. Have I ever practiced getting to another area while staying low?   |     |
| 11. Do I have a plan for how I can separate a suspicious person from other people in the lobby or sanctuary?   |     |
| 12. Do I know what items or areas in every part of the building would provide the best protection, barricade or concealment?   |     |
| 13. Do I know where mechanical and utility areas and items are located and how to access them? (Electrical boxes, water supply, alarms, gas, fire extinguishers, ladders, tools, potential weapons, office keys, etc.) |     |
| 14. Do I know where crawl spaces, overhead storage and closets are located and if they would be useable for concealment?   |     |
| 15. Could I lock every front door quickly?   |     |
| 16. Do I know which interior doors have locks?   |     |
| 17. Do I know the best location outside for viewing each parking area?   |     |
| 18. Do I know where there is a flashlight in several areas of the building?  |     |
| 19. Have I ever checked to see if I could move a pew, desk, table or other item if it was necessary to do so in an emergency?  |     |
| 20. Do I have a plan for how I might respond to an emergency in a variety of church areas? (Lobby, during the service, classroom, fellowship hall, parking lot?)   |     |

**Are you prepared for your dual role of greeter and guardian?** You can be better prepared by knowing your role, your resources and your options for responses.

Best wishes to you and thank you for your service in helping others!

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## **About the Author**

Tina Lewis Rowe had a thirty-four year law enforcement career, first with the Denver Police Department where she served in every division and was a captain in charge of the Academy and Internal Affairs before retiring after serving as the captain of Patrol District Two, northeast Denver. She served for eight years as the Presidential-appointed United States Marshal for Colorado.

One of her challenges as the United States Marshal was to develop and provide oversight for security in the trials for Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who committed the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, OK, April 19, 1995. The explosion took the lives of 168 people--including 19 children--and injured over 500 others.

Tina has been an inspirational and informative presenter and trainer for forty years and has spoken to thousands of audiences. She started her own training company in 2002 and now is involved full-time in presenting, training, writing and assessing the effectiveness of people, programs and processes. Her focus is on professional and organizational development in government, criminal justice agencies, businesses and organizations.

She is one of the Workplace Doctors on the *Ask The Workplace Doctors* website, developed by William Gordon, Ph.D. ([www.workplacedoctors.com](http://www.workplacedoctors.com)), a site that answers workplace communication questions from around the world.

Tina is the author of a book on preparing for assessment centers, *A Preparation Guide for the Assessment Center Method* (Charles C. Thomas, publisher), as well as hundreds of workbooks, guides and templates related to effective supervision, communications, security assessments and planning, and professional development.

Her online training journal is at [www.tinalewisrowe.com](http://www.tinalewisrowe.com).