NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Growing up in church in the early 1960s was a lot different than today. Churches across the nation left their front doors open so a wanderer could come in to seek refuge from his troubles in the House of God. Today, only a few churches in America leave their doors open. Crime is a cruel reality even for the church. The church is no longer considered a safe haven that criminals respect and fear. Local congregations must address this growing issue.

While the church should not become a fortress, it needs to undertake some of the following precautionary steps to make sure the worshippers are protected and safe.

1. **Plan for the unexpected by developing procedures for different security breaches.** The church needs to charge an individual or a committee with the responsibility of planning for security gaps at church. Hopefully, the person will be or the committee will include someone with a law enforcement background. This security ministry would be responsible for planning for unexpected security infringements.

2. **Ask local law enforcement officers to discuss church security with church leaders and the church staff.** Most police and sheriff departments would welcome the opportunity to help church leaders determine security issues. Action plans can be developed with local enforcement officials that will help reduce confusion in a security response.

3. **Hire off-duty police officers and encourage church members who are in law enforcement to wear their uniforms.** The presence of a law enforcement officer on the church property is a known deterrent to individuals seeking to do harm to others. Not only can he or she help with traffic control, that person also will reduce the possibility of crime on the church’s property.

4. **Trim the hedges around windows and doors and make sure the church’s security lights are working properly.** A well-lit church parking lot provides a sense of relief to church members and others. Ask the church’s senior adults to assist in evaluating the church’s lighting needs. Do not give criminals an opportunity to hide in unlit areas or hidden corners.

5. **Train ushers how to react in an emergency.** Not only should ushers be trained to greet members and guests, they should also be trained as first responders in a crisis. Ushers should be trained in CPR and other life-saving tools. During the worship service, the ushers should be seated strategically around the worship center to be available in an emergency.
6. Establish a parking lot greeters’ ministry. Visibility is a key component in reducing the possibility of harm occurring at the church. The parking lot greeters should be equipped with walkie-talkies to help communication flow smoothly in an unexpected episode.

7. Make sure all events are well supervised by adults. The church should always practice the “two adult” rule that stipulates youth and children are not left alone with one adult. In the case of an emergency, one adult can secure help while the other adult assists in the emergency.

8. Develop an action plan for necessary steps to take should someone become disruptive during a worship service. The church staff and security ministry need to discuss what they will do if someone causes a disruption during a worship service. Who is responsible for the safety of the congregation and the church staff? Who is going to assess the level of the threat? Who will be in charge of the security breach? All of these are important questions that must be addressed.

9. Announce to the congregation the worship service will never have a drama that includes violence. Explain to the fellowship that guns, knives and other tools of violence never will be used as part of a worship experience. Furthermore, explain that a church drama will never surprise the congregation with introductions of shock and awe. Security at the church must be addressed with a practical and commonsense approach that helps ensure the seekers of God’s abundant life that God’s House is the true harbor of refuge and strength. It is the church’s responsibility to provide this safe environment in which to worship God.

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See also: Church Safety and Security: A Practical Guide by Robert M. Cirtin.