



# Security Considerations for Houses of Worship

## **Keeping Religious Leaders and Worshippers Safe**

Religious leaders and their congregations should have a security mindset. The practices listed below should be considered when addressing security efforts.

## **Use Local Law Enforcement to Deal with Security Incidents**

Religious leaders and worshippers should rely on local law enforcement to deal with security incidents and emergencies at religious facilities and at religious entity-sponsored events. In an emergency, call 911 immediately.

## **Considerations for Religious Leaders**

- Build relationships with local law enforcement and use them as your first resource to deal with emergencies and security incidents. They are also a great resource for training and assessments.
- Avoid being alone in the building. Keep the building locked when you are.
- Lock vehicles in the parking lot. Keep all personal items out of sight, including bags and electronic devices such as cell phones, laptop computers, and garage door openers.
- Report suspicious persons in or around the buildings to local law enforcement.
  - Do not approach suspicious persons alone.
- All leaders should know the location of fire pulls and building exits, how to lock interior doors, and the building's emergency procedures.
- Communicate with one another when suspicious items, persons, or behaviors are observed.
- Assign greeters to welcome and engage guests at the door.
- If a person's behavior becomes disorderly or unacceptable, calmly invite him or her to stop the behavior or leave the property. If he or she refuses to comply, notify local law enforcement. Do not engage in physical action against disorderly persons.
- Do not touch unattended items that seem suspicious by their composition or placement. If the owner cannot be located and there is no reasonable explanation for what the item is or why it was left there, notify local law enforcement.
- Prepare an emergency action plan for an active shooter or armed assailant attack. Religious leaders should consider creating an active shooter preparedness plan that can fit into their organization's overarching plan which may already include a plan for fire evacuation, severe weather, and bomb threats.
  - For additional information or training contact your local law enforcement and visit <https://www.dhs.gov/cisa/active-shooter-preparedness>.
- Following a serious security incident, religious leaders should refer affected

individuals to a competent counselor for professional counseling. Religious leaders may inform the worshippers of the security precautions taken pursuant to these guidelines and counsel about additional precautions that may be needed.

### **Additional Guidance for Religious leaders**

- Conduct one-on-one meetings with caution. If a leader feels the person being met poses a potential threat, consider cancelling the meeting or invite another adult into the meeting if appropriate.
- Lock religious leader's offices when not occupied.
- Make sure all computers are logged off or locked when not being used. Do not store passwords in places where others can easily find them (*ie. under the keyboard, etc.*).
- Develop an Emergency Response Plan. For help, please contact your local law enforcement. Ensure that the congregation understands the plan and knows how to respond.
- Ensure proper access measures are in place and followed. Report lost or stolen keys to religious leaders immediately. A nightly check to ensure the religious building is locked should take place.
- If there is repeated criminal activity at the building or in the area, consider leaving lobby lights on as a deterrent.
- Any threat to persons or property should be taken seriously and reported to local law enforcement. In some instances, law enforcement can pursue legal means to keep individuals off religious facility property.
- Weapons at Religious Facilities-Religious leaders should consult with local law enforcement and adopt policies and practices that are suitable and adhere to all local and state laws.
- Additional resources can be found at:
  - <https://www.fema.gov/faith-resources>
  - <https://idvoad.communityos.org/cms/system/files/Federal-Government-Resources-for-Protecting-Houses-of-Worship.pdf>

### **Responding to a Disruptive Person in a Meeting**

If a person becomes disruptive during a religious meeting:

- Be respectful, speak calmly and with self-control, and respect his or her personal space. Do not touch the person.
- Remember that your response to the situation is likely to be recorded.
- Whether the person causing the disturbance remains seated in the congregation, approaches the leader, or stands in front of the worshippers, approach the person and ask him or her to stop, leave, or invite the person to meet with a religious away from congregations.
- Tell the person that his or her behavior or comments are inappropriate for this setting.
- If the person has been asked to leave religious property, but refuses, consider informing

him or her that law enforcement may be notified, and he or she may be arrested for trespassing.

- If the person refuses to leave and continues to cause a disturbance, consider dismissing the meeting.
- Physically restraining or removing someone from your building without law enforcement assistance can be dangerous. Absent of an active violent situation, consider alternative solutions to deescalate the situation.
- Adapt these guidelines as needed for auxiliary meetings, classes, or other religious events or activities.
- If a serious or dangerous disruption occurs on religious property or at a religion-sponsored event, call local law enforcement.

### **Homelessness/Panhandling/Transients**

- Community Approach: Coordinate a response and report issues to local law enforcement, neighboring faith groups and community organizations.
- Environmental: Increase lighting/hours of lighting; decrease areas of concealment/landscaping.
- Technology: Cameras, motion lights, access control, alarm monitoring.
- Utility Access: Ensure access to power and water are restricted or removed.
- Clean-up: Be proactive in removing items left on your property. Dispose of them in a dumpster that is not on or near the site.
- Community Resources: Provide a list of resources for those seeking assistance in your community.
- Building Security: Ensure that windows and doors are secured each evening.
- Key Control: Continually verify that keys are accounted for and secured.
- Neighbor Support: Contact neighbors close to the property and ask them if they would help reduce the problem by calling church leaders or the police if they observe violators on the property
- Trespassing: As representatives of the property you can verbally trespass any individual that does not comply with your directions. If they refuse to leave, contact local law enforcement.

### **Vandalism**

- Community Approach: Report issues to local law enforcement, neighboring faith groups and community organizations.
- Remove or Fix: Remove or fix the vandalism as soon as possible
- Be a Witness: If you witness something occurring, be a good witness and call the police. Don't put yourself in a life-threatening situation to protect property.

- **Preserve Evidence:** Ensure that any evidence is preserved until the police investigation has occurred. Unless otherwise instructed by law enforcement, do not clean anything up until law enforcement takes crime scene photos.
- **Environmental:** Increase lighting/decrease areas of concealment/landscaping
- **Technology:** Cameras, motion lights, access control, alarm monitoring
- **Neighbor Support:** Contact neighbors close to the property and ask them if they would help reduce the problem by calling church leaders or the police if they observe violators on the property.
- **Trespassing:** As representatives of the property you can verbally trespass any individual that does not comply with your directions. If they refuse to leave, contact the police.

## **Theft**

- **Community Approach:** Report issues to local law enforcement, neighboring faith groups and community organizations.
- **Preserve Evidence:** Ensure that any evidence is preserved until the police investigation has occurred. Unless otherwise instructed by law enforcement, do not clean anything up until law enforcement takes crime scene photos.
- **Lock Desk & Filing Cabinets:** Ensure filing cabinets and desks that have locks are locked. This means placing items that should be secured behind these locks even when the building is occupied and in use.
- **Passwords:** Do not share passwords or use common passwords. This includes writing the password down and taping it to the keyboard or in a drawer.
- **Confidential Information:** Keep confidential information confidential. Destroy all confidential information as soon as possible when it is no longer needed.
- **Protecting Documents:** Password protect digital documents.

## **Guidance for Worshippers**

- Be aware of your surroundings, know what belongs and what doesn't belong. If you find yourself in a situation (meeting, interview, activity, etc.) that doesn't feel right, remove yourself from the situation, and contact the appropriate religious leader or law enforcement.
- Be friendly to those visiting religious meetings; however, if anything out the ordinary is observed, inform local religious leaders.
- Report suspicious persons in or around religious facility buildings to religious leaders or law enforcement. Focus on the person's behavior, not appearance.
- Avoid being alone in religious buildings.
- Vehicles in the parking lot should be locked. Keep personal items out of sight,



including bags and electronic devices such as cell phones, laptop computers, and garage door openers. Avoid being alone in the parking lot.

- When leaving the building, check your surroundings for anything suspicious before returning to your vehicle.
- Do not enter a building that appears to have been broken into or vandalized. Call law enforcement and the appropriate religious leader to report the incident.
- Do not leave packages, briefcases, backpacks, or bags unattended in religious buildings or parking lots. Report suspicious items to law enforcement and religious leaders.
- Avoid posting sensitive building information and personal information online that may jeopardize the security of the building and congregants.
- Know the location of fire pulls, building exits, and the building's emergency procedures.

