

Church Office Safety

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I just read the prayer request for the, church secretary who was viciously attacked in her office. As saddened as I was to read this, it was also a wake-up call for me to carry my alarm system panic button with me when I am alone in our church since I tend to take my safety for granted. I know there must be many churches without alarm systems or locked offices. I am wondering if those churches would consider investing in something like a life alert or medi-lert system for their secretaries and staff. This can be used to summon help immediately and may provide a reasonable measure of protection, particularly if churches cannot afford other security measures at this time. This attack can certainly provide the needed opening for dialog about current church security and affordable means of protecting church staff, while maintaining accessibility to church members and the public at large. The time to look at possible solutions is before churches experience problems, not afterwards. Unfortunately, our church had to learn the hard way (extensive vandalism) before we installed our alarm system. The panic buttons were requested for the staff because often times some of us are here alone during office hours and our transient traffic has greatly increased in the past year or so. I pray that the churches without adequate security measures will take a hard look at finding reasonable ways to protect their staff.

Here is a very inexpensive and "low-tech" way to be a little safer. We have recently installed a battery operated doorbell for the outside door to the church which is the closest door to the church offices. The doorbell rings in my office. So when I am here alone, I can have the outside door locked. The outside door has a large window. So if someone rings the doorbell, I can easily go see who it is and make the decision whether to unlock the door or not. Since I can easily talk through the window, if I don't wish to unlock the door, I just politely say, "I'm sorry the pastor isn't in right now. You'll have to come back at a later time." The doorbell cost about \$20.

Here in our office, since I'm the front person and usually alone, our code phrase is "Bring me a hotdog." (This is for those **non-emergency situations** where 911 isn't necessary but where I feel uncomfortable with a client.) I can use that with any of the staff and they know to come running. J

I have a friend who is a receptionist in a church in a high risk area who was concerned about someone coming into the office on Monday to rob them when they were counting the collection. She asked the local police department about using pepper spray and they recommended to her that she get a can of wasp spray instead. The wasp spray, they told her, can shoot up to twenty feet away and is a lot more accurate, while with the Pepper spray they have to get too close to you and could overpower you. The wasp spray temporarily blinds an attacker until they get to the Hospital for an antidote. She keeps a can on her desk in the office and it doesn't attract attention from people like a can of pepper spray would. She also keeps one nearby at home for home protection.

Our local church Secretary Group set up our own safety network – complete with a password system ... we would never call each other up and ask directly for money so this became our password – if one of us was in trouble and couldn't get in touch with our minister we'd call each other and say "can you bring me over a check for (whatever amount needed) right away". The secretary who received the call would then contact 9-1-1 and get help. This has worked out very well for us – we've only had to use this once in the 8 years – but it worked and my friend was safe! We also have set up an ALERT system – when any of us help someone in our community (many who are just passing through) we just throw out a quick email to let the others know of the story we heard and what we did about it – it has helped tremendously in stopping church fund abuse.

When you leave your office, even if just to run an errand within the church, PLEASE take a portable phone or your cell phone with you. Yesterday, I wish I would have put my cell phone in my pocket when I went upstairs to eat my lunch. I left it in the office thinking I wouldn't need it. An intruder found me in a room that is very far away from my office and usually no one can find me there. Well, he did. I ended up fleeing the room and going through the only door I knew was open to hide in a very small office but he found me and I ended up running through another door and on to the second floor roof. He locked me out on the roof and I was there for over an hour until someone stopped and I could summon help. Needless-to-say, the intruder was gone by that time having escaped through the balcony fire escape, which is even farther away than where I was. I was very fortunate the roof I ended up on was over a well used entrance or I might still be up there. If I had had a phone with me, I could have summoned help immediately and we could probably have caught the guy. Believe me, from now on, my cell phone goes everywhere with me in the church.

Oh my gosh !! I have a similar story except this happened to our janitor. We have a full-time janitor and he was caught by surprise outside of the church building but caught by several who had weapons on them. He had his cellular in his pants pocket and slipped out of sight and dialed 911

I just have a question about Safety Alert. How did the intruder get into the church? Are the doors kept unlocked? I am alone in the church often and want to take all precautions that I can. I do keep the doors locked, but sometimes someone comes and the door gets left unlocked.

We are in the process of building a new office space and fellowship area in an old four story building directly south of our church building (burned with only walls standing but will be rebuilt). Our offices are now north of the church. I have been asked to help design our space and I what I have stressed most is safety....escape route, windows to allow you to see who enters the building, secre

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tary's desk facing the door, ability to lock off other doors and access to elevator when the rest of the building or church (which will be reached with a catwalk from this building) when not in use. Unfortunately we need to keep our own safety foremost in this day and age. We can all learn from this experience!

I would insist that the church be locked and a buzzer or doorbell installed. We finally had to do that at the last church I worked at because I was threatened twice and one time had to tell a lie to get the man to leave. Another time thankfully the treasurer came by to check on some things. Anyway I requested a buzzer and they installed one at the front and back doors. When I came to this church they already had a doorbell installed. The doors are never left unlocked except for services. Sometimes it is an inconvenience but it is safe!!!

We've installed a small (inexpensive) surveillance camera at the office entrance that communicates with a TV monitor in my office to provide a visual of anyone wishing to enter the building. The outside office door is equipped with a buzzer and intercom system. It is unlocked from an access switch at my desk. So far it's proved very effective in screening those who enter the building. We just got a bid for installing a new phone/intercom system that will allow a guest to call a specific staff member from a phone located at the entrance door. The staff person can then unlock the outside door from a phone in his/her own office, similar to some apartment access systems. (Our church houses a daycare center, so we're especially sensitive to "safe sanctuaries.")

There is a remote camera outside, connected to a small screen at my desk. There I can visually see who is at the door, ask who they are, if I don't recognize them and buzz them in if I so choose. A church I worked at formerly had a preschool with 3, 4, & 5 year olds, so the doors were always kept locked. We had a doorbell and a large window I could see out of prior to allowing anyone entrance. Some people complained "Why is the door locked?" We have young children and in today's times it is just common sense & makes me feel much safer!

We have a security system here that includes buzzers and speakers at the outside office door and the education building as well as a video link at all the doors so I can "see" those requesting entrance. The exterior door here at my office was glass (old parsonage house) and I sit in the "living room" of the building visible to all who walk up to the door. Today, the building super was installing car film to make the door more opaque and the glass broke. So until we can install tempered glass (city code here) I'm going to have a piece of plywood. Whatever works!

Our SPRC chairman was here yesterday for our staff meeting and saw us ask our landscapers to cut back the bushes around the office dramatically. Mr. SPRC was interested to hear about our sister secretaries' problems with attacks in recent months. There have been times here that someone has come around the bushes as we're walking to our cars. Scary. He agreed that something needed to be done ASAP.

Since it's the wrong time of year to prune trees/bushes, our landscapers cut the bushes back as far as they could for now and will cut them further in late winter. They said the bushes should not be higher than the window sills and, when at the corner of a sidewalk, no higher than your knees—all for safety. (Our insurance inspector also encouraged us to do this.) What I find interesting in all this is that church members usually practice this and more in and around their homes. They just usually don't consider the same things when they are looking at safety in the church office.

We are only a couple of blocks from the police department. Thank goodness our Trustees saw the need for safety years ago. Even in our new addition, one of the primary things in my office is a little button under the edge of my desk that can be set off very easily without anyone knowing it. It may just look like I am grabbing the edge of the desk to roll the chair forward, but a slight one-finger pull will have the police at my door in just a minute! We have had a couple of very scary-looking and jumpy people come into the office in the past and only once did we consider pulling it. It's just nice to know that without setting the suspicious person off, you can have help at your fingertip.

Just this week our church Trustees installed an electronic doorbells system on our front and back entry ways, the doors will be locked from now on. Many times during the day I am the only person in the building. I never really thought much about it until now, we have a "summer interim" pastor and he was very concerned about having the doors unlocked during the day. Thanks for sharing the stories about safety concerns!

I work in a 5-floor education building of the church, in a downtown area frequented by homeless and needy. We have lots of people in and out all day; it is impossible to be sure who is in the building at any given time. My door is always locked. I've had installed individual door alarms that are set each evening. We have a perimeter alarm that is armed every night and checked by our security company. We have a buzzer at the front door and the person sitting at the front desk has to open the inner door for folks to come in. I've even had our local police department come and present Empowerment Seminars to help our nursery school teachers and church folks/staff feel more secure when on campus. But all of this is still not enough for our safety. I carry my cell phone and pepper spray when I wander around this building because some folks get in, hide in the building, and you don't know what to expect. When wandering outside I carry my pepper spray at the ready and my cell phone ready to call our police dispatcher. Ask your local police for the

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dispatcher number to call; don't rely on 911 as that does not get connected locally. Finally, the Trustees are considering putting up surveillance cameras at each of our 7 doors.

Even after all of that, our best defense is to always be careful, prepared and vigilant. Protect yourself. Never assume you are safe. Demand that safety measures be put in place--for you and anyone who is ever in your building--that means church and staff! People that don't work in our buildings don't understand how today's desperate economic situation for so many means that we need to be even more vigilant in our churches, and everywhere. Churches are no longer safe havens, if they ever were. Be safe!

I feel the need to have someone in to speak from local law enforcement agencies to reiterate the importance of addressing this topic, give facts about crime in each local area, and give tips from a law enforcement point of view, some of which may be new ideas other than the ones expressed on Linking Hands. Keeping a cell phone with you at all times is a wonderful idea.

On the funny side of taking your cell phone. Take it with you always. I got locked in the bathroom and had to wait for someone to come rescue me. HA HA!!

I didn't have my cell phone with me a couple of months ago when I and the Financial Secretary were checking out unused spaces in the church for potential cleaning. We wandered into a small wing (used for overflow seating) of the sanctuary and the doors closed behind us and promptly locked. The doors have those pull down chains to open the door, on the sanctuary side, but nothing to get you out of the room once you are in it. We spent 20 minutes banging on the door, yelling, and laughing with nervous hysterics, trying to get some attention from the pastor who was in a meeting at the time. After we got out of the room, by someone else's assistance, we asked the pastor if he heard us and he chuckled and said he thought it was people out on the street, he heard the noise but not the specifics, so he ignored it. I was just glad there was someone around because I am often alone at the church. I now carry my cell phone with me everywhere.

Regarding the safety alert, after we had a series of break-ins last year, the decision was made to install an alarm system (something that had been talked about earlier but rejected). We asked for panic buttons. (There is no other exit from my office, nor from the office wing.) Now, if I'm here alone and the church is unlocked, I carry my cell phone and the panic button with me. At other times, we request volunteers to lock the office door and only open it if they know who the person seeking entrance. We've had a couple of close calls, both before and after the alarm system was installed. We are working on making sure employees and volunteers can work safely. Unfortunately, churches seem an easy target these days so measure we take are not unfriendly, just common sense. Hopefully, with education about the safety risks faced in our own churches and others, members will not resent the extra measures taken to protect the staff and volunteers.

Before you rely on [your cell phone] in a case of an emergency, make sure you get a signal in every corner of your church. What good is it if you don't have a signal? I am fortunate enough to work in a district office but in my church I can't get a signal any of the buildings. So please all of you check out the signal for coverage.

We live in a small town and don't get good cell phone coverage. Our church purchased an inexpensive cordless phone, which I can take with me when I leave the office to go to another part of our large building. It has worked out well... not only is it available in case of emergency, but I won't miss any calls coming in while I'm away from my desk.

Suggestions to keep church doors locked and carry cell phones and cordless phones when leaving the office are good ones. The church doors are always locked when I'm in the office. Last year during evening choir rehearsal, there was a scary incident when a man walked in and was very threatening, resulting in a choir member calling the police on her cell phone while another person distracted the man. Since then, congregation members are asked to keep the doors locked when they are here for a meeting or another activity and are reminded about this periodically in newsletters and bulletins.

The church has two main doors, solid metal with a peephole, and a doorbell that rings in the office, and I've been told not to open the door if I see someone through the peephole I don't know who "looks suspicious." Well, what does "suspicious" look like?! I just open the door and hope for the best. If it's someone asking for assistance, I offer them a list of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of local agencies that I typed up, explain this is a small church with limited funds, and keep my hand on the door. Lists of these agencies are tacked to each bulletin board in the entry areas so anyone answering the door can offer them to people requesting assistance.

One caveat about keeping church doors locked . . . do not lock yourself out! I almost did this several weeks ago when I stepped outside to look in the parking lot and held the door open with my foot. My foot slipped away from the door, but I was able to grab it just before it closed completely shut. There I could have been standing outside the locked church with no church keys, no car keys, no phones, and no money, thinking where I could walk to find a phone and a phone book. Since then I've been trying to remember to put at least my church keys in my pocket when I go to the door.

A scanner which gives you police/ambulance and other important information in the office area or church area.