

# ***Wisconsin Crime Prevention Practitioners Association***

## **Protecting Houses of Worship**

Unfortunately across the globe and here in the United States we are seeing an increasing amount of acts of violence. The people looking to inflict this chaos seek out places for revenge as well locations where there are likely to be quite a few people. These tragedies used to be confined to schools and workplaces but now are occurring at malls, parks and even the unthinkable – churches!

Controlling access to a facility is a key component in physical security; however that becomes increasingly difficult for places that are open to the public. Churches, by their nature, are open and inviting for folks to come in during worship times and quite literally any other time of day. With that said, limiting or controlling access to a church becomes a balancing act. In hours of non-worship times, churches need to practice the same principles as schools and other businesses through limiting access and directing visitors to an office area where they can meet with staff prior to accessing the rest of the building. It is during the hours of open worship that this gets a little tricky.

For the most part, churches have members that are designated as greeter for each service. The greeters' duties are to not only welcome other members but acknowledge and help visitors to the church. However the greeter also serves as a set of eyes and ears on the 'front line' of defense for the building. Now we are not advocating for armed, militaristic looking individuals, but the greeter can serve as a deterrent to those would be ne'er do wells. This is part of the *surveillance* component of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) if you are familiar with that.

Let's look at other places and how they employ the greeter or acknowledge visitors. Many businesses require visitors to sign in and obtain a visitor ID badge. If an employee sees a person without an ID badge, they are trained to ask that person if they need any assistance and directing them to the area that they are looking for and ensuring that they check in.

The last time you were in a grocery or retail store, did you have employees asking you if you needed help, welcoming you to the store or just acknowledging your presence. What they are doing is obviously great customer service, but it is also sending a message to those would be ne'er do wells that we are watching you. This is a very effective deterrent and these bad guys take note on that when looking to wreak havoc. They see that there are people watching them and realize that the odds of them going undetected are slim to none.

So getting back to church, how can we implement this here and deter those would be criminals? Have the greeters acknowledge your visitors and be attentive at the doors, looking out for someone that might seem out of place. Those visitors can further be directed to a welcome desk or another greeter to assist them further. Those legitimately visiting church will feel welcomed while those coming to the church for other reasons will be deterred.

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