Many people find it hard to believe that such things could happen at their ministry, says Brock Bell, senior manager of risk control at Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company. Bell travels the country each year, advising churches how to reduce their risks.

“It’s kind of like lightning,” Bell says. “You know it’s out there, but you never expect it to hit you.”

While outbreaks of violence at church seem unthinkable, they’re happening with increasing frequency. Just type “church shooting” into your Internet browser and see how many results appear. Browsing the list makes you realize that violence can happen anywhere, even in the smallest communities.

Fortunately, you can take steps to prepare for many situations in a way that will improve your ministry’s ability to respond quickly and appropriately.

“A traumatic incident can only get worse if you’re not prepared,” Brock says. “While you can’t make the risk go away, you can manage it by doing what a prudent person would do to prepare for it.”

**ASSESS RISKS**

For each ministry you operate, consider possible threats that could emerge. Imagine what would happen on weekends when the sanctuary is full or on weekdays when a handful of staff are present. Don’t forget to consider what could happen at a school, preschool, or day care center you operate.

For example, could an angry father enter a children’s wing, demanding to have a child no longer in his custody? What barriers are in place to stop him? This is a time to imagine worst-case scenarios. Developing your response will come later.

Consider these possibilities:

- An estranged boyfriend stalking his ex-girlfriend at church
- An agitated man entering the building, looking for someone
- A group of people standing outside, hurling insults at people entering the church
- A person seeking assistance who pulls out a knife when denied the help sought

What would you do if one of these situations were to erupt? Does your church have a safety team or a response plan to guide staff and volunteers? For more great questions, [download our Responding To Church Violence checklist](#).
Once you have listed possible threats, determine the probability of each event happening. What impact would each emergency have on people, property, and the ministry?

Now you have a better picture of the risks your ministry will need to address.

**DEVELOP A PLAN**

Creating a [violence response plan](#) involves assessing your ministry's individual situation, determining how to respond, and practicing what to do if it happens.

In many ways, it's identical to creating a disaster response plan for weather-related events. The only difference is the type of threats you face.

You'll need more than one person to help you. Enlist a broad cross-section of people, including staff, volunteers, and church members, who can contribute their expertise to the plan. Including people with experience in law enforcement or public safety would be helpful.

Then, make a plan for dealing with crisis situations when they happen. Keep in mind that your response on a Sunday morning might differ drastically from what you would do on a weekday.

**ESTABLISH PROTOCOL**

Your church may already have a plan for dealing with fire or weather emergencies. In many cases, you can modify that plan to deal with incidents of violence in your congregation. Here are some aspects to consider:

**Communicating a Threat:** If you have a large church, how will you communicate that people need to evacuate because of a threatening intruder? Could you use a public address system or assign certain people to deliver the message to various parts of the church?

**Contacting Law Enforcement:** Who will call police? Does this person carry a cell phone?

**Communicating with the Public:** How will you deal with a possibly overwhelming response from people concerned about the situation, including friends, family members, the community, and the media? Do you have one or more spokespeople who could work with each audience?

**Evacuation:** How will people leave the building, and where do they go afterward? Have you posted evacuation routes and procedures throughout the building? Does your congregation know where to meet after evacuating? Do you have a system for evacuating small children and people with disabilities? How will you know that everyone has gotten out?

**Responsibilities:** Who will do what? Does your ministry have a current list of all people (on- and off-site) who would respond to a crisis of this nature? Does the list note their responsibilities and their 24-hour telephone numbers? Is anyone responsible for keeping this information up to date?

**First aid:** How will you treat the injured? Do you have an appropriate first-aid kit that someone checks regularly to make sure all items are available? Are key volunteers and staff trained in first aid and CPR procedures?

**Training:** How will you ensure that everyone knows what to do in a crisis situation? Does your ministry provide general training regularly to make sure that new people know what to do? Do you update responsibilities as church membership changes?
COORDINATE WITH OTHERS

Talk with first responders, law enforcement, and community disaster response organizations about how you can prepare for violent incidents and respond to them.

Your local school system might be a good resource as well. Since the Columbine High School massacre, many school districts have enlisted professionals to help them prevent violence or protect children from it. School leaders may be able to recommend some safety experts who have conducted training workshops in your area.

Be sure that any expert you choose comes with proper credentials and has experience working with churches.

CONDUCT PRACTICE DRILLS

Regularly review and practice what you intend to do during and after an emergency with drills and exercises. Ask someone from an emergency response agency to observe the drill and offer advice for improvement. Repeated practice helps people remember their roles and remain calm during an actual crisis. Drills can also identify problems in your response plan that could be prevented.

INFORM THE CONGREGATION

Your staff and volunteers aren’t the only ones who need to know what to do during an emergency. If a crisis occurs, people will panic. They need to know the protocol for that particular situation—should they hit the floor, try to subdue an intruder, or start running for the emergency exits?

Parents instinctively will want to retrieve children from other parts of the building, but this can result in chaos and delay. Practice drills can help parents understand how your ministry will protect their children during an emergency.

Consider informing your congregation about emergency policies by using the church bulletin, visitor packets, or handouts for parents that drop off children in the nursery. Regular reminders will be necessary since memories fail and attendees come and go.

REVIEW YOUR PLAN REGULARLY

Just as your ministry changes over time, so do your preparedness needs. When you hire new employees, launch new ministry initiatives, or expand your building, you should update your plans and inform your staff, volunteers, and congregation.

PREPARATION IMPROVES CONFIDENCE

It’s easy to imagine that something so tragic could never happen at your church, but experience has shown that it could happen anywhere. While it may be impossible to prevent an incident altogether, being prepared to handle violent situations will give you the confidence to face the emergency when it happens.

With sufficient forethought, planning, and practice, you can help ensure that your ministry is as prepared as possible to face violent threats to the congregation.