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## Safety in Sanctuaries: a Threat Assessment of Omaha Churches

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Safety in Sanctuaries: A Threat Assessment of Omaha Churches

University Honors Program Thesis/Capstone/Creative Project

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Submitted by

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May/2018

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS:

Churches are a soft target for people with malicious intentions. They are filled a large of amount of people, including large groups of children and elderly folk. Religions also encourage people to be friendlier towards outsiders, which could result in the church goes to lower their defenses and be more vulnerable to attacks. Church security teams are also primarily composed of volunteers, which means there is limited experience in security protocol and could lead to limited incentive to perform security tasks thoroughly. Churches are a crucial part of the spiritual wellness of a community. All these factors make churches a viable target for terrorist attacks, kidnappings, thefts, or other malicious acts.

This capstone evaluates the safety of churches in the Omaha area. This is done by meeting and interviewing church leaders, commencing a walkthrough assessment of the church, and providing recommendations to churches based in their needs. The common safety deficiencies are compiled and provide a list of areas of improvement throughout the Omaha area.

The largest area of concern would be a general lack of safety plans being implemented in Omaha Churches. Based on the information obtained in this project, other churches can identify common problems and use recommendations from other churches to benefit their own safety.

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### Introduction:

Omaha Churches are common soft target in the Omaha area. Churches lack funding for sufficient security, are meant to look open and welcoming, and are filled with vulnerable populations. The research of this capstone is critical to better analyzing how to protect a substantial piece of the Omaha community.

Church funding is generally spent on church outreach through missions, church classes, and group activities. As a result, safety measures like shelters, security teams, cameras, off duty police officers, and safety plans are generally lacking in churches. Larger churches have the capabilities to pay for some of these features, but smaller churches do not.

Churches are meant to be inviting as part of their mission, which means that safety measures can be contrary to the goal of the church. Security measures can make people weary of entering a new place and extreme measures, like metal detector checkpoints, can cause the congregation to become upset with the sense of distrust in their church.

Churches often double as day cares, schools, or community centers, which makes them a hub for the younger population in a community. Children are a vulnerable population because of their size, lack of reasoning, and because they are vital to a community's future and moral.

### Literature Review:

Different types of churches face different threats and attacks. African American churches have long been the target of arson attacks by white nationalist groups and present a unique problem for investigators (Green, 2015). When a fire burns down a church, it can't be considered arson until motive or foul play are proven. Until then most fires are considered an accident and don't warrant a criminal investigation. Arsons in African American Churches tend to occur more in southern states. Green discusses two specific churches, Glover Grove Missionary Baptist church in Warrenton, South Carolina and College Hill Seventh Day in Knoxville Tennessee, that were burned down in 2015. A burned down church can still have the same desired effect by the arsonist, which could discourage the church members and cause fear. Of course, it can also have the opposite effect, the church members could become more strengthened in their resolve or could miss the point of the attack and not become fearful at all. Mosques have also been targeted in recent years following 9/11 as anti-Islamic turmoil increase.

Active shooters are another issue for churches. Active shooters often suffer from depression or some other mental illness. Churches reach out towards individuals suffering from such problems. Churches are meant to help people who are suffering. They are also filled with elderly people, families with young children, and almost everyone in the church is meant to be welcoming towards outsiders. Church members do not frequently practice safety drills and some members of the congregation may not feel violence is permissible in the event of an attack. Unlike an arson attack, there is no mistaking an active shooter from an accident. There will be a long term psychological effect on the congregation and the community following such an assault. The attack in Sutherlands Springs is the most recent example of a church active shooter (Bacon, 2017). Ed Sterzer, a professor at Wheaton College said in regards to church shootings, "This is

the perfect place. People are focusing on something other than their own safety. Heartbreakingly, that is an easy target. I think that what we find in most cases is that there's a motive tied into the evil . . . Evil knows where to find the good.”

People have attempted to remedy the concerns in the church attacks. Larger churches have security teams and can install security systems to help observe and deter attacks. Mark Whitlock wrote an article on the specific policies and training that churches can implement to increase church safety (Securing Gods Sanctuary, 2015). His recommendations include applying for FEMA's Nonprofit Security Grant Program, creating plans and drills for the congregation, and asking law enforcement and other agencies to commence a vulnerability assessment in the church. There are also instructions for planning inside FEMA's Guide for developing high-quality emergency operations plans for houses of worship.



### Methods:

This research project will use a qualitative study based on observation and interviews. Observations are generally used for observing people and environment. Interviews are used to investigate peoples' opinions and experiences. This research project included conducting threat analysis of Omaha churches, which involves observation, as well as gauging the comfort levels of church officials, which would include interviews. Observation involved going to a location, keenly monitoring and recording activities, inspecting the building and surrounding environment, and collecting information pertinent to your study. Interviews included creating a list of questions regarding a research topic, meeting with individuals that are pertinent to the study, recording the information, and utilizing the data to answer the research question.

This observation portion of this research will begin by organizing meetings with church officials at their respective churches. Observation meant inspecting the church grounds and checking for possible threats. The building locking protocols, parking barricades, fire exits, and security cameras are all examples of observable items that can be controlled and improved to protect the overall safety of the church. The observation can also be viewing the main roads leading to the church, identifying buildings that overlook the church, and tracking written, or verbal threats directed towards the church from the outside community. These items may require outside assistance from law enforcement to address. The size of the church is a major variable in this project. A larger church could comprise of several buildings on a campus, each one having unique challenges associated with it. A smaller church may only consist of a small building, maybe even an old business or community center. A larger church is also more likely to have a security team, cameras, and general safety awareness. Of course, they also represent a larger target. Another variable that plays into a church is the religion of the church and the majority

ethnicity of the congregation. Islamic churches may face persecution from fearful outsiders and churches with African-American majority populations have often been targeted for arson. Verbal threats against the churches are especially pertinent to these types of churches.

The interview portion of the project was conducted by meeting with church officials and security to gauge safety concerns they may have regarding the church. Their responses were used to further identify threats to that pertain to their church. Using the observations and interviews the next step of the project was to create a threat analysis for the churches based on their specific needs along with advisements for improvements.

The information for creating this project came from an article by Mark Whitlock titled “Securing God’s Sanctuary – How to Protect Your Congregation from Attacks”, a book by Carl Chin titled “Evil invades sanctuary: the case for security in faith-based organizations”, and the FEMA documents over “Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment” and the “Guide for developing high-quality emergency operations plans for houses of worship”. These sources include threat assessment plans as well as potential advisements.

Church safety is limited by the amount of security that can be implemented in churches. Churches do not make a lot of profit and they are meant to be open and friendly, which contradicts security measures like metal detectors and armed security. This project itself was limited by the willingness of churches to allow a threat analysis and their honesty with the honesty of the interviewees. A semester is not a long time for improvements to be observed as well, which makes time a constraint as well, as the interviewees may not have time to see any of their concerns addressed by any of the advisements. The sample size for this project may not be enough to accurately gauge the feelings of safety within church officials.

The project data was arranged in several ways. The interview questions included some questions with a scale answer. For example, “How safe do you feel within this church building during service, on a scale of 1 through 5?”. This data was organized in a bar graph.

The data for the threat analysis was harder to present. Common problems and threats were noted and displayed on a pie chart. For example, a lack of barricades was noted and then the frequency of was recorded in the pie chart to show how the lack of barricades compared to the lack of security cameras.

## Results/Discussion

Churches in Omaha are lacking in the safety procedures. This is in line with what is anticipated in churches due to the lack of funding and training. Safety concerns that were commonly found in this project are included in the following pie graph. The size of the slice represents how frequently the safety feature was missing from the church. The data was collected from observations in Omaha churches and by speaking with church leaders.

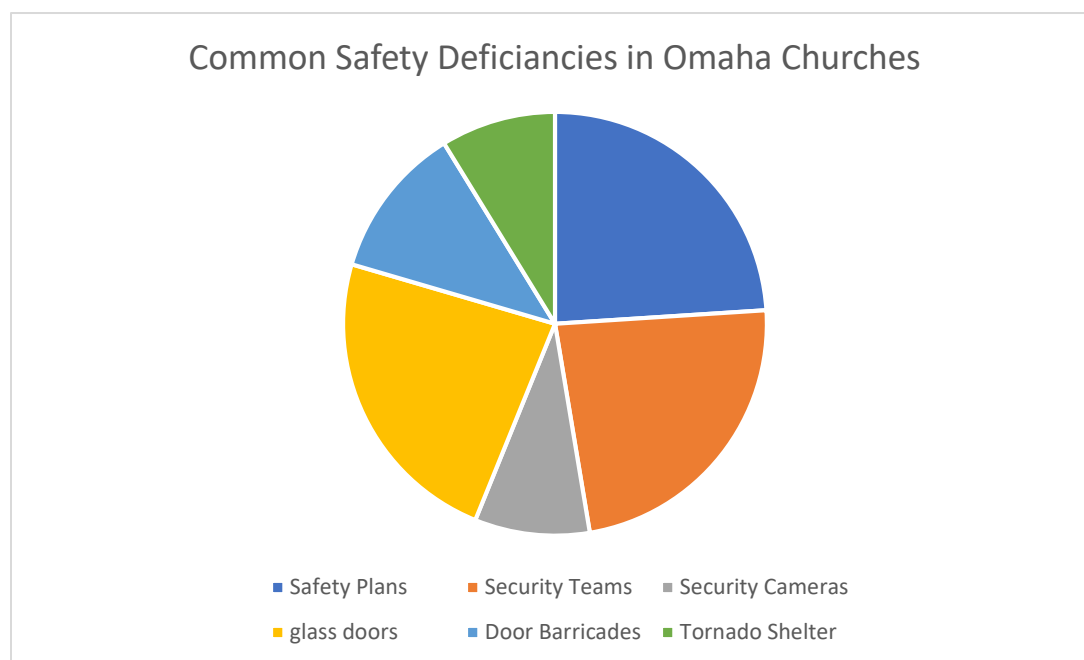
The majority of churches involved had little to no organized safety plan. They had not practiced fire drills, active shooter drills, or tornado drills. This is a major problem when dealing with any sort of disaster. The congregation should know how to deal with different forms of disaster within their specific building. The problems that several churches encountered was that multiple messages are given, which would require multiple services to be effective. They also felt there was enough turnover in their congregation that some of the training would not be beneficial.

Another major issue in churches is the vast amount of glass doors. These doors make the church more open and appealing, but also presents multiple threats when dealing with disasters. Glass doors are easy to break in the case of an active shooter threat or theft, don't allow for visual coverage, and are a safety hazard during a tornado where the intense winds and debris would cause the glass to break and projectile in the building.

Many churches did not have any form of security team, though they all have some system of greeters. Greeters could be used for initial observation of a possible threat, whether weather or criminally related. Churches generally lack the funding for paid security teams, but churches can establish volunteer security teams. The smaller churches tended not to have any team, but were

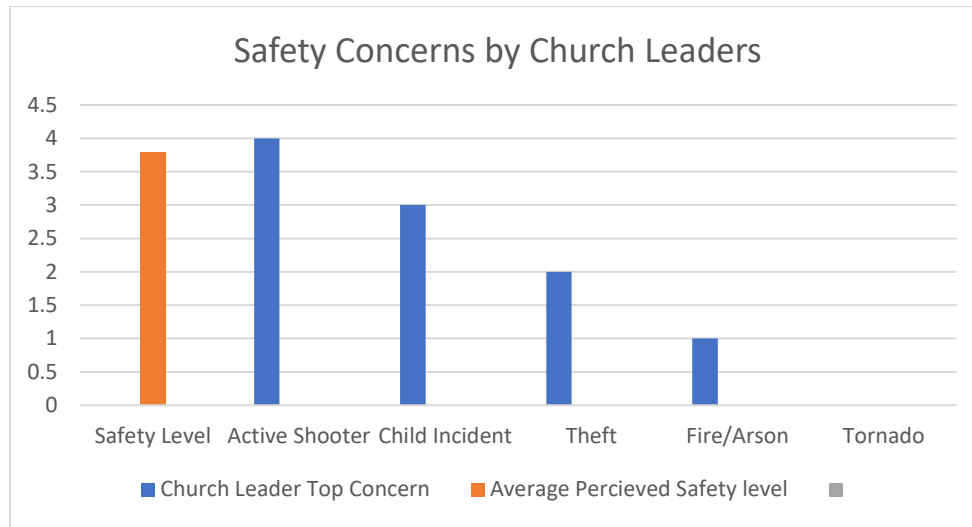
open to the idea of volunteer teams, suggesting that it may also help maintain a stable congregation population of younger males. The larger churches had security teams and had some individual that was armed. There was also a difference between denominations. Catholic churches were concerned with denomination policy on armed church attenders.

There were other concerns that also came up multiple times. The churches also had a lack of security cameras, whether the number of cameras was limited, or the cameras were not on consistently. There were no barricades to protect the front doors of the several churches, which could be an issue in the event of a car bomb. Several churches also lacked substantial space for a tornado shelter.



Church leaders number one concern was an active shooter, this would make sense considering the media coverage that is presented following an active shooter situation. It is also the most unpredictable of the disasters. A child situation could likely be detected beforehand because a custody dispute would be reported by the custodial parent to a church or a school

before any events occurred within the church. Theft of the offering could be an issue, but there is less danger for the church members. Churches have also created countermeasures to protect their funds. Natural disasters do not have malicious intentions and can be responded to more easily.



### Summary:

In review, this was a study in the common safety deficiencies in Omaha churches. Churches are high-risk operations due to their high-risk populations, lack of safety funding, and church openness goals. This study utilized churches in a range of sizes of locations to determine common problems, but the study is lacking in a sufficient sample size due to the time constraint on the project. The churches involved were provided a physical walkthrough for deficiencies and were interviewed regarding their feelings on their churches safety level.

The safety issue with the greatest need and potential impact is safety planning. Safety plans can be created relatively easily and cheaply. Plans can be created from other churches base plans and adapted to unique churches. Planning can improve the confidence from the congregation and can benefit church leader protocol during a disaster. Other common issues included glass doors, lack of security cameras, of security teams, and of tornado shelters. These issues can be remedied with physical and policy changes, though a major concern is funding for safety upgrades. The next step for this project would be to reach out to more churches and to share a base line for safety plans from the larger churches that have more experience safety planning. Openness between church leaders would be beneficial to increasing the safety preparedness of Omaha churches and would benefit the entire Omaha community.

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