




Adventist Risk Management, Inc.



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Why Hands-on Training Is Critical for Active Shooter Preparedness: An Interview With Deputy Sheriff Karl Burnett

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The frequency of mass shootings—especially church shootings—has left many congregations unnerved. At Adventist Risk Management, Inc., we want to make sure churches have everything they need to ensure emergency preparedness for any situation.

We spoke to Deputy Sheriff Corporal Karl Burnett of Prince George’s County Sheriff’s Office about his experience on-duty as well as his experience training church leaders to be prepared for active shooter emergencies.

1. Your passion is preparing churches in active shooter safety. What spurred this passion and what do your trainings entail?

It started when I was a patrol officer with the City of Glenarden Police Department. In the second year of my work in law enforcement, the Sandy Hook shooting took place and a local elementary school reached out to my agency about active shooter training. This led to my studies with a Texas-based training organization called ALERRT (Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training). ALERRT opened my eyes and gave me a huge view on active shooter preparedness from the law enforcement vantage point. I did not begin my work with churches until I stumbled across ALICE, an organization that trains faith-based institutions. I received my instructor’s certification through both organizations. At that point, Allegheny East Conference contacted me about training on active shooter preparedness for conferences and churches.

Realizing the urgency of active shooter preparedness, I took the next step and deepened my understanding of the field by training with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers, Homeland Security, and the Secret Service. I formed my training organization, Sig7 Training Institute, which specializes in active shooter awareness in schools, churches, and federal government office buildings.

If someone reaches out about active shooter training, I try to meet first with deacons and pastoral staff. I go through a PowerPoint presentation on history and statistics, and I seek to familiarize leaders with the terminology and resources available to them. In the next phase of hands-on training, we practice an evacuation of the church. This trains people on identifying points of exits, barricading doors, and effectively apprehending assailants.

2. How does your on-duty work inform your active shooter trainings?

I am a member of the Prince George's County Sheriff's Office Specialized Services Team (SST). I am often dealing with people who have warrants for assault, attempted murder, or armed robbery. When we clear a house, we must make sure we are searching safely and that suspects do not run onto school properties. I always hope that the school has a lockdown procedure in place and, luckily, it turns out most schools do. The second thing my on-duty work teaches me is the importance of staying calm in overwhelmingly chaotic situations. This is why what we call tactical breathing is very important: to slow your heartrate down so you can get oxygen to the brain and think clearly. A lot of times, we need to take a deep breath and process what is happening in front of us. That way, we can figure out the best tool for each situation. Tactical breathing is an essential tool I teach.

3. I understand that hands-on-training is preferable, even if it's only for a few trained leaders in the church's emergency response team. What do you recommend churches do to access a training and why?

The very first thing you should do is reach out to your local law enforcement agency. Most local law enforcement does a civilian response to active shooter training. If you don't want to go that route, ALERRT, ALICE, or my own Sig7 Training Institute are perfectly credible organizations to train with. If you are looking for something more cost-effective, local law enforcement is something all communities are entitled to.

Active shooter situations are stressful. The main reason I think hands-on trainings and drills are preferable is because they develop muscle memory. If you can induce a small amount of stress that happens in an active shooter situation and allow a person to take a deep breath and apply the tools you gave them, they will be prepared.

Active shooter preparedness is about survival. The national average for law enforcement response to active shooter situations is five to six minutes. Someone with an automatic weapon or handgun can fire rounds in a matter of seconds. At some point in time, we need to be well-practiced in "run, hide, fight" at an experiential level. If you are doing something, whether just a basic drill or an extensive training, you will be more prepared.

4. Both the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation provide basic information on the run, hide, fight method. An active shooter situation can be very disorienting. What would you say is the most important thing to know about when to run, when to hide, and when to fight?

This is not a simple answer: I can't give specific directions on when to run, to hide, or to fight. Your response is determined by where you are and what you have around you. If you don't have an exit at all, then you must hide. If you can't hide, then you must fight. If you are learning the technique by video, you must watch the videos and you must practice them first-hand. There is no right or wrong answer. There are choices to make. It's your choice if you are going to run, to hide, to fight. You must choose what is best for you.

5. Why do you, as a law enforcement professional and a person of faith, think active shooter safety is important, and why do you think it can help churches advance their mission?

Active shooter safety is particularly important in religious establishments because of the vulnerability of the congregation. My faith provides me with the full belief that God has given us the tools we need to be able to expand our knowledge and create safer communities for ourselves and those around us. Some people in the congregation may feel they lack the physical abilities necessary to defend themselves. However, my job is to train every member. There are steps that can be taken that will allow trainees to obtain lifesaving knowledge.

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