



The Accidental Visitor

WHEN THE WORLD COMES TO CHURCH

Sunday morning. The pastor is front and center, preaching. A man walks down the aisle as if he's on a mission. He's not looking for a place to sit—his eyes are on the pastor. He walks up to the stage and makes himself at home in one of the chairs.

Some people in the audience think this must be part of a planned skit. The pastor knows different. This isn't scripted.

The pastor wonders why the ushers didn't intercept the man before he got to the stage, why no one intervened. At a loss, the pastor turns to the man and asks, "Is there anything I can do for you?" The man just leans back in the chair, arms crossed.

"Could someone come up and help this man?" the pastor asks. No one moves. The pastor repeats the request. Again, no one moves to help. The pastor then calls several men by name and asks them to come up on stage and escort the man to another room where they can talk to him and help him.

People in the congregation are nervous and a little scared. They aren't at all sure what is going on. Nothing like this has ever happened at their church. Meanwhile, the pastor is thinking, "What if the guy gets angry? What if he fights with the men trying to help? What should I do?"

This incident happened at First Church of the Nazarene in Spokane, Washington. The man's wife was in counseling with a pastor at a nearby church. The man didn't like how things were going and decided to confront the pastor. He was drunk, and he had a gun with him.

And he was at the wrong church.

The potential for violence came to this church quite by accident. But it came.

The pastor at the time was Reverend Jerry McConnell, now Director of the Ministry Outreach/Non-profit Division of the Center for Personal Protection and Safety in Spokane. "My church was not prepared for things like that at all," says McConnell. "I was not prepared as a pastor. I had done nothing to help my people be prepared for something like that. I was the poster child for how you shouldn't do things. We had no training whatsoever. We had never even asked 'what-if' questions. We were totally unprepared."

McConnell knew they had to take action. "It was something we absolutely could not ignore. And we knew if it happened once, it could happen again. That was the day we realized that bad things can happen even in churches, and we needed to be prepared," says McConnell.

After the service, McConnell invited anyone interested in discussing the incident and starting a conversation about church security to come back for an impromptu meeting. The church held its first safety and security meeting later that day.



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Not By Accident

Even though First Church's visitor showed up at the wrong church, the potential for harm was real. Imagine if the man had fought the efforts to calmly remove him from the sanctuary. Imagine if McConnell and the men who helped him had reacted differently. With no plan and no training, they were vulnerable.

The good that came out of this incident? It erased the "It won't happen to us" mentality. Church leadership understood that safety and security had to be addressed and started the conversation.

Is your church prepared? Preparation doesn't happen by accident. It has to be intentional. Planning can help prevent or minimize danger and help keep your ministry safe.

Begin the Discussion

The best way to begin is to ask some "what-if" questions. What would we do if...

- ... we had a fire, a tornado, an earthquake?
- ... someone had a heart attack?
- ... a child went missing during an activity?
- ... two separated parents were arguing in a classroom about custody of a child?
- ... someone brought a weapon to church and caused a disturbance in the sanctuary?

By asking and answering these questions, you'll get a sense of where you are in the preparation process. Next, approach the senior pastor or an appropriate leader and raise some of the same "what-if" questions. This conversation can help you determine whether you and your leadership team are on the same page. It might also give you insight into objections that might be raised as you promote increased church security.

tip TAKING ACTION

Who is the best person to go to with this discussion? For some churches, the senior pastor may be best; in other churches, the administrative pastor or another senior leader may be a better choice.

YOUR GOAL: Gain support before having a larger discussion with church leadership.