SECURING WORSHIP FACILITIES

Protecting Vulnerable Security Points At Religious Worship Centers

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The nature of worship facilities implies a welcoming, openly accessible environment. These sanctuaries are often used for many purposes beyond worship in the communities they serve. From soccer team registrations to bible studies, worship facilities provide gathering places for a multitude of users.

The charitable spirit of these facilities does not make them impervious to theft and vandalism. Equipment theft, information theft, and even embezzlement can and do occur in places of worship. Many of these facilities offer readily available access to computers, copiers, media devices, and A/V equipment. Potential thieves can easily steal thousands of dollars worth of equipment. Confidential files and computers with sensitive information are often unsecured and may potentially be accessed by anyone. The importance of securing and managing access to these areas is often overlooked.

CONFIDENTIAL FILES AND COMPUTERS WITH SENSITIVE INFORMATION ARE OFTEN UNSECURED AND MAY POTENTIALLY BE ACCESSED BY ANYONE.

Failing to control access to cash contributions or define procedures for handling cash puts facilities at greater risk for embezzlement. A lack of access control provides wrongdoers with plausible deniability. Without clearly defined systems of accountability and access control, churches and worship facilities unknowingly put their assets at risk.

Traditionally, access control in worship facilities revolves around locks and keys. Key control can be a difficult task for any organization. Keys are easily copied or lost, leading to a number of potential security issues. Most churches cannot afford the cost of re-keying their facility every time a key is lost. Therefore, they brace themselves for the consequences and accept the risks associated with too many keys in circulation.

Even if a church is fourtunate enough to avoid theft or embesslement, these factors mean worship facilities are considered high-risk by insurance companies. This reality is reflected in their soaring insurance premiums, adding further to the real cost of overlooking critical security measures.

Break-ins, thefts, and vandalism

Risk is inherent in life, but that doesn't diminish the responsibility of an organization to minimize its exposure. By deploying access solutions and implementing practical, effective security measures, Seattle First Presbyterian has taken the necessary steps to secure its buildings and assets. Seattle First Presbyterian Church was once the largest Presbyterian Church in North America, with membership exceeding 8,000. Today, the church is an aging facility that has become a recognizable part of Seattle's landscape. Jace Allen, a Seattle First Presbyterian Elder, comments, "Our perimeters were breached many times, and we experienced vandalism and thefts of our sound and audio equipment. We looked at re-keying and found it to be an inadequate solution. After re-keying, we would still have a mechanical system that could be compromised by the loss of one key."
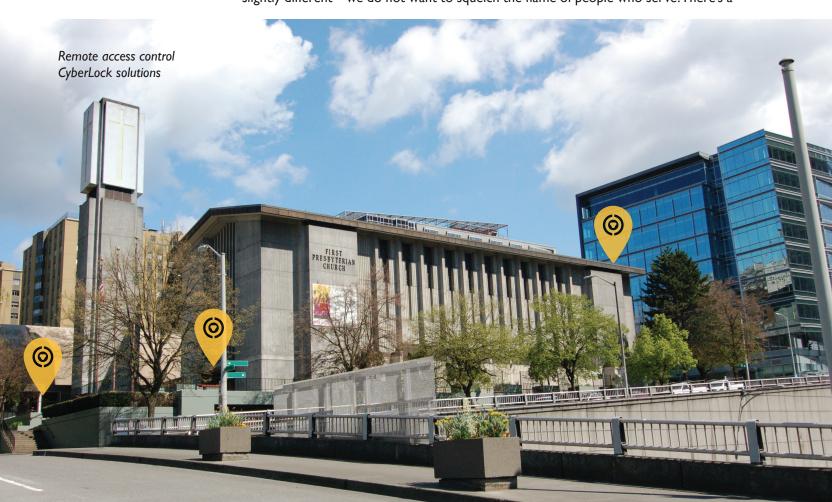
Determined to make Seattle First Presbyterian a safe and secure place of worship, church leaders installed an electronic lock and key access control system. Allen shares, "It was the quickest and least expensive action we could take because our existing door locks could be easily retrofitted and we'll never have to re-key again."

Allen adds, "Whether [churches] are experiencing problems or not, we should not wait for the incident that is going to make us feel the weight of being culpable for not having done what we could have done up front."

It's a matter of being good stewards

Mega churches, such as Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, have hundreds of visitors, subcontractors, staff members, volunteers, and tenants coming and going each day. Churches of this size need effective ways to manage traffic throughout their facilities. Challenged with raising the level of security across their large campus, John Jackson, Calvary Chapel Facilities Manager, says, "As a church, we look at security slightly different—we do not want to squelch the flame of people who serve. There's a

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delicate balance between elevated security and the freedom of an open environment. However, as a church, we are concerned about every dime and penny that is spent and treat the tithes entrusted to us as widow's mites: it's all a matter of being good stewards. Of particular concern is keeping track of physical assets that help us minister to our people. We need an audit trail of when people are accessing areas and a way to control that access."

Calvary Chapel implemented a comprehensive security system that includes security patrols, an electronic lock and key system, and a network of CCT V cameras. Jackson shares, "We always have at least two security guards on duty at any time. When one guard is roving, another guard will be at the guard station monitoring activity from cameras that have been placed at strategic locations. With the electronic lock and key system, we can change someone's access privileges on-the-fly without issuing cut-keys. Each person's electronic key is programmed with the permissions they need to do their job, so we have tighter control of overall access. We also have electronic padlocks on the shipping cases that store our recording and sound equipment so only authorized people can access the equipment."

THE AUDIT TRAIL FROM THE LOCKS AND KEYS IS VERY IMPORTANT TO US AND HAS INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGHOUT OUR FACILITIES.

No end in sight to re-keying costs

Many churches, like Grace Christian Center in Killeen, Texas, acknowledge their mechanical key systems have become unsustainable in cost and control. With over 2,000 adult members and three buildings to protect, Grace Christian was facing significant key control issues. They had to hire outside contractors to re-key their buildings three times in a span of six years because of people losing master keys. They decided to implement an electronic lock system leveraging the mechanical lock hardware they already had in place. Pastor Steven Timmerman says, "We saved a great deal on installation costs because no wiring was required. As the person in charge of security, the audit trail from the locks and keys is very important to us and has increased accountability throughout our facilities. Most importantly, we'll never have to re-key again."

Jim Reed, Grace Christian Center's Facility Manager adds, "Incorporating security has had a positive effect on our insurance costs. We invited the insurance company underwriters to visit us and see the security improvements we had completed. After looking at the church's alarmed security system, the electronic locks on our doors and cabinets, the security cameras throughout our three buildings, and the internal control measures we had put in place, they lowered our insurance rates."

Auditing insurance coverage

A number of church organizations are auditing insurance coverage across all their member churches. These organizations focus on locations which have a disproportionate number of incidences, which increase insurance rates for the entire organization. An at-risk church may receive an onsite security audit for the purpose of exposing areas of concern. Next, the church is encouraged to address any issues found during the audit. If the problems persist, they are often required to pay an insurance surcharge.

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Gaining acceptance for access control

Access control can sometimes leave a restrictive impression. To overcome this perception, people need to be assured that heightened security is only meant to protect them and the church's assets. By emphasizing specific areas of concern and clear examples of risk, stakeholders can better understand the church's exposure to risk and cost. Leadership and administrator involvement will further encourage acceptance. Highlight areas and groups which will gain the most benefit. Encouraging stakeholder feedback and including them in the process will ultimately drive support for access control and security measures.

CyberLock solutions for remote access control

What's next?
Once a decision has been made to re-evaluate an organization's security measures and access control infrastructure, careful planning becomes imperative to success. Creating a vision and identifying tangible goals will expedite the process of implementing an access control system that provides both physical security and accountability. It's best to thoroughly research the different types of access solutions available in today's market. Exploring what other churches are doing to secure their facilities is a good starting point to understand all that may be involved with selecting and implementing new access control protocols.

BY EMBRACING NEW ACCESS TECHNOLOGY AND MAINTAINING SOUND SECURITY PROCEDURES, CHURCHES BIG AND SMALL CAN REDUCE THEIR EXPOSURE TO RISKS.

Churches must not become complacent
Implementing an access management solution is just the beginning. Churches must not become complacent and think that "everything is now safe and secure because we have a security system in place." There must be follow-up training every time a member or volunteer assumes responsibility in a new area.

Security procedures may need to be revised from time to time to make them more effective. Enforcement is a strong word; however, it is necessary when established procedures are not being followed in high-risk areas. By embracing new access technology and maintaining sound security procedures, churches big and small can foster a safe, welcoming environment that reduces their risk, and lowers their costly insurance premiums. ◎