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MINISTRY PROTECTION MEMO

TIPS FOR CHURCH USHERS

In our churches today, the ushers do much more than hand out the worship bulletins and take up the offering plates. Ushers are often the first point of contact for anyone entering the church for a worship service or special event. This not only gives the usher the opportunity to be the first to welcome each person; but it gives the usher the opportunity to notice anything unusual, or “out of place”, about those who are entering the church. In the event of an emergency during the worship service, it is the ushers who can best lead the response because they have been well trained and organized.

There are probably four types of emergencies that ushers need to be trained to respond to: individual health emergencies, fire, weather emergency (such as tornadoes), and security

emergency such as the presence of a dangerous person or persons.

Individual health emergencies:

The most important training and preparation for ushers is first aid/CPR/AED training for handling individual health emergencies. Our goal is to have several ushers present during each service who are trained in first aid/CPR/AED. Appropriate use of CPR and/or the AED can save a life. Many churches have added AED units to their locations recently. Thorough training in CPR/AED use can be arranged through the American Red Cross. Providing such training for your ushers, and opening it to the whole community will be a valued service.

Fire emergencies:

In the event of a fire in the church building during worship or any other special event, the ushers will be the leaders who can most efficiently lead the congregation to safety. Training in the use of fire extinguishers, and best evacuation routes can be arranged through the local Fire Department. Working with the Fire Department to plan and carry out “Fire Drills” for the ushers will be a worthwhile endeavor. Be sure to include practice and training in attending to the persons who are present and may have special needs, such as the elderly or disabled.

Weather emergencies:

Nearly every season of the year carries with it the possibility of some sort of

weather emergency. We live through tornado season just in time to get to hurricane season. Then, just as soon as hurricane season ends, we have the ice and snow storms of winter. All of these create possibilities for damage to our buildings and danger to our members and visitors. Usher training for how to evacuate the buildings, or provide as much safety for building occupants as possible until the emergency ends, is important. Local Police and Fire Departments will gladly provide this type of training, and it is valuable to hold practice sessions, just as we mentioned holding “Fire Drills”.

Dangerous Persons:

Reports of violence perpetrated in churches, including robberies, assaults, and even shootings are made more frequently than any of us would hope for. Training ushers to recognize persons who may pose a danger is important. Ushers need to be on the lookout for persons with weapons, those who are intoxicated, those who may be mentally ill and not taking appropriate medication, and those who may have grudges against current or former members or staff. Persons such as these may engage in behaviors indicating an imminent danger such as displaying a weapon (gun, knives, or other objects), violent speech such as hate speech, threatening speech or bullying speech. In the event such persons are identified, the ushers must be prepared to quietly and firmly engage in conversation and remove the persons from the scene. It is imperative to speak plainly, and be

respectful. Simply keep the conversation to the basics – asking the person to leave, or move away from the group, without inviting argument or debate. Sometimes, a simple request not to disrupt the worship is all that is needed. But, if not, then the usher needs to be prepared to state what is expected of the person by saying something as simple as, “You’ll have to leave or we will call the police.” Don’t speak in an accusing or hostile tone of voice and don’t reach out to touch, or grab, the person. Accusatory language or uninvited touch may incite a dangerous reaction that can lead to injury. Usher training that includes some practice sessions for dealing with these types of scenarios will equip your ushers to handle them appropriately without panic.

Some churches are considering adding professional safety personnel to their usher teams. Richard R. Hammar, in Church Law & Tax Report, has reported that churches considering this usually think of adding uniformed armed police officers, uniformed private security guard, or plain clothed and armed church members with appropriate weapons permits. On the one hand, the presence of uniformed police or private security guards may have the greatest potential deterrence effect on those who come into your church looking for an opportunity to perpetrate a crime such as robbery or assault. On the other hand, the presence of plain clothed security may increase the security resources without creating heightened anxiety among parishioners.

No matter which type of safety personnel your church chooses to add to its usher teams, be sure that all members are thoroughly screened including checking references and criminal background screening, all are thoroughly trained in the use of the weapons they carry, and all are trained in crisis management.



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