



Disaster Response – In Their Words

Lessons Learned: Improving Church Safety

In January 2016, a man walked into the Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York City and began yelling threats. This individual went on to damage church property and set fire to two pews before being apprehended by authorities.

Many members of the congregation felt shaken after the incident. The Church of the Heavenly Rest is open to the public twelve hours a day, and the building is also used by a café and a school.

In the weeks following, church members worked to balance concerns about maintaining the church’s open and welcoming identity while ensuring the safety for all who use and visit their building.

In this piece, The Rev. Matt Heyd and then Chief of Staff Lindsey Briggs reflect on the actions that the Heavenly Rest community has taken following this event.

INITIAL RESPONSE AND DIFFUSING ANXIETY

Our first priority during the incident was to take immediate steps to keep people safe. The sexton called 911 and first responders arrived on the scene rapidly to diffuse the situation. The actual event was over quite quickly. Afterwards, we turned our attention to helping members of the Heavenly Rest family feel safe in their place of worship.

- The Rev. Heyd contacted the vestry to notify them about what happened and to enlist their help in making the congregation feel more secure.
- Next, he and church wardens emailed a letter describing the incident to parishioners. The letter was also published on the church’s website.
- The entire vestry came together to greet parishioners for Sunday services the following day.
- Clergy reminded the congregation of the Church’s commitment to being an open and loving presence in the community. Although hazards exist in the world, we are called to not dwell in fear.
- During announcements, The Rev. Heyd outlined actions that church leadership was taking to address the event.
- The incident was not a taboo topic. Church members were encouraged to continue talking about the event during church gatherings such as adult forums and coffee hour.

Faced with the challenge of keeping the church and congregation safe, we



Biography



The Rev. Matt Heyd is Rector of Church of the Heavenly Rest. Lindsey Briggs is the former Chief of Staff & Assistant to the Rector for the Church of the Heavenly Rest.



Fast Facts



CONGREGATION:

Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest

LOCATION:

New York, New York

CONGREGATION SIZE:

About 300

DISASTER RELIEF:

Establishing a Security Task Force and Providing Pastoral Care



decided to take incremental steps to improve Heavenly Rest's security. We established a security task force to provide a formal forum for discussing church safety. The security task force met for six months following the incident in order to achieve two goals:

- Establish a baseline assessment of what security means for Heavenly Rest
- Create a plan for making the campus safe, knowing that we couldn't do everything at once

We were careful to include people experiencing anxiety from the incident and others who were a calming presence on the committee. We worked with a retired member of the New York City Police Department to do a security walkthrough of the building to look for ways the church was vulnerable. Then, The Rev. Heyd and the security task force discerned which recommendations were appropriate for the church and put together a safety and security guide.

It was important to our church members that we continue to work on supporting positive police and community relations. We recognize that those relationships are sometimes fraught, so church leaders held space and encouraged conversation about the event so that parishioners could process their feelings about the safety, justice, law enforcement and forgiveness.

TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE CHURCH SAFETY

Improving church safety is an ongoing process. Here are some of the initial steps that we are considering at Heavenly Rest:

- Key Control – Immediately, the staff worked to identify who has keys to the sacristy and all other doors. This small step helps control access to our space while we work towards making the shift to electronic key cards that can easily be reprogrammed as needed.
- Hospitality and Safety Presence – The church has hired a full-time security staff. They are in plain clothes and warmly welcome everyone using the church's space.
- Security Task Force – Our security task force worked to research and develop a security document with safety recommendations for the congregation.
- Training – We plan to train all ushers and docents in safety procedures and first aid. In particular, we want to make sure that all volunteers can help lead an evacuation and guide visitors to the nearest exit.
- Keeping copies of the floor plan on hand – The floor plan allows first responders to quickly and safely move through our building in the event of a security emergency.
- Checklist – The staff is putting together a checklist of actionable tasks that the Heavenly Rest can do to improve church safety.
- Paying attention for signs of domestic violence and distress – Unlike this incident, the majority of violence that takes place in churches is related to domestic violence. Being mindful of warning signs and making referrals as appropriate can help people in distress and reduces the risk of additional violence.

Key Takeaways



- Improving security can be costly and time-intensive, but there are lower-cost actions that you can take to reduce risk right away such as key control.
- It is difficult to prevent bad events, but we have the ability to reduce our vulnerability and increase our capacity to respond to those events.
- Pastoral concerns were a central following the event. Many of Heavenly Rest's parishioners are long-time New Yorkers, and this incident evoked other past traumatic experiences. Take every opportunity to address anxiety and rededicate parishioners to the Church's mission.
- Enlist the help of vestry, staff, volunteers and other church members to work on improving security. All play a role in keeping your church safe!

Additional Resources



For more information on helping during times of disaster, see the following resources:

- [Ministering to Adults After a Disaster](#)
- [Identifying and Reducing Risk](#)
- [Comprehensive Preparedness Planning Guide for Congregations](#)
- [Serving the Flock Safely](#)
- [Church Safety and Risk Assessment – St. Gabriel the Archangel in Colorado](#)
- [Mental Health First Aid Training \[www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org\]\(http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org\)](#)
- [How To: Build a Church Preparedness Team](#)