

Safety Teams in Houses of Worship: Why Leaders Hesitate to Have Them?

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Abstract

Incidents of violence in houses of worship in the United States have increased over the last ten years. Many houses of worship have implemented security or safety teams to protect their organizations. Some houses of worship have gone beyond using a security team and have developed safety teams. A safety team aims to mitigate the effects of an active shooter. The team training includes assisting the organization with emergencies that are more likely to occur, such as medical emergencies, natural disasters, and suspicious activity on campus. However, many houses of worship have not established an organized safety team to protect against disruptions to their organizations' reputation, productivity, and financial stability. This qualitative single-case study aimed to understand why spiritual leaders have hesitated or failed to establish safety teams to prevent, mitigate, or minimize the impact of violence and other unexpected incidents at their places of worship. The findings of this study relate to the safety of a house of prayer and to general leadership practices applicable to any organization.

Keywords

House of Worship, Risk Management, Safety Team, Security, Spiritual Leaders

1. Introduction

Increasing the safety and security of houses of worship is necessary for today's society, based on a rise in acts of violence and other crimes toward houses of worship (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020). To address this growing problem, some houses of worship have established security teams, while others have implemented safety teams. The primary difference between a security and a safety team is that security teams focus solely on the physical security of a

facility. In contrast, safety teams also address the security of personnel and act to mitigate acts of violence at or toward a house of worship. Safety teams can include the component of a security team, but also serve the organization by mitigating medical emergencies, disruptions from severe weather events, and other incidents that can negatively affect the house of worship's reputation, production, and financial stability. However, most houses of worship do not support adequate security or safety teams. This problem is a strategic leadership issue across denominations and geographic boundaries (Bigley, 2018; Samson, 2020; Scheitle & Ulmer, 2018). This qualitatively designed single-case study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by understanding why leaders in the Potomac Baptist Association, located in southern Maryland, hesitated or declined to implement safety teams in their settings. Most participants from the Potomac Baptist Association demonstrated more effort to secure their houses of worship, as revealed in previous literature. However, an imbalance exists in the safety strategies, as most represented houses of worship were more focused on security against an active shooter than on other emergencies that are more likely to occur unexpectedly. The study's results include recommendations to develop a risk management plan that supports organized safety teams being prepared to prevent or mitigate those unexpected emergencies that may arise in houses of worship.

Houses of worship in the United States are places where people gather physically for spiritual worship, religious study, and community organizing. People rely on these places as safe places of refuge. Over the last ten years, a rise in violence has increased against congregants attending worship services at houses of worship. A study conducted by the *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency* (2020) reported that between 2015 and 2019, 37 incidents of violence occurred during worship services at houses of worship, resulting in 64 deaths and 59 injuries. These incidents occurred in rural, suburban, and urban locations. Gaps exist in the previous literature regarding church safety, particularly in the data addressing other types of emergencies that occur more frequently at a house of worship. Leaders of the church have implemented safety teams in various houses of worship to address active assailant threats, medical emergencies, disasters such as tornadoes, and other incidents that could disrupt the organizational reputation, productivity, and financial stability of houses of worship. However, many, if not most, houses of worship decided not to implement a safety team or assign it low value (Ojedokun & Oduoye, 2020; Scheitle, 2018). This study is significant for understanding why house of worship leaders were hesitant to implement safety teams at their facilities. The first section includes the abstract, background, significance of the study, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The second section includes a review of academic literature. The third section presents the methodology, findings, and conclusions.

1.1. Discussion of Research Questions

RQ1. Organizations develop strategic plans to enhance their operations and the

products or services they offer to consumers. The goal of this research was to identify the reasons house of worship leaders fail to protect the success of their organization by not implementing safety teams. Preventive measures implemented by safety teams can help prevent disruptions to the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. The leader's outward actions will indicate their support or objection to having a safety team and will be a determining factor for other decision-makers in the organization.

RQ2. Between the news, governmental studies, and scholarly research, there has been an increasing amount of information indicating increased violence and acts of fraud against houses of worship. While this study examined the basis for a leader's decisions regarding the safety of their organization, in many denominations, the leader is not the ultimate decision-maker. Additionally, data and insightful information from leaders who support particular denominations or cultures, and who are more or less affected by violence, reveal how the weight of that knowledge impacts their level of support for safety teams.

RQ3. Houses of worship depend on an open and inviting environment to attract guests and serve as a place where members can focus on worship, undistracted by the world's distractions. When considering physical security, a sense of a fortified and militarized appearance may be present at the facility. There are many safety measures an organization can take that appear natural and do not detract from the inviting and open nature of a house of worship. Leaders may have predetermined ideas of what safety measures look like and may not be well-informed about the numerous options available that do not compromise the desired open and inviting feeling while preserving the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability.

RQ4. In a society that is quick to engage in civil litigation for financial gain, houses of worship are not immune to lawsuits and need to take preventive measures to protect the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. Religious leaders may believe the chances of violent crime and fraud are not likely to occur in their organization, thus not feeling the need for a safety team. However, other incidents can occur at a house of worship, like a medical event, that a safety team can intervene in and minimize the organization's exposure to service disruptions. A safety team can conduct a threat-risk assessment to inform leaders of potential exposure to their organizations that they may not be aware of and take action to avert potential threats.

1.2. Problem and Purpose Statement

The primary issue to be addressed was the failure of organizational leaders to establish effective safety teams capable of mitigating emergencies, which resulted in disruptions to the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. The lack of research by secular and religious scholars has left leaders of houses of worship uninformed about the benefits of a safety team in addressing risk management issues that may reduce the likelihood of a serious event occurring on their

campus. The safety team can mitigate issues, allowing spiritual leaders to attend to the spiritual needs of those impacted (Ojedokun & Oduoye, 2020). Houses of worship generally follow their called leaders, and if those leaders do not support the implementation of safety teams, the organization will not fund or sustain such teams (Doherty, 2022; Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020). There are growing trends of increased violence and financial threats toward houses of worship, and leaders may be neglecting the fact that these activities can happen to their organization. Many leaders of houses of worship have ignored the threat to their facilities, resulting in vulnerabilities that are likely to devastate the organization's operational and financial stability (Bigley, 2018). Harmful acts expose houses of worship to fraud schemes, disruption of their cultural diversity, and decreased membership retention (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020). Such disruptions can negatively impact the community's trust in the house of worship as a safe place for families (San Roman et al., 2019). The specific problem addressed is that leaders in the Potomac Baptist Association may not have implemented a safety team in their houses of worship, potentially exposing the organization to disruptions that could harm its reputation, productivity, and financial stability.

The purpose of this flexible single-case study was to develop an understanding of the rationale behind spiritual leaders' decisions not to implement a safety team that would benefit their house of worship congregations. The research includes understanding the basis for why leaders have hesitated or declined to implement safety teams, likely based on their general beliefs, concerns, information (or lack thereof), and fiscal concerns that would deter a house of worship leader from implementing a safety team. Identifying why house of worship leaders hesitate or refuse to establish a safety team to protect their organizations from disruptions to their reputation, productivity, and financial stability will bridge the gaps in the current literature. This study may also enlighten house of worship leaders and encourage them to protect their organizations.

The research questions below guided the study on why leaders view implementing safety teams as they do, as well as what other factors may influence or override their view or support for implementing safety teams.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

RQ1. To what extent do leaders possibly fail to implement adequate safety teams in their houses of worship that can help to prevent disruption of services to the community?

RQ1a. How can leaders demonstrate their support for safety teams that can influence the organization to implement and fund them?

RQ1b. What actions or attitudes can leaders demonstrate that detract from the value of having safety teams?

RQ2. What causes leaders to ignore the trends of increased violence and other

threats to the sustained operations of their house of worship?

RQ2a. How do cultural or denominational issues influence leaders in whether or not to support safety teams in a house of worship?

RQ3. How do leaders in houses of worship understand physical security that does not make the facility appear fortified?

RQ4. To what extent do leaders understand ignoring threat risks that can disrupt their organizational and financial stability by not having safety teams?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it involves understanding why leaders in houses of worship in the Potomac Baptist Association have hesitated or refused to implement safety teams for the protection of their congregants and organizations. The average active shooter incident typically lasts less than fifteen minutes unless a mechanism is in place to disrupt the shooter; a safety team can be that mechanism (Doherty, 2022). Based on the analysis of the data obtained in that study, any misconceptions or the lack of information about implementing safety teams were identified and can be addressed in the future. This study was not intended to discredit these spiritual leaders, but rather to identify and develop an understanding of the reasons they opposed or had not implemented a safety team. The limited research by academia has contributed to the spiritual leaders not being well informed. However, other studies containing a wealth of information on house of worship safety were unknown to the leaders. A delicate balance exists between having a safe and secure environment and also enjoying an open and welcoming atmosphere for congregants to enjoy. However, incidents of violence toward houses of worship are increasing, thus exposing congregants and organizations to violence (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020). Setting aside acts of violence, which are likely to be mitigated by a safety team, other events such as fires, medical emergencies, weather disasters, and general crime may occur while a house of worship is in session.

1.5. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This study aimed to develop an understanding of why leaders in houses of worship hesitate to implement safety teams within their facilities. Several assumptions led to an interest in studying this problem. Once assumptions were identified, I assessed any risks associated with each assumption and then developed a mitigation plan for each identified risk. The initial assumption was that leaders of houses of worship would desire their worship activities to be conducted safely; however, they have not received formal education or training at seminary or Bible college to comprehend how a safety team could be advantageous in preventing, mitigating, and minimizing the organization's exposure to disruptive impacts on their reputation, productivity, and financial stability (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020; Scheitle & Ulmer, 2018). The risk associated with this assumption was that some participants may have received training outside of their

organization's seminary or Bible college experience related to safety and security. To mitigate the risk of this impacting the results during the data collection phase of the study, I followed up with readily available interview questions that assessed the participants' level of awareness regarding the safety and security of their house of worship.

The second assumption was that house of worship leaders understood the importance of safety and security for their facilities, but it was not a priority at the time, or they had not taken the initiative to establish a safety team (Samson, 2020; Scheitle & Ulmer, 2018). A potential risk to this assumption was that the participant in the interview might become defensive, as they would view this assumption as an alleged deficiency in their personal character (Benitez et al., 2018). Mitigating this risk involved confronting the conflict and assuring the participant that their character was not being questioned. Third, leaders did not believe a violent attack was likely at their house of worship. Evidence of increased violence and other crimes at or toward houses of worship has been steadily increasing over the past several years, but this information was unknown or not acknowledged by leaders (Glassman, 2018; Kroesbergen, 2018; Samson, 2020). A risk to this assumption was that during the interview, the participant might become defensive if they believed they were being accused of neglecting the protection of their organization or that Scripture assured the Lord would protect His people. My mitigation plan included beginning each interview in prayer. Secondly, the interview was set up as best as possible to avoid challenging the participant's view of their vulnerability or their theology. I was respectful of their appointment with the Lord. I had a Scripture available to support the assumption, but it did not challenge the leader's paradigm.

The limitation of this qualitative study was that the sampling of houses of worship was limited to one denomination in one small region of the state. In one way, this limits the ability to generalize the research findings, making the conclusions applicable to houses of worship in various denominations and geographical locations. However, the conclusions contribute to the existing literature, which includes studies involving Southern Baptist Convention churches (Samson, 2020; Scheitle & Halligan, 2018). Considering that this study was a single-case study, there were limited options available to mitigate the limitations. The best I was able to do was to include the limitations in the study, so that other researchers can conduct future studies that broaden the study's impact to more denominations in various geographical locations.

This study was limited to leaders of Southern Baptist churches in the Potomac Baptist Association. Since I conducted this study, and the time designated for its completion, denominations outside of the Southern Baptist churches in the Potomac Baptist Association were not included in this study. This delimitation was necessary in order to complete the single case study with meaningful conclusions within the designated timeframe. These meaningful conclusions remain relevant and valuable to previous studies that included churches affiliated with Southern Baptist or evangelical Protestant denominations.

2. Literature Review

Bourns and Wright (2004) gained an understanding of church vulnerability and explored the perspectives of spiritual leaders on violence against churches. Questionnaires were mailed to 175 churches of different denominations nationwide, with only 55 surveys returned (31%). The responding churches were mostly Baptist and Methodist churches, and purported violence was low at their churches, but they did acknowledge that violence and anger were slowly increasing. Additionally, the survey revealed that 49% of the spiritual leaders reported observing a gradual increase in violence, while 54.9% of the leaders stated they believed adult anger was also increasing gradually. When asked about juveniles, 47% of respondents reported observing a slow increase in juvenile anger, while 31% believed juvenile anger was increasing rapidly.

Bourns and Wright (2004) revealed that the spiritual leaders responding to the survey believed that violence between people would occur 23% of the time during a church service. In comparison, 33% of the respondents believed violence would occur as members were excited about the building. The truth is that the violence at houses of worship occurs most of the time in the worship area. Leaders also believed that committee meetings were 13% more likely to have violence against a person, while 3% believed it was probably in pastoral counseling. Lastly, 11% believed that if violence were going to occur, it would take place before the church service started. While the respondents acknowledged that violence and anger were increasing at some rate, 92% of these churches had no security other than a greeter or usher at the front door. In addition, the study revealed that only 3% of churches responding to the survey had an action plan if violence did break out at their churches. During this research, only a few of the represented houses of worship disclosed that they had plans and policies to address violence or other disruptions within their organizations. The majority of the represented houses of worship were content with informal ideas on how emergencies would be handled.

While most active shooter incidents, on average, last only 12 minutes (Doherty, 2022), most church leaders responding to the survey indicated that if violence or another emergency event occurred, they would call 9-1-1 and wait for assistance or be instructed on what to do. This event was disturbing as it took longer than 12 minutes to place the 9-1-1 call, provide the dispatcher with the necessary information, and then have the police dispatched. By the time police units started to arrive, the act of violence was over, and multiple casualties were highly probable. House of worship leaders have the immense responsibility to answer their call to pray for people and the church, as well as teach the Word of God to their congregations. However, that role does not relieve them of the responsibility to protect their house of worship from disruptions to the reputation, productivity, and financial stability of the organization (Bigley, 2018; Morton, 2009). While spiritual leaders were not expected to be personally involved in the handling of safety and security, they do need to empower others who can take on that role for the benefit of the organization (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020;

Scheitle & Halligan, 2018). This study supported previous studies on house worship safety, as almost all participants were spiritual leaders who relied on congregation members for expertise in providing safety and security.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

All leaders, including those in the house of worship, are influenced by their social exposure to media, the experiences of others, their own paradigms regarding the need for safety, and their definition of what cultural leadership entails and looks like (Chong et al., 2018). Chong et al. (2018) interviewed 356 participants, ranging from managers to other positions in a company's human resource department in China. The focus of the study was on the impact that leadership and the organization's culture have on each other. Through social learning, many leaders have observed others they consider models and, in turn, put into practice the leadership qualities they have learned. Some of the leadership qualities include being able to influence or persuade others in the organization to understand and consider changes. This idea may be what is necessary in houses of worship to convince the organization of the need for a safety team. Interestingly, Chong et al. noted that social learning can occur in either direction, from the leader to the organization's culture or from the organization to the leader. Therefore, the house of worship leader or the members of the congregation could be the catalyst to change their mindset regarding the importance of a safety team in their organization.

What someone learns in their life experiences to gain the knowledge to set their worldview should not be inflexible. Learning new knowledge and observing different models of development can keep a leader current in a social context and foster growth as a leader. Using supportive literature, Chuang (2021) explained how adults acquire new knowledge through various experiences in human relations and social interactions. Additionally, Chuang maintained that while the leader may not immediately change their position on a matter, they may show a change in their position based on the new knowledge and observation, as well as the leader's organization's acceptance of any new norms. The leader models the change in mindset and direction, ensuring the organization understands the new direction. In the case of this study, it was found that many representative houses of worship implemented either an organized or informal safety team strategy, supporting and recommending safety or security strategies to their organizations. Only very few houses of worship did not support their spiritual leader's recommendations for a safety or security strategy.

Considering that the social learning theory is based on exposure, observation, and modeling to acquire new knowledge, Yarberry and Sims (2021) conducted a study that supported the notion that human interaction is necessary for practical observation and modeling to occur. The authors conducted the study in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many workplaces transitioned to a virtual environment for organizational activities. Yasberry and Sims examined the

experiences of eight participants who were mandated to work remotely. The authors sought to determine whether employees can effectively enhance their skills and job knowledge in a virtual or remote environment. While there was some success in enhancing skills and job knowledge, the study highlighted the importance of human interaction not only in learning but also in fostering a sense of belonging to the organization. In the context of this study, members of a house of worship generally sought a sense of belonging and value within the organization. That sense of value and belonging was necessary to gain their support for proposed policy changes. A spiritual leader could be more effective in gaining support from their congregation for safety teams if the leader were to engage with the congregation in person, rather than presenting strategies in a virtual format. Virtual formats often lack the human connection that many in society desire for their organizations.

Transformational Leadership Theory

House of worship leaders changing their mindset or intentionality to implement safety teams is necessary for members of those organizations to recognize and accept the internal organizational change. Leading religious organizations into change requires leaders to be transformational leaders. Sun and Henderson (2017) supported previous literature, indicating that transformational leadership has a positive impact on individuals and group or organizational level outcomes. The authors examined the type of impact transformational leadership had on the performance of a school system in New York City. The authors identified three practices that contributed to the institutionalization of the effect of transformational leadership. These practices included fostering a collaborative culture, utilizing performance information, and cultivating relationships with external stakeholders. Sun and Henderson explained that a collaborative culture within an organization can occur through healthy social exchanges among its members. Using performance information with a purpose was incorporated into the process to enhance internal decision-making within the organization's management ranks. Lastly, by including external stakeholders, the organization's decisions were strengthened and aligned with its shared values. After analysis of available data, surveys were sent to teachers, parents, and students to examine management practices. Sun and Henderson concluded that transformational leadership fosters enthusiasm and creates the right environment for an organization to succeed. As a result, student performance in New York City high schools improved.

Hoch et al. (2018) also supported the effectiveness of transformational leadership in influencing organizational change. However, the authors extended their study further to examine how transformational leadership interacts with new leadership models, such as ethical, authentic, and servant leadership. This transformational leadership study was conducted through meta-analyses of contemporary leadership styles and compared with transformational leadership to determine if ethical, authentic, and servant leadership can enhance the effectiveness of transformational leadership. The results of the meta-analysis suggested a high de-

gree of redundancy between ethical and authentic leadership and transformational leadership. Transformational leaders built trust in their followers by being ethical and authentic in their actions. However, servant leadership was found to have some distinct differences compared to transformational leadership. Servant leadership was not found to be nonredundant to transformational leadership and scored higher in achieving outcomes than transformational leadership. The characteristics of servant leadership may explain these results. These characteristics included “listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community” (p. 507). Although transformational and servant leadership share some similar characteristics, servant leadership prioritizes the needs of others above all else. [Bush \(2018\)](#) also supported transformational leadership as a robust influence process. Studies were examined from learning institutions in Ghana, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, Texas, and Michigan. The literature analyzed by the Bush study confirmed that transformational leaders were often charismatic and could persuade others to adopt behaviors that would support the leader’s vision of change.

Lastly, a study on the relationship between transformational leadership, adult attachment, and God attachment was reviewed. [Foulkes-Bert et al. \(2019\)](#) aimed to investigate the relationship between adult attachment and God attachment, as well as their impact on transformational leaders. More specifically, the study aimed to bridge the gap in the literature on the attachment of religious leaders to adults and God, as well as the importance of this attachment to spiritual transformational leaders. Adult attachment refers to the attachment to those who are significant to a person, which helps develop or maintain a model for relating to others and oneself. The God attachment was described as a personal connection to God, where God is the figure of attachment, like a child attaches to their parents.

Participants in the [Foulkes-Bert et al. \(2019\)](#) study were students in a Baptist seminary, and the data were collected through an online survey. The God attachment part of the study employed a 28-item self-report survey to measure the attachment and separation anxiety of these seminary students. The analysis of the collected surveys suggested that a God attachment was a stronger relationship with a transformational leader than was an adult attachment. The leaders were more impacted by separation anxiety from God than by other adult attachments. Leaders with a God attachment exhibited a unique variance in transformational leadership, not observed in those with adult attachment. The results of Foulkes-Bert et al.’s research had an impact on this researcher’s study. The level of attachment to God either blocked or enhanced their understanding of Scripture regarding the privilege to protect their organizations. Additionally, when relying on their attachment to God to serve as transformational leaders, they were drawing on more than their personal opinions that may have been formed through social learning.

2.2. Related Studies

Full Truth Church

Other studies related to the safety and security of houses of worship were also found during this literature review. One such study focused on the Full Truth Calvary Church, also known as Full Truth. The Full Truth believers that [Glassman \(2018\)](#) studied for three years stood firm in their belief that only through prayer, without any other influence, would they be safe from harm in their churches. The believers also believed that if harm came to the church, it was a result of their own sin and lack of faith. Whole Truth believers reject any outside assistance, such as medical intervention, including dental, prescription eyeglasses, emergency treatment, and medicines. Understanding the doctrine of Full Truth beliefs provided researchers with insight into why such a church might not implement safety teams to protect its organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability.

Growing Mental Health Crisis

After interviews with mental health specialists, health care professionals, families, and law enforcement, it was discovered that in a high number of incidents where a mentally ill person escalated to use violence as a means to an end or call attention to a problem, they believed nobody was paying attention to them ([Doherty, 2022](#)). Additionally, [Doherty \(2022\)](#) noted that victims' families were suing organizations, churches included, where there were indicators of a person having mental difficulties and did not act responsibly. This was a concern for houses of worship, as they sought to assist all people. However, with the increased incidents of violence being experienced in the United States, staff need to be trained to identify indicators that a person is suffering from mental illness and exhibit indicators of irrationality. To do this, houses of worship need to engage in planning to prevent a mentally distraught person from using acts of violence toward attendees at their facility ([Doherty](#)). Without such a plan, the organization will be vulnerable to unnecessary civil litigation, which can disrupt its reputation, productivity, and financial stability. [Doherty \(2022\)](#) also noted a study by the US Secret Service that identified one of the patterns of a potential attacker as visiting the facility several times to plan their attack. [Meszaros \(2017\)](#) noted that those committing mass shootings had significantly higher rates of the shooter suffering from mental illness than the population in general. An analysis of mass shootings correlated with the lack of mental health services or facilities to treat the shooting suspects. Meszaros revealed a decrease in federal and state funding for mental health hospitals, and many mental health hospitals have ceased operations.

Lack of Formal Crisis Education of Leaders

One of the areas of weakness that has prevented house of worship leaders from being more intentional about protecting their organizations is that there was no focus or direction given to these leaders in their seminaries or Bible colleges. [Morton \(2009\)](#) argued that institutions of higher education have failed to recognize and address the increasing safety issues that new spiritual leaders need to be prepared for in their ministry. [Rowel et al. \(2011\)](#) studied a variety of higher education institutions to examine curricula that introduce their students to disasters and emergencies. While secular institutions had begun to offer preparedness cur-

ricula, religious institutions had not. Rowel et al. focused on how house of worship leaders could become prepared to assist their communities. The researcher would argue that the same principles are necessary not only in nearby communities but also within the leaders' own organizations. The article claimed a failure of government agencies to collaborate with houses of worship and integrate them in emergency preparedness and response. Houses of worship, however, may be reluctant to accept government assistance in their emergency planning due to not trusting the governmental agency or the concern that obligations of the governmental agency's intentions would serve the needs of the house of worship without interference.

3. Research Methodology

The research method used in a qualitative study is the approach to the research determined by the scope of the research and how the researcher plans to collect and analyze data. Researchers must become aware of their role in research that extends beyond problem identification and research design and conduct research with the vigor to minimize any previous experiences or biases that could lead to misinterpretation of the collected data. The researcher wants a credible and trustworthy product, as this will also reflect on the quality of the researcher's reputation. In this study, qualitative and flexible design methods, including a single-case study and data triangulation, were employed to produce the best possible product.

3.1. Population and Sampling

Qualitative studies do not typically include a defined set of data sources to draw successful conclusions, unlike quantitative studies. The flexibility of the qualitative study allows a researcher to adjust certain aspects of the study as needed to obtain the best data to answer the research questions. However, the results of the qualitative study must be rigorously analyzed to ensure that the data is accurately interpreted. This begins with selecting the best participants for the study. To keep the study manageable, the researcher must identify the population from which participants are selected. In this study, the thirty-one (31) Potomac Baptist Association churches formed the population from which participant sampling was conducted. The participants were selected using the purposive sampling method. In other words, the sampling of participants was purposely done by selecting church leaders as they are best suited to provide in-depth information on why they hesitate to implement safety teams to protect their organizations. Using the sampling model of [Guest et al. \(2020\)](#), I exercised a high degree of rigor to support the justification of the participant sample size based on the saturation of the data. Using the contents recommended in this study, I produced a study with conclusions that are validated, trustworthy, and complete.

3.2. Data Collection

Before a researcher can collect data, they need to determine what type of data is

necessary to answer the research questions and how they will organize the data from the moment it is received. Additionally, the researcher must determine the most effective method for collecting data. Several data collection options were considered for this study, including interview guides, surveys, and archival data. I used an interview guide during the in-person interviews with participants. In-person interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their beliefs and decision-making processes, enabling me to tailor the questioning to probe the most profound levels of information necessary to answer the research questions. Having a data organization plan helped me manage the data from the time it was received through the analysis phase of the study. This data organization plan outlines the procedures for collecting, organizing, storing, and preserving data to ensure it is handled and interpreted responsibly.

Data Analysis

Unlike a quantitative study, data analysis in a qualitative study needs to begin sooner rather than later (Belotto, 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). A qualitative study involves a significant amount of data to digest and interpret. Waiting until the end of data collection can make the analysis seem overly burdensome and potentially lead to errors in the analysis. Once the research data has been collected, the researcher needs to deploy a method of qualitative analysis to identify common themes that address the research questions within the study. Several methods exist to conduct a qualitative analysis of the collected research data. Qualitative researchers may use mind mapping when conducting multi-site research. Other qualitative analysis methods include metaphor and story analysis, which aim to have participants share stories or metaphors about the subject of study (Cassell & Bishop, 2019). To best address the research questions in this study, data analysis was conducted by using thematic analysis. The goal of the qualitative analysis was to produce conclusions that answered the research questions, while ensuring that the analysis was transparent, validated, and adequately interpreted with minimal bias (Cassell & Bishop, 2019). By analyzing the transcripts of participants in in-person semi-structured interviews, common themes were identified as they related to the hesitation of house of worship leaders to implement safety teams in their organizations, which aim to reduce disruption to the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability.

Presentations of the Findings

This study was conducted by collecting data via audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with eighteen (18) participating senior pastors from the thirty-one (31) churches of the Potomac Baptist Association (PBA). Before conducting the semi-structured interviews, I obtained voluntary consent from each participant. The participants were informed that the interviews would be audibly recorded and transcribed for later review. As the semi-structured interviews took place, I utilized the Otter.ai transcription application to record and transcribe the interviews in real-time, allowing for audibly accurate transcription. After the interview, I compared the transcription with the audio recording and refined the

transcripts for accuracy. The transcripts were provided to the participants for review and validation to ensure that they accurately reflected the content of their interviews. Once the participants validated the transcripts, the transcripts were then uploaded into MAXQDA analytical software for coding and thematic analysis. The themes developed during this study are listed below.

Several anticipated themes were identified through the thematic analysis of the participants' semi-structured interviews. Those anticipated themes are discussed in the section of this study's findings. In addition to the anticipated themes, three unexpected themes were discovered in this study. These discovered themes were verified through triangulation by the high frequency with which the themes appeared in the coded transcripts across the participants' semi-structured interviews. These discovered themes related to the primary focus that the leaders or their houses of worship have on safety and security to protect their organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. The discovered themes include an overreliance on firearms, overconfidence in background checks, and the lack of a team concept. While each of these discovered themes can be an essential part of a safety strategy for houses of worship in and of itself, many participants focused so intently on one or two of these themes that there was an imbalance in the overall safety of their houses of worship.

Relationship of the Findings to the Research Questions

The findings presented in this study address the research questions developed specifically for this study. The findings identified factors that contribute to leaders not implementing an adequate safety team due to a lack of understanding of an organized safety team, lethargy, and apathy toward the topic of safety teams, and not being provided with resources that would be helpful to start incrementally building an organized safety team to protect the house of worship as intended. The research questions related to ignoring trends about violence and other crimes against houses of worship identified gaps between spiritual leaders and others in their organizations or member associations. This finding proactively provides necessary information to assist leaders in remaining mindful of trends, rather than requiring them to find the time to research related, valid articles. The data supported the notion that most participants in this study had a good understanding of the balance between security and a welcoming and inviting environment.

Relationship of the Findings to the Literature Review

During the review of available academic literature during the proposal phase of this study, it was found that there was a limited number of studies on safety and security in houses of worship. There were even fewer studies on why spiritual leaders would hesitate to implement a safety or security team to protect their house of worship from disrupting the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. Findings of lethargy and apathy were strongly supported in previous studies (Samson, 2020). Unfortunately, this study also revealed a common theme of lethargy and apathy in houses of worship that lack either a formal or informal security team. These earlier researchers also found that white Protestant

churches were less likely to take church safety as seriously as black churches, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim houses of worship (Scheitle & Ulmer, 2018; Samson, 2020). This study does not support the earlier findings, as the churches in this study had racially mixed congregations comprising white, black, and mixed racial groups. There were no discernible differences in the implementation of some form of security and safety strategy in these Protestant churches. Except for two houses of worship represented by participants 6 and 13 in this study, generational differences were not a factor in implementing a safety or security strategy.

The findings in this current study are similar to those in earlier studies (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2020; Scheitle & Ulmer, 2018), in that security is primarily focused on the safety needs that could result from medical, man-made, or natural disasters occurring in houses of worship. Only one previous study could be found (Doherty, 2022) that had a similar finding as this study that looked to the benefit of an organized safety team that could be capable of preventing or reducing the disruption to the house of worship's reputation in the community, the productivity of services to the community, and the financial stability of a house of worship so it can not only continue to exist but also resource their workers to provide the ministries they were established to do. Scheitle and Ulmer (2018) discovered that only a few members of the congregation they studied knew who was serving on the safety team. This finding was also supported in the researcher's study. Additionally, most of the security or safety team members in Scheitle and Ulmer (2018) operated in a low-visibility manner. All participants in this study supported the establishment of a security or safety team operating under a low-visibility strategy. I also believe this is the first study of its kind since the Supreme Court of the United States struck down provisions in a New York state law that restricted the issuance of handgun carry permits to only those who could demonstrate a qualified, specific need for a permit. In the landmark June 23, 2022, *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. Bruen* decision, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional for states to require handgun wear-and-carry permit applicants to provide a substantial reason for the issuance of a permit. That decision affected other states with similar handgun wear-and-carry permit process restrictions. The influx of handgun carry permits has changed the posture of many houses of worship to over-reliance on firearms as part of their security or safety strategy. This study can potentially make a significant contribution to narrowing the gap in the academic literature on the importance of organized safety teams in houses of worship.

3.3. Summary of the Findings

Based on the earlier review of the limited available academic literature, I identified themes from the literature that are likely to be observed in this study if there had been no efforts to address those themes in the house of worship community. The findings in this study supported some of the earlier themes to a point. However, based on the single case study of the participating PBA leaders, the findings reflect that there has been at least some level of awareness and action steps to protect

houses of worship from disruptions to their reputation, productivity, and financial stability through the use of safety teams. This is important as it illustrates that many spiritual leaders are more attuned to events threatening houses of worship. Unfortunately, lethargy and apathy continue to plague the safety of many of these houses of worship leaders and congregations.

The primary concern of this study is the failure of organizational leaders to establish effective safety teams capable of mitigating emergencies, which results in disruptions to the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. Based on the findings in this single case study, it can be argued that twelve of the eighteen participants have implemented some form of safety team strategy to address emerging threats to their organizations. Based on the data and some of the participants' own admissions, this researcher would argue that organizations with an organized security or safety team are better trained, staffed, and equipped to mitigate emergencies in the best interest of the house of worship. Additionally, most of the twelve organizations having safety teams in this study are heavily focused on the active shooter threat to security and only address sexual abuse through background checks and segregating the children's activities in a secure area of the house of worship. These actions are reasonable first steps, but fail to address medical emergencies, non-aggressive suspicious activity, and other safety measures. If these organizations continue to develop into an all-hazards operating safety team with a genuine team concept, risk management assessments will direct the team to their highest-priority issues while still being prepared to address less significant but potentially impactful incidents.

The specific problem investigated in this single-case study was that leaders in the Potomac Baptist Association may not be implementing a safety team in their houses of worship, potentially exposing the houses of worship to disruptions that could harm the organization's reputation, productivity, and financial stability. As previously mentioned, a weak argument could be made that a representative sample of Potomac Baptist Association houses of worship has implemented some level of strategy to safeguard those attending their facilities. Many of those strategies are narrowly focused on an active shooter while neglecting other security and safety issues the organization may overlook. Suppose this problem is viewed from a comprehensive perspective. In that case, most of these participants have not received any information or exposure during their schooling or in their pastorate to prepare them for considering the protection of those who attend their houses of worship. This has left many of these participants doing their best without any recommended strategies, templates for risk management assessments, or an understanding of strategic planning strategies that would blend all considerations of needs and opportunities for the house or worship to be successful, not by luck but rather by intentionality.

The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the rationale behind spiritual leaders not implementing a safety team that would benefit their house of worship congregations, so that gaps could be narrowed and this infor-

mation could be provided to Bible colleges and seminars to equip spiritual leaders for the task at hand, protecting the flock. Additionally, this case study aimed to educate house of worship leaders and encourage them to safeguard their organizations. This study was designed to introduce the concept of a safety team prepared to mitigate various types of events, rather than a security team whose primary purpose is incapacitating an active shooter, which is statistically unlikely to occur with certainty. The participants in this study are eager to learn how to develop their strategies into more organized, dynamic, and practical strategies to protect their house of worship from disruptions to their reputation, productivity, and financial stability. Follow-up sessions with participants can provide the tools they seek to be successful without draining their organization's ministry priorities. The findings in this study identified weaknesses in leaders' understanding of the current and emerging threats that can disrupt the entire operation of a house of worship, as the threat relates to sexual assault, civil litigation, overconfidence in background checks, and threats of a cyber intrusion that can financially devastate a house of worship.

3.4. Application to Professional Practice

Organizational leaders have the responsibility to ensure that their organization is best positioned to remain relevant in the current marketplace and to anticipate the obstacles that could hinder its competitiveness in the future marketplace. Spiritual leaders in houses of worship need to understand the leadership concept of being relevant in the current or future marketplace to their organization's mission. Without having an awareness of increased trends of violence toward houses of worship or a plan to address any emergency that could disrupt the reputation, productivity, and financial stability, of their house of worship, spiritual leaders and congregations fail to address the potential threats to their organization to remain relative and competitive in the future remaining relative by having the ability to provide ministry-related services that are needed in the community. A house of worship is competitive by operating in such a manner. In contrast, the community can trust and rely on the house of worship in times of need or personal growth, rather than relying on secular or scandalous solutions. Spiritual leaders bear a heavy burden to ensure that their house of worship is a safe place for gathering, serving, and nurturing those in their community. Effective safety teams can help spiritual leaders achieve these goals.

Improving General Leadership Practice

The findings of this study focused on a sample of participants from a specific organization, the PBA. These specific findings resulted from common issues found in general leadership principles. Whether the organization is a corporate business, a governmental agency, a non-profit organization, or a house of worship, it does not matter. These same standard leadership practices prevent organizations from identifying, preventing, or mitigating potential threats that can be disruptive, and keep the organization from reaching its full potential for success.

The specific issues identified in the findings of this study provide insight for leaders to improve their organizations' resiliency. The general leadership practices identified in this study, applicable to leadership beyond this study, include reducing tunnel vision, mitigating apathy, engaging in a risk management process, and being involved and supportive of those working within the organization.

Potential Implementation Strategies

The findings of this study can be utilized by leaders of houses of worship and other leaders to enhance the effectiveness of their organizations by addressing potential risks. Leaders who practice tunnel vision, exhibit apathy, fail to implement risk management, and are not involved or supportive of their workers will negatively impact their organizations in numerous ways. These negative impacts include reduced efficiency, increased turnover, increased risk exposure, and financial risks. Some strategies can be leveraged to minimize risks to their organizations. First, before leaders can implement strategies to maximize safety or other organizational strategies for success, they should be aware of the trends that potentially threaten their organizations. This study demonstrated that some leaders were unaware or not convinced that the violent trends against houses of worship were increasing. These leaders did not understand the trends that could potentially affect their houses of worship. A SWOT analysis is a popular method to assess an organization's awareness of its vulnerabilities and strengths. Knowing the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats will help the leader avoid tunnel vision by being aware of all areas of the organization. A SWOT analysis can be conducted by competent staff, and the results can then be presented to organizational leadership. Leadership can establish a risk management team to review all the threats identified in the SWOT analysis and identify additional threats or risks to the organization that the SWOT may not have uncovered.

Now that the organization is aware of the vulnerabilities, the risk management team can review each threat or risk and categorize them in a matrix based on the potential risk or threat, as well as the impact on the organization if the risk or threat were to occur. Once the risks and threats have been identified and categorized in a matrix, strategies can be developed to prevent or mitigate them. A strategy should also be developed to guide the organization through recovery if one of the identified risks or threats materializes. The quicker the organization can recover from an incident, the less disruption it will experience, both operationally and financially. A strategy recommended for developing any program, policy, or procedure is to explore other similar organizations for best practices. Similar organizations may have already developed plans and processes that others can review and adapt for their specific context, eliminating the need to develop an entirely new product. This can save an organization not only money but also time in the development and implementation of programs, policies, or procedures.

The next potential strategy is for a mechanism that keeps leaders involved in implementing the solutions developed in the risk management plan. Suppose leaders are not engaged or publicly support plans to protect the organization. In

that case, the workforce is unlikely to view the risk management plan as serious and will not take it seriously. Leaders can send brief messages throughout the organization to inform them of the strategies' importance and each workforce member's role in supporting the strategies. As leaders interact with workforce members, conversations about threats to the organization and potential solutions will keep them well-informed and help identify any internal trends that may disrupt the organization's success. These quick worker contacts also allow the leader to engage the worker on a personal level, where they can be appreciated and informed on why particular strategies are essential. It is essential to keep the workforce informed and appreciate them, so they are well-informed, aware of their expectations, and experience as little turnover as possible.

Next, threats to an organization will change, and the best practices for mitigating threats will also change over time. A strategy should be developed where all levels of the organizational leadership review the SWOT and risk management plan to ensure it is currently relevant and the best available model. Suppose a plan is developed and placed on a shelf without being used or reviewed. In that case, a false sense of security occurs, and the organization is no better prepared than it was before the plan was developed. Another time the risk management plan should be reviewed is after an incident has occurred. This is an excellent opportunity to review what worked and what did not during the incident, as well as identify any necessary changes to the plan. Leaders must be involved in all stages of the organization's risk management process to demonstrate to those in the organization the importance of the plan.

These implementation strategies will only be theoretical unless houses of worship can organize the people necessary to make these strategies a reality. Establishing an organized safety team can make these recommended implementation strategies a reality. Reviewing the results of the risk assessment will guide the structure of the safety team and identify any services that are currently missing. An organized safety team should consist of several people and ideally have diverse backgrounds. These diverse backgrounds can include current or retired law enforcement, emergency managers, military, as well as fire and medical personnel. However, other positions on a safety team may be available to volunteers without prior military or public safety experience. For example, almost all the houses of worship represented in this study had security cameras, but no one monitored the camera system to detect potential issues before they occurred. When suspicious activity is observed through camera monitoring, the information can be relayed to other safety team members over the radio. Observing and mitigating potential issues early gives the organization the best opportunity to de-escalate potential issues so they do not disrupt activities at the house of worship. Additionally, active camera monitoring is a strategy that can be used to monitor various areas inside and outside a facility. This will reduce the number of personnel needed to be posted to observe the critical areas of the house of worship, allowing personnel to be used for other safety or welcoming tasks.

One misconception about a safety team is that current or prior law enforcement is needed for the team to be effective. While law enforcement personnel offer some advantages, houses of worship can have an effective safety team without relying on law enforcement personnel, especially if the house of worship has members with a calming disposition who can help prevent problems from escalating. Each person on the safety team should be assigned roles and responsibilities on a weekly basis, encompassing tasks such as camera monitoring, parking lot duties, medical response, disturbance mitigation, or serving as a designated team leader. Cross-training safety team members also provides a mechanism to cover gaps caused by a safety team member being absent on a given day. House of worship safety teams should develop quarterly training sessions that include radio procedures, camera operation, first aid, personal protection, and other relevant topics to strengthen the safety team and maximize its benefits to the house of worship and its attendees. By establishing a well-trained and balanced, organized safety team, those attending activities at the house of worship can enjoy their experience without being distracted, knowing that safety and security activities are in place the entire time. If an unfortunate incident does occur, the safety team can respond promptly and mitigate the incident, thereby reducing disruptions to the house of worship's reputation, productivity, and financial stability.

3.5. Recommendations for Further Study

This single case study investigated why spiritual leaders hesitate to implement safety teams in their houses of worship. The study was limited to a single religious denomination in a specific regional area of a state. I recommend further studies across different denominations and geographic areas to determine if the same results are found in those studies. Based on the three unanticipated themes developed in this study, further studies abroad would provide evidence that religious seminaries and educational institutions developing future spiritual leaders should develop a curriculum to educate them on the trends of violence toward houses of worship and how to address other safety needs holistically. The development of safety teams should be part of the curriculum to prepare new spiritual leaders to adequately protect their house of worship's reputation, productivity, and financial stability.

Previous research did not mention the three discovered themes in this study. First, the study found an overreliance on firearms. This study revealed that since the U.S. Supreme Court ([U.S. Supreme Court, 2022](#)) relaxed handgun carry permit restrictions nationwide, more people are carrying firearms. House of worship security teams are more focused on having an armed security person than on having personnel ready for other emergencies that are more likely to occur in a house of worship. Additionally, the overreliance on firearms as part of the house of worship security demonstrated that firearms were the centerpiece of the security strategy for most houses of worship that had them. Many of the houses of worship in this study had a single armed person either as their security strategy or as the cen-

ter focus of their security team. Further studies investigating this theme will determine whether its significance is as profound as observed in this study or is limited to the particular area examined.

The second recommendation for further study relates to the overconfidence in background checks discovered in this current study. Those potentially working with children or vulnerable adults were subject to a background check. As this study revealed, there is an overconfidence in the value of background checks in determining if a potential worker has had past incidents that would disqualify them from working with children or vulnerable adults. While background checks are important, leaders were unaware of what they were. They were not included in the background check that should be considered before approving someone to work in a sensitive area of the organization. Additional studies of other denominations and organizations that rely on background checks would likely support the findings in this study. These supportive studies will provide a basis for educating organizational leaders about background checks and additional sources of reliable information that can be researched to exercise due diligence before allowing a person to work with children or in other sensitive areas within an organization.

Lastly, this study revealed a lack of an overall team concept strategy for ensuring safety in a house of worship. Many houses of worship in this study had one person who carried a firearm as part of the security strategy. This person operated without any support from others in the house of worship. Additionally, most houses of worship were imbalanced in their safety strategy. Most of the houses of worship in this study had a much heavier focus on security than on overall safety in their organization. They wanted to be rightfully prepared for a potential active shooter, but neglected other emergencies that were more likely to occur. Most of the security teams in this study were informal and lacked formal organization. Many participants expressed a desire to develop an organized and balanced safety team, but lacked knowledge on how to do so. Additional studies would provide a proper understanding of whether houses of worship are organized and balanced between security and safety. This additional research would likely to support the findings of this researcher's study. The importance of these supportive research findings would pave the way for house of worship leaders to better protect their organizations from disruptions. This current study also revealed that information reaching the house of worship leaders is quite limited. The supportive findings of additional research will also lay the foundation for leaders to implement effective safety teams with confidence.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Addressing violence toward houses of worship has received limited attention from the academic community. Even less attention has been given to the more likely unexpected incidents that may occur at a house of worship, which could disrupt the institution's reputation and productivity. Security against acts of violence at a

house of worship is important to address, but there is more to providing a safe environment than security. Organized safety teams provide security to prevent or mitigate hostile acts of violence, and they are prepared to assist house of worship attendees in cases of medical emergencies, fire, natural disasters, abuse, and other unexpected incidents. Prior scholarly studies have shown that a majority of houses of worship have taken only minimal steps, if any, to ensure the safety of their organizations. The primary focus of this study was to understand why spiritual leaders of houses of worship hesitate or decline to establish an organized safety team, given the increasing trend of violence against houses of worship in the United States and the need to provide critical services to attendees during unexpected incidents. To best understand why spiritual leaders hesitate or decline to implement an organized safety team, consideration must be given to any experiences the spiritual leaders have had that have influenced their views on the need for organized safety teams.

I employed a qualitative design, specifically a single-case study, to develop the research questions and framework for this study. The single case study organization used in the study was the Potomac Baptist Association (PBA). The research framework outlined the relationships between the concepts, actors, theories, and constructs of this study, thereby ensuring the research remained focused on the study's objectives. This study developed its participants from a population of spiritual leaders within the PBA. To be eligible for this study, participants had to be senior pastors at their respective houses of worship. I collaborated with the leadership of the PBA, and eighteen (18) pastors volunteered to be participants in this study. Although the participants belonged to the same denomination, they were diverse in terms of generational and racial composition.

This study supports many of the themes presented in earlier studies. However, the data in this study demonstrated that efforts have been made to better safeguard houses of worship in the PBA. While there has been progress to better protect houses of worship, in the PBA, spiritual leaders need to be equipped with information provided to them so they can use it to understand their vulnerabilities and develop a better understanding of how safety teams can prevent or mitigate the vulnerabilities in a total safety perspective, and not just security-focused. The data provided by the participants well supported the findings of this study. However, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other denominations across different regions of the country. This study provides recommendations for future research that aims to bridge the gaps in the current literature and make houses of worship safer organizations for their members and guests.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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