



## When Family Hurts

### THE EVENTS:

It took just a few minutes of talking with the woman to realize she was stressed about something...really stressed. What the team member thought would be a few moments of pleasantries was quickly becoming a silent call for help. There was nothing overtly wrong with her conversation; it was pleasant and amiable. But the conversation was also rapid fire with body language that said, "I'm worried about something." That "something" turned out to be her grown son.

The previous night, she related to him, the son, in his mid-20's and physically fit, had made a direct threat to potentially do physical harm against his step-father. Now she was concerned he might come into the church that morning, sit behind his parents, and "harass us or worse."

What made the incident truly tragic was that the son was usually quite friendly, loving, and caring for everyone around him. A head injury in a vehicle accident several years earlier now left him with potential fits of rage that would flash for no apparent reason. He was a good guy - until he became angry. Then, just like Bruce Banner said in the movie, *The Hulk*, "When I lose control, it's very dangerous to be around me."

After listening to the concerns of the mother and her husband (the young man's step-father,) the team member directly and specifically asked a clarifying, "Are you concerned he will come into the church this morning and possibly try to harm you and / or your husband?" She replied in the affirmative.

### RESPONSE(S):

The team member immediately took several steps:

1. Assured the two parents that they would be safe in the church, but also told them that their son would not be allowed into the church at all that morning, based on his threats the previous evening.
2. Informed the Senior Pastor, as well as other pastoral staff and church leaders, of the potential threat.
3. Clarified with the Senior Pastor and church leaders that the young man would be stopped at the door and not be allowed into the church that morning.
4. Informed local law enforcement officers who attended the church of the potential situation.
5. Gave detailed information to the team members working in the foyer of the church that morning, along with reminding them of proper procedures for encountering the young man.
6. Informed the control room, who also acts as the point of phone contact with local

police, of the situation so that any requests for 911 calls would not be delayed with inquiries.

7. Took all of the above actions without any other church members even being aware there was a potential issue.

#### POINTS & LESSONS LEARNED:

This incident was one of those minor frustrations that could have been explosive under the wrong circumstances. The young man, it was later discovered, had been in nearly continual counseling with local mental health professionals over the years since the tragic accident that altered his personality. But tragic or not, any direct or indirect threat against a member of the church that might take place inside the church must be taken seriously.

Later, when the team reviewed the incident in an after-action meeting, they realized there was a trained mental health professional who was a church member who was attending that morning. He could have also been given a notice of the situation and asked to be ready to respond if there was a confrontation of some type. They have since changed their response policy in this type of potential incident to make certain he is contacted immediately.

Ministry opportunities were realized in several different ways. One was in comforting the parents and letting them know there were people ready to step into the gap for them. Another was in the follow up with the son to make certain he received the remedial care he needed at the time.

From a training perspective, the need was determined for training all team members on the basics of verbal de-escalation for potentially violent individuals. Within weeks of the incident, they brought a mental health professional in to do that type of training for everyone.

#### **At this point, ask yourself these questions:**

- *What can our team learn from this event (good, bad, or indifferent?)*
- *At this point of team training and experience, would we have done in this situation?*
- *What do we need to do to prepare our team members to respond appropriately should we be faced with this event?*
- *How could we make this a ministry opportunity?*