The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina
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Handling a Disruption at Church

Practical guidance for clergy, staff, ushers, greeters, and volunteers

CORE IDEA: Stay calm. Set boundaries early. Avoid argument. Escalate when needed.

Context

Churches are welcoming places and often serve people who are under stress or in need. Most difficult interactions can be handled calmly and respectfully. A disruption becomes a safety concern when behavior interferes with worship or ministry, ignores reasonable boundaries, targets another person, or begins to escalate.

The Goal

The goal is not to win an argument or physically control the person. The goal is to protect people and space, reduce escalation, and obtain help when necessary.

Before a Disruption

- **Decide who has authority.** Clergy should identify who may speak for the parish, direct a person to leave, and contact law enforcement.
- **Set clear service policies.** Be clear about what assistance the church provides and what it does not provide. Avoid improvising money, rides, or other assistance outside parish policy.
- **Use a team approach.** Avoid handling a difficult interaction alone. Whenever practical, have another person present and use available camera coverage.
- **Know how to call for help.** Staff and volunteers should know when and how to contact clergy, the parish safety lead, 911, or local law enforcement.
- **Practice.** Ushers, greeters, clergy, and staff should periodically talk through how they would respond to a disruption during worship or another parish activity.

When a Concern Begins

NOTICE	Pay attention early. Do not wait for a manageable concern to become a crisis.
ENGAGE	If appropriate and safe, approach calmly and respectfully. Keep reasonable distance and avoid isolating yourself.
SET BOUNDARIES	State clearly what is expected: where the person may go, what behavior must stop, or what assistance the church can provide.
ESCALATE	If the person will not follow reasonable direction, behavior escalates, or anyone feels threatened, involve clergy and call law enforcement or 911 as appropriate.

If Worship or an Event Is Disrupted

- Pause or stop the service or activity if needed.

- Keep the congregation calm. If there is no immediate threat, avoid creating unnecessary movement or confrontation.
- Do not argue with or crowd the disruptive person.
- Move a targeted person, child, vulnerable adult, or anyone at particular risk away from the disturbance when it can be done safely.
- Call 911 when the behavior is threatening, violent, cannot be safely managed, or immediate law-enforcement assistance is needed.
- Follow the directions of responding law-enforcement or emergency personnel.

Requests for Assistance

LISTEN → OFFER → REFER → CLOSE

- Listen respectfully.
- Explain what the church does provide.
- Refer the person to appropriate community or social-service resources when the request is outside parish services.
- Do not provide money, transportation, or other assistance outside established parish policy.
- Close the interaction clearly and respectfully. Repeated requests do not require repeated negotiation.

After the Incident

- Notify clergy and appropriate parish leadership.
- Document what happened while details are fresh, including who was present and what actions were taken.
- Preserve relevant camera footage, messages, photographs, or other information. Do not delete or destroy potential evidence.
- If law enforcement was involved, record the agency and incident/report number if available.
- Review what worked, what did not, and whether parish procedures need to change.
- Notify the diocesan offices of significant safety events in accordance with diocesan guidance.

Parish Decisions to Make in Advance

Who may direct a person to leave?	
Who calls 911 / law enforcement?	
Who communicates with the congregation?	
Where can a targeted or vulnerable person be moved?	
Who documents and preserves records after an incident?	

Remember: Consistency prevents escalation. Set boundaries early, use a team approach, and seek help before a situation becomes harder to manage.