

Winterizing Your Church

As winter arrives, the change of seasons brings with it special challenges for churches in all climates. Whether it is as obvious as ice and snow in the North or as simple as a change in temperatures or dropping leaves in the South, the changes call for attention in order to protect the ministries of your church and those in attendance.

A Case Example

Joe, Sally and their family are first-time visitors to your church on a cold, clear morning following a heavy snow earlier in the weekend. The parking lot has been carefully cleared of snow and the sidewalks cleaned. However, water dripping from a clogged rain gutter has fallen in the shade at a corner near the door, where it has frozen. As Sally, who is carrying their three year-old daughter, reaches the door to the sanctuary she slips on a wet spot on the tile floor and falls. She strikes her head against the door frame and lays motionless in the entryway. The girl is stunned by the fall and begins to cry. Joe is trying to assist both of them. The service is delayed as EMTs treat Sally and the joy of the service is dampened.



In reading this example, no doubt you saw several of the potential hazards, but did you think ahead to the one that actually contributed to the incident, the wet tile floor away from the entry doors to the church?

It is important as a leader in the church, to understand the potential winter causes of incidents, weather like the one above or others, and to address them as a part of your ministry protection effort. Let's consider some of the aspects of preparing our church for the cold weather and address methods of prevention.

Changes in Temperatures

Regardless of your area of the country, winter brings with it lower temperatures. Where 65° may seem like quite a warm New England winter, it is quite chilly for church members in New Mexico and Hawaii. Each year, we hear of a handful of churches that suffered a fire or explosion during the winter season. Sadly, most of these incidents are preventable.

Before the season begins, a critical first step is to have a qualified boiler inspector inspect your boiler and entire heating system. Corrosion, pressure and faulty parts are frequent culprits in fires and explosions. By having the certified inspection, you can enter the season with confidence in your heating system. Ask the inspector to show some of your members or maintenance staff what to look for between their visits. Knowing how to look for leaks, building pressure and reading gauges can prevent some tragic accident from happening.

Additionally, make sure your boiler room is clear and clean. Too often the boiler room is a convenient storage location. Remove flammable materials from the room and lock them in a safe cabinet elsewhere. Take out any clutter that may have accumulated over time. Do not stack boxes, mops, equipment or anything else on top of or leaning against the boiler.

Ministry Protection Memo

“MPM” is a series on various topics relative to Church and safety. Send your comments and interests to Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church's Director of Risk Management.

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“Let those responsible (leaders, ushers, contractors, staff) and the members in general know what your plan is and what role they play in it.”

With lower temperatures, we are reminded that not all people have the same threshold for staying warm. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find space heaters throughout the church. Space heaters are not inherently hazardous; however, they can become dangerous in several ways. Older models that are missing a grill on the front, have old and deteriorating wiring or lack an automatic shutoff are often found as the cause for church fires. Several fires are known to have started when papers stacked underneath desks in the church offices came in contact with the heating coils of an unattended space heater. Another frequently identified case is space heaters plugged into outlets and power strips with too many items plugged in. Space heaters should be plugged directly into the wall and not strung with other items in extensions or power strips. Use an “Underwriter’s Laboratory” (UL) certified space heater and operate it within the parameters found in the user’s manual.

Another area to consider protecting is the pipes and plumbing. If you have areas of your church that allow the water pipes to be exposed to freezing temperatures, they should be insulated. Too often we hear of pipes bursting in the middle of the night and by the time it is discovered, a great deal of damage has occurred. Not only can you prevent pipes from breaking, but you will also save money on your water and gas bill.

Snow and Ice

Storms seldom come at an opportune time. Therefore, an intentional, flexible snow removal system is necessary. This plan consists of several steps, each of which plays a key role in protecting people at your church.

First, pay attention to the weather forecast. It is rare these days for a storm to develop without some advance awareness. Have someone in the church that is responsible for deciding when the winter weather team should be activated. Each member of the team should have a specific responsibility or two to ensure that the church is prepared for services. These will range from making certain the parking lots and sidewalks are cleaned to drying wet interior floors to making sure those members and visitors who need assistance making it out to their cars find the help they need. The team should have redundant roles; that is, there should be extra people assigned to each role in the event that one team member is absent.

In moving ice and snow, prepare a map of the church grounds to identify places where snow and ice could accumulate and possibly refreeze; snow could fall from the roof; and snow and ice can be moved to minimize hazards from thawing and freezing again. Pay particular attention to areas receiving minimal winter sun, gutters and drainpipes, sidewalk corners and doorways. Remember that ice and snow may start outside, but they get tracked into the building on shoes and boots. A plan for drying areas inside doorways is important. Use of mats, mops, carpet and other means of protecting against falls on wet floors will reduce the number of incidents.

Where possible, a reliable snow removal contractor for the parking lots can be a valuable resource. Make sure the contractor will be available on the days you have services or winter events planned. In addition, be specific on the ways the contractor will be called into service. Many contractors only come out following a predetermined amount of snowfall. Make sure the contractor is aware of your



building and ground plan for snow removal, so that snow gets pushed to the places where it is least likely to become a second problem later. As with all contractors, check to ensure the contractor maintains their own insurance and check references.

You may still have to deploy your own crew to clear snow and ice if the contractor is not available or does not clear particular areas. Many parking lot contractors are reluctant to clear sidewalks and steps. These areas should be checked, and if needed cleared, for the times before, between and following services. Be prepared to restrict entry or exit through a doorway if slick conditions or the potential for falling snow or ice exists, until the hazard can be cleared. A group of members who can assist in shoveling, sanding or salting, mopping and walking people to their cars will go a long way to protecting the people at your church.

Access to proper supplies is an essential part of a winter plan. Whether it is warning cones for wet floors, mops, mats, shovels or a compound to melt snow, having the supplies on hand and accessible will make or break your plan. Someone should be assigned responsibility for inventory before the season and after any of the equipment or supplies is used to ensure they are back in place and available in sufficient quantity. Trying to clear the sidewalks of a large church with only a single remaining shovel will seem a task beyond simply daunting and there is nothing worse than realizing that the supply room is locked as the blizzard rages outside.

Inside your Church or Facility

Though many churches respond well to getting the outside clear and clean, occasionally they fail to protect the inside. Whether it is snow and slush or rainwater, the outside can get tracked in, creating a potential hazard. It is wise to have a mop and bucket near entrances and cones or signs indicating that the area is slippery and wet. Special entrance mats should be considered that soak up water and make a safer condition.



Evening and Special Events

Many times during the winter season, there are extra meetings, choir practices, rehearsals and evening services. Anytime you combine additional traffic, darkness, services at times out of the ordinary, snow, ice and cold, it increases the chances of something bad happening. A parking lot that looks free from hazard during daylight may look much different after dark when ruts in the parking lots or uneven sidewalks are less visible, especially for visitors who don't know they are present. Inspect the church both during daylight and dark. Include in your inspection a regular look at outside lighting to monitor for burned out bulbs or broken fixtures.

Weather-Related Closure

Seldom do churches close due to weather conditions, but on rare occasions, it's just the right thing to do. You should discuss ahead of time and have a clear understanding of how and when to close the church or cancel an event. As with schools, that duty should fall to one or two people responsible for making the call and setting the wheels in motion to communicate quickly to all involved.

Communicating to members about a closing of church for worship, day care programs, a meeting or event might keep them from putting themselves at risk unnecessarily. Perhaps uniquely, sometimes the people most committed to worship services and events are those that really should not be going out in poor weather. It is important to consider your membership, their age, and how far many of them have to travel to get to church, as you decide on whether to close. Let them know ahead of time where to tune their radio or television or where to call. A voicemail answering message or a phone calling tree may be options that would work well for your church.

Safety First

Some churches are blessed to have a maintenance person on staff that is available to clear walks, throw down salt, and keep the entrances and steps clear of ice and snow. Once again, regardless of whom you have complete the job; always give them the best equipment possible. If you have a snow blower, make sure it is inspected and in good working order before the season. Buy shovels that cause the least amount of strain.

As part of assembling your winter weather team, make sure the person assigned to the each duty is healthy enough to do the job and will be present during the season. Often we hear the tragic stories of someone suffering a heart attack while shoveling. Jobs which require exertion should be performed by those best able, not just the most willing. Make sure each person knows it is okay to take a break, whether to rest or get warm, as needed.

Communication

Having a plan is the most important step you can take to keep your members and visitors safe. The next most important aspect is communication. Let those responsible (leaders, ushers, contractors, staff) and the members in general know what your plan is and what role they play in it.

By taking a proactive approach to winterizing your church, you will have a much better chance of having a blessed and wonderful winter.

The Ministry Protection Memo (MPM) series is offered as an educational tool in support of Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church's property and casualty insurance program to help you develop loss control procedures to suit your specific needs. With these publications, Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church does not seek to establish a particular standard of care or to promote legal advice. We encourage church leaders to consult with competent attorneys with regard to their specific loss control need. Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church encourages reproduction and distribution of this MPM within denomination.



Facility Daily Checklist

PARKING LOT

- Outside sidewalks are even and level
- No potholes in travel paths
- Handicap ramps are available and clear of obstacles
- Parking bumper secured and color-coded
- Parking stalls and/or aisles are visibly marked
- Traffic control signs are legibly posted
- Landscaping is not blocking any driver's vision
- Ample lighting coverage
- Paint used to identify changes in walking surfaces

TRAFFIC CONTROL

- Traffic flow is safe especially at rush-hour times
- Students clear of bus stop or parent drop-off area
- Traffic flow properly marked with cones and/or signs
- Traffic flagger wearing orange vest with flag/paddle
- People available to direct others from drop-off
- No vehicles blocking traffic or flow
- Bus drop area is clear
- Safe bus driving

ENTRANCE/TRAVEL PATHS

- No water on entrance/exit floors
- Mats secured and in place
- No tripping hazards (carpets/cords/equipment)
- Door closures properly adjusted
- Ample lighting
- Steps and handrails are in good condition

FACILITIES

- Aisles are clear
- Stock, equipment and tools stored in an orderly fashion
- Portable power tool cords free from splices/cuts
- Only outlets with ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCI) used near water sources
- Electrical installations meet code (no breakers tripping)
- Guards on woodworking equipment/tools
- Guards on portable power tools
- Flammable/combustible liquids stored outside or in UL-approved fire cabinets
- Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) available on all hazardous materials used
- Personal protective equipment (for eyes, face, hearing and hands) stocked and available
- Overhead storage properly secured to avoid head injuries or collapse
- Ladders are in good condition and not damaged
- Shop is secured when unattended
- Pesticides stored outside in properly ventilated room

RESTROOMS

- Floor surfaces are free from water or wet conditions
- Towel dispensers are filled and located near sinks
- No plumbing leaks
- Clean and in good sanitary condition
- Water fountains: no water on floor with mat

PLAYGROUND

- Proper ground covering around and below any playground equipment's fall patterns
- No broken steps, hand-holds, rungs or seats
- Equipment anchored securely without movement and anchors are covered
- Spacing of equipment provided between equipment (minimum of 6 feet)
- Bolts/fasteners should be tight and not protruding more than 1/8 inch

- No metal or sharp objects from equipment
- No tripping hazards in the area
- Gate and playground secured
- Posted signage with Safety Rules at the entrance and readily visible

SECURITY

- Employees have ID badges displayed at all times
- No unknown persons or visitors on-site not wearing ID badges
- Secondary doors are locked from outside entry (open from inside)
- Mechanical rooms are locked at all times
- Electrical panels are locked at all times
- Perimeter protection is secured at all times
- Surveillance system is in order and working
- Radio working; front office communication checked

FLAMMABLE LIQUIDS/CHEMICALS (CUSTODIAN WORK AREAS)

- Flammables stored in UL-approved containers
- Flammables stored in UL-approved fire cabinets
- Keep custodian closets locked at all times
- No leaking chemicals or odors in custodian closets
- Aerosols are kept out of reach of all students (check classrooms)
- Chemicals in science labs must be secured in cabinets (shelves have raised lips to prevent falling)
- No glass containers are to be used for chemicals (or chemical handling)
- Chemical containers must be properly marked
- Chemical container lids must be closed at all times
- Keep all flammable rags in self-closing containers
- No-smoking signs and other warning signs must be posted in hazardous and all appropriate areas