

PMT GUIDE # 12

Book of Order Section G-10.0102o: "The session is responsible for the mission and government of the particular church. It therefore has the responsibility and power ...to provide for the management of the property of the church, including determination of the appropriate use of church buildings and facilities, and to obtain property and liability insurance coverage to protect the facilities, programs and offices, including members of the session, staff, board of trustees, and deacons."

Churches face the possibility of many kinds of emergencies for which recovery efforts must be planned. Planning for an emergency requires preparation, immediate response and recovery, which may be taken in two phases. Just as in other aspects of church life, the session has the responsibility to ensure that this planning is done and that the response and recovery procedures are tested to ensure they will work. For example, imagine the impact on a church in any of the following circumstances:

- Inability of clergy to perform assigned tasks due to illness or death
- Loss of key computer records for church operation due to computer failure and inadequate offsite backup
- Loss of work area for church administration due to fire or other building disaster
- Destruction of church sanctuary or other space used for worship
- Destruction of key financial records not saved on computer
- Risk of lawsuit due to member or guest falling on church property
- Lawsuit against staff alleging improper dealings with children
- Administrative support not being available due to illness or death
- Key signers on church financial accounts not available to sign necessary documents and/or checks

To address these problems, churches are encouraged to create an emergency team charged with the responsibility to guide the church's actions in the event of emergency situations. The emergency team has the job of trying to imagine the unimaginable, every possible thing that can go wrong in the life of the church. This team should be responsible to do a risk assessment study to help prioritize the kinds of emergencies that need plans to address them (with the session's oversight, since it is the session that ultimately must rank the various emergencies.) If possible, this team should include members of the congregation with some disaster-related backgrounds like medical, police, and fire personnel, as well as members with mechanical interests. Additionally, members with good organizational skills are always needed to keep the team on the right path. After determining the team members and who will serve a moderator, some of the team responsibilities should include:

- Develop a telephone tree of congregation, taking note of members with special needs in the event of a disaster
- Assess insurance policies of church facility and make sure all applicable papers are safeguarded
- Take inventory of church equipment, furniture and building area. Taking pictures or a video of the building and their contents may also be of value. Such lists, photos and/or videos should be maintained offsite.
- Arrange for offsite backup of important church documents and computer records
- Develop a written plan to be followed (a sample plan entitled Congregation Emergency Plan can be found on PMT website)

Within the kinds of emergencies that can arise are several, such as loss of work areas due to a flood caused by a broken pipe or damage to the sanctuary, which reasonably fall within the property committee's

area of responsibility. Such things as loss of power, loss of heat, computer failure, damage to the sanctuary, a leaky roof or failure of part of a wall, illustrate the kinds of emergencies that the property committee should be asked to address. For some of these emergencies, planning for how to handle the situation for a long-term solution can be found in other parts of the PMT website. But such emergencies also require an immediate response. For example, if the sanctuary suffers damage from a flood, full recovery will take a long time. But the congregation needs to have a place to worship while the water is removed and the damage repaired. Answering that immediate need is what the emergency plan should address.

In the course of working on emergency plans, the emergency team and/or the property committee may discover that one of the best ways to handle some emergencies is to prevent them from happening in the first place. For example, a snag or tear of the carpet in the sanctuary could cause a worshipper to trip, fall and suffer injuries. But a regular inspection of the building with a checklist of warning signs would identify the damaged carpet, get it tacked down and trigger a call to the carpet servicer. The kinds of warning signs that signal trouble on the way might include

- Flickering lights (overloaded circuits), sputtering burners on stoves,
- Boilers or water heaters (clogged valves),
- Puddling around the exterior of the building or dark spots mildew appearing on the basement walls (water leaking into the foundation, damaged or inadequate gutters).

Again, regular inspection of the building with a checklist of trouble signs could enable the property committee to catch any problem early so that an emergency doesn't happen. There are three important things to remember for any emergency plans:

- Each plan must be written down and put in places accessible by anyone in the congregation;
- Each plan must be tested to ensure it really works;
- If it is decided that no plan can be used for a specific emergency, that decision to take no action must be documented.

Additionally, your church may be asked to participate in a community-wide emergency plan. It is right to attempt to help in time of need, thereby showing Christ's love and putting faith and concern into action. But while seeking to help in a local disaster, your church needs to first ensure that it is prepared for whatever disaster may befall it and its members so they can feel comfortable about providing service to others. All too often, churches fail to prepare themselves for their own "emergency". As an analogy, it's like putting the oxygen mask on yourself before your children in an airplane emergency.

Many sources are available to churches planning to perform a risk assessment. However, keep in mind that the varieties of ways churches can prepare are as varied as there is number of churches. Several of the sources are:

www.safechurch.com)

www.churchcentral.com/

Some additional sources of discussions on disaster plans can be found at

www.pcusa.org/mqbconnect/pubs/disasterresponse.pdf and www.pcusa.org/today/cover/2008/cover-0808.htm

and

www.shenpres.org/disasterprep.html