United Methodist Insurance
Property & Casualty Coverage for Your Ministry

# Preparing a Church Emergency Plan

**OVERVIEW**

If a phone call came into the church office that the senior pastor had just suffered a heart attack, would the person answering the phone know what steps to take? If five people became violently ill after eating the potato salad served at the potluck dinner, would anyone know what to do? If the tornado sirens started blaring during one of the worship services, would the staff and leadership know their responsibilities? If the police came to the church and arrested your youth pastor for sexual misconduct, would you know the best way to proceed?

We all hope and pray nothing bad ever happens to our church or anyone associated with it. We would like to think that if anything were to happen, everyone would know exactly what to do. But sadly, many churches have no plan to respond to an emergency at the church or to a member of the staff or congregation. As a result of not having a plan, the response is often inadequate or will even compound the original problem, making the situation worse.

For the safety of the congregation, church leaders should seriously consider taking time to develop a church emergency preparation and response. Here are some very simple steps to assist in the development of such a plan:

**TEAM DEVELOPMENT**

Every church should have a Safety and Security Ministry. Their job is to evaluate every aspect of programming, facilities and resources to determine if they are safe and secure. They will be responsible for everything from prevention and inspections to training and oversight.

As a part of that larger ministry, an Emergency Preparation and Response Ministry should be formed. Depending on the size of the organization, you may either choose to make the emergency group a part of or the same as the safety and security group. The important piece is to bring together a group of people that can spend the time to educate themselves, organize and develop a plan and carry out the functions needed in the event of an emergency.

You do not need a team of hundreds; however, the following positions should be considered (some may be combined) depending on the size of your congregation:

- Team Coordinator and Assistant Team Coordinator
- Board/Leadership Representative,
  Staff Representative,
  Membership Representative,
  Youth Representative,
  Children's Area Representative,
  Senior Services Representative,
  Volunteer Representative
- Facility Management
- Medical Representative
- Prayer Coordinator
- Spiritual Support Coordinator

Select team members who can give the time it will take to make this ministry grow and thrive.

**EDUCATION AND IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES**

After your team is formed, you will want to help them understand issues that could negatively impact your ministries. Be prepared, this may take some time. However, by relying on such organizations as the Red Cross, FEMA, and web sites such as *www.ready.gov*, you will be able to quickly identify not only the wide variety of issues that might happen, but also those more prevalent in your geographical area.

**THE THREE AREAS YOU WILL WANT TO CONSIDER ARE:**

**Internal Events.** Those events that happen either at your church or to your people (staff, members, volunteers, children, etc.). They may include such events as death, injury, threat, robbery, abuse or severe weather conditions.

**Community/Regional Events.** These events happen within your vicinity, but may not impact you directly. They would include such occurrences as a civil

disturbance, flood, mass destruction, severe weather within another area of your town or a chemical spill.

**National Events.** A terrorist attack, elevated Homeland Security Advisory, or having your members travel to offer aid and assistance are some of the events that could be considered national emergencies. Your team will want to brainstorm and identify all incidents and emergencies that they can think of.

**PLAN YOUR RESPONSES**

Once identified, your team will want to discuss the best response for each of them. Many will be similar. The responses often will be a page or less. Others may be more detailed. You will want to identify people within your congregation that could make up a response team. You will also want to identify those people and organizations outside of your congregation that will be valuable during an incident (e.g. attorney, denominational officials, other care providers, etc.). Consider the needs of all age groups and those in your congregation with special needs.

**PUT IT IN WRITING**

Once you have assembled this information, put it in writing. This is the most time consuming part of the plan, but the most important. What you put in writing becomes your plan; it will act as a foundation and invaluable resource for responding to an incident. It is best to view the plan as a series of principles and practices. Never develop a plan and place it on a shelf somewhere; it will not help you there. Review it regularly and revise as needed.

**COMMUNICATION**

Share the plan with members of the staff, church leadership, volunteers and members. Let them know you have developed it out of a sense of care for their well-being as well as the entire congregation. Help them understand that by developing this ministry your congregation will be better able to respond to a more catastrophic event. Use
small group settings and other creative ideas to communicate the plan.

**PRACTICE/IMPLEMENTATION**

You will never know how good your plan is unless you practice it. Conducting periodic emergency drills will help you see holes in the plan or areas that need to be modified.

Evaluation
Finally, after you do a mock drill or event, evaluate and revise. Discuss who did what and how they did it, solicit feedback and address concerns. Keep the plan flexible. If you do have an actual event that you respond to, always conduct a debriefing to evaluate how the response went and what revisions need to be made.

**CONCLUSION**

You may be fortunate enough to never suffer a life-changing event in your congregation. However, you want to be prepared to react if something does occur. Also, you never know when your congregation may be called upon to assist and provide care and resources in the event of an emergency across town or across the country. Wouldn't it be great to have the confidence to know that your church would be ready to respond almost instantly?

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