

EMERGENCY PLANNING: EXTERNAL THREATS

By Dick Baggett, SPHR

THERE ARE SOME very concrete and specific potential threats from the surrounding environment that every church should plan for in advance. Why?

It is true that the frequency of disasters and emergencies may be low, but the severity of an occurrence can be very high. Nearly half of all organizations that experience a serious loss never reopen. Disaster planning contains life-and-death consequences for an organization.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act requires employers to do emergency/disaster planning in advance and have a plan prepared to follow. As part of its expectation, a church is supposed to consider the relevant threats from its environment and to its operations from the outside.

Location—location—location we hear is extremely important to church growth success. Location is also important to disaster planning. Where a church is located, or what is located nearby, is very important.

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For example, one of my clients was located a block away from some railroad lines. Those lines frequently carry hazardous cargos. Additionally, the interstate loop, where hazardous cargos traveled around the city, was a block away. The client had two potential threats from hazardous materials—neither of which had been given any prior thought.

Another client had one of its locations adjacent to a refinery. For years, that was never a problem until one day the refinery decided to blow up. The explosion jettisoned some petroleum tanks into the air, over the fence and into the property of its neighbor.

So, obviously fire, explosion, or a chemical spill from a neighboring location all are aspects that all churches should recognize and plan for in advance if their locations call for such exposure.

The following are potential problems which can be caused by the immediate environment:

- Disruption in transportation systems
- Damage to your facility
- Loss of power for an extended period of time
- Tornado and/or high winds
- Flooding

Even though a church's own property, vehicles, and ministry are not damaged, it is possible that normal transportation routes and systems can be

shut down for a period of time. Having alternate plans and arrangements ahead of time will assist immensely in the church's response.

It is an interesting fact learned from research that immediately following a disaster, the next 24 hours is what defines your response—and sometimes your future. How well prepared you are and what actions you take can affect seriously your ability to continue effectively. Your immediate response will affect your membership, their loyalty, their attendance, your ministries and your cash flow. Frequently, when there is a major disruption in a church body, giving suffers—some times to the critical point.

Prior planning for external disasters, for the 24 hours following the disaster, and for resumption of operation is critical. There are certain things that a church should do prior to a disaster situation:

- Call in specialists in safety management, industrial hygiene, fire protection, and ergonomics.
- Budget for outside experts.
- Allow time to prepare in advance.

Should a disaster occur, it is highly likely that two things will come into play:


First, evacuation of most or all people will become necessary. An efficient plan for evacuation is vital. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's standards dictate a two-stage evacuation plan be developed: partial evacuation and complete evacuation.

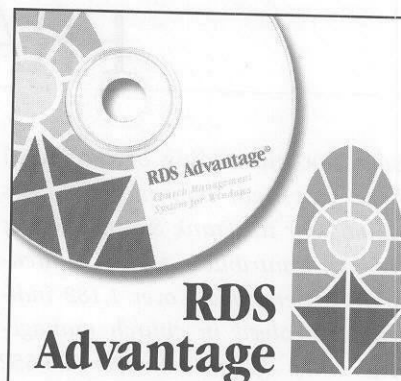
Second, the facility must be secured and effectively shut down in order to protect assets. Prior development of a procedure is essential.

For these two procedures to take place smoothly, taking the following steps is important:

- Conduct actual disaster drills and "walk-throughs" regularly. These simulated emergency experiences should occur once or twice a year as a minimum. Please note that where children's programs are present the frequency of these drills should increase substantially. Also, if your church has a licensed children's ministry or school, the licensing standards will usually dictate a minimum number of these emergency drills for those organizational units.
- Audit these drills to see that they are actually happening and observe how they are handled.
- Have the local fire department come to your location for a visit. There are two reasons for this: first, they are another source of prevention and planning; second, the fire department can become familiar with your location, its risks, and problems. This will provide good information for them to have in advance should they be called to respond to a disaster at your location. In most cases, the local fire department welcomes this opportunity.
- Train employees/volunteers on evacuation plans and routes, to safeguard them and prevent human tragedy.
- Properly mark exit routes that will provide guidance during blackouts.

- Have supervisors in physical areas knowledgeable and well-versed in the reaction/response steps.
- Have a public relations professional develop a crisis communications plan for your church. This can include how to contact significant people and organizations and what to tell them about your situation.
- Have a protected, off-site, listing of all suppliers' and members' numbers to call. Reassuring your members and community is important to keeping your church, ministries, and cash flow during this time of concern and doubt about service and ministry capacity.
- Consider the necessity for shifting meetings and ministries to another site and develop plans to use alternate locations.
- Locate sources for emergency, short-term generators, air conditioning, and heating and power sources and make a record of their contact information.
- Lay out in advance transportation issues and options in order to the continue services and ministries.
- Have specific plans for immediate re-stocking of supplies and materials needed that could be lost in a disaster. Quick delivery or location of materials and technology is a necessity for continued service.
- Frequently backup all computer files and recent entries to an off-site location.

These are some of the more recognized steps to take prior to and immediately following a disaster. Being prepared does not ensure that disaster will not strike, but when it does dealing with it will help your church deal with the situation and the loss with the least possible suffering. 



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