

Are You Prepared

In earlier articles in this series we have covered some of the things that your church can do to be better prepared for disasters or emergencies. One of the first steps is getting a small group together that is genuinely interested in being prepared and committed to leading your church's effort to be ready. They are also the group who will get others involved in developing the plan for your church and making sure that you are as ready as possible. In addition they can lead the process of getting phone trees and texts groups set for quick communication and updating your church directory with cell phone numbers and email addresses.

Along side of ensuring that your church can quickly communicate with the congregation I highly recommend that your church get "outside eyes" involved. Ask your local police department or county sheriff and your local fire department to do a walk through with you through your building. They will be glad to assist and they view your situation through a different lens. Doing the walk through with them will help you to see and understand what they are seeing. Where we may see a cluttered closet they may see a serious fire hazard. Where we see some bushes around the building that need trimming they may see a hiding place for someone up to no good. Where we may see some items stored near the door they may see an obstruction that could hinder people getting out of the building in an emergency. Not only will they be able to assist you in evaluating potential problems they will have the opportunity to visit your building and become more familiar with it. This familiarity can be crucial should they need to respond to an emergency. Having a basic idea of the floor plan can be very helpful if the building is filled with smoke or understanding the best way to reach someone in a medical emergency. The police and fire people can provide valuable information on how to deal with a potential situation or where you can obtain preparedness products that may not be locally available.

In my home church we did a walk through with the police department and another with the fire marshal. During each visit lasting a little over an hour we asked a lot of questions about our situation, about actions we should take and received great information about some things that we were planning. After the police and the fire marshal had visited, our disaster preparedness team presented a list of 32 suggestions from them to the session. The suggestions ranged from periodic training for all church leaders in the proper use of a fire extinguisher to making sure that both sides of a double outside door are unlocked so people can exit more quickly in case of emergency. They suggested that we implement a written schedule of first-aid kits and AED's being inspected at least twice a year. They recommended that we improve our interior signage and include floor plans showing the nearest exit or fire extinguisher. Most of their suggestions were to make minor changes that could have a major impact in our preparedness. Some of their suggestions were for actions of a larger nature. The preparedness team then grouped the suggestions by the session committee that would be responsible and sent them to the session for review and action.

Will all of these changes be implemented? There is no doubt that while the majority will be put in place there are others ideas that the session will modify to better fit our situation or determine to be beyond our needs. The idea is to make our churches safer for everyone without turning them into facilities that cease to be welcoming. Your church will be better prepared for having gone through the effort and had the conversation with experts on your readiness.

Engaging your police and fire departments to help you in evaluating your preparedness is a valuable tool in your work to be better prepared for emergencies or natural disasters while at the same time providing them with valuable information to help them respond quickly and efficiently.

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