Slip and Fall Prevention: Wet Surfaces

During a recent Christmas season, a congregation member arrived at church for a Tuesday morning Bible study carrying presents in both arms for the other members of the group. The church's outdoor automatic sprinkler system had been left on, even though temperatures had recently dropped below freezing.

This created an icy condition on the church's sidewalk. The member slipped backward on the ice and struck her head on the sidewalk. She never regained consciousness and passed away due to head injuries caused by the fall.

Obviously, a death caused by a slip and fall is the worst possible scenario. But it's important to recognize how frequently people get hurt when they slip and fall. According to GuideOne Insurance, slips and falls are the number one cause of injuries at churches, as well as liability losses. What's more, churches are frequently sued by people who are injured on the premises. So, instead of keeping your fingers crossed that an injury will not occur, churches are advised to be proactive in preventing slips and falls.

Wet surfaces, whether they're inside or outside the church, can pose a severe slip and fall hazard. To be proactive in preventing slips and falls from occurring on wet surfaces, appropriate policies and procedures should be developed to address various wet surface exposures, including spills, irrigation systems, inclement weather and many other sources.

Interior

- Employees and volunteers should be trained to identify wet conditions and clean up spills immediately.
- Keep equipment and supplies available to deal with the wet conditions, including the following:
    - An adequate number and placement of mops and buckets.
    - Warning cones or signs that can be used to warn people of wet surfaces, slippery, or unsafe areas.
    - An adequate number of floor mats to place at entrances and other areas where wet conditions may exist.



Mop and bucket and caution signs

The photos at the right are examples of the appropriate types of supplies that should be available for controlling wet conditions, including a mop and bucket, caution signs and cones to be placed in visible locations to warn of the potential slip and fall hazards from the wet conditions, and floor mats for entrances to remove moisture.



Warning cone



Floormat at entrance to absorb moisture

Exterior

- Grading of land should be away from the building to allow for adequate drainage.
- Drainage for storm water run-off should be adequate, and blocked drains and gutters should be kept clear.
- Gutter downspouts should not drain onto walkways.
- Condensation from air conditioners should not accumulate on walkway areas.
- Growth of moss on walkways also can be present in shady walkway areas where drainage is not adequate. This moss should be eliminated.
- Excess water from lawn sprinklers also can cause pooling of water on walkways. Test the spray pattern of the sprinklers to ensure that they do not cover the walking surface and adjust as needed.



This photo shows the effects of a downspout discharging water onto the sidewalk. This creates an unnecessary wet surface and has badly deteriorated the walking surface. To eliminate the slip and fall potential, route gutters away from any walking surface, and make repairs to the sidewalk surface.

Protecting your congregation against slips and falls from wet surfaces should be a priority for church leaders. It would be frustrating to have a valued member of your congregation become seriously injured from a slip and fall that could have been prevented. Don't wait another day to implement a policy on handling wet surfaces and to properly train your employees and/or volunteers on any new responsibilities.

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