SafeChurch

Baptistery Safety

Baptisms take place every week in churches across the country. While, thankfully, the overwhelming majority of baptisms go off without a hitch, churches should be aware of the dangers that accompany the mix of water, people and electricity that baptisms – especially baptisms by immersion – entail. This fact sheet addresses the main risks surrounding baptisteries, including electrocution, slips and falls, and water damage to church property.

Electrical Safety

A pastor in Texas was electrocuted while holding a corded microphone during a baptism in the church's baptistery. The cause of the incident was found to be a faulty baptismal water heater, coupled with improper grounding of the sound system.

According to the United States Department of Labor, approximately five percent of workplace deaths involve electricity. Since human skin acts as a conductor when wet or moist, anyone working with or around electricity in a damp environment should always exercise extreme caution. For that reason, only cordless, battery-powered microphones should be used around baptisteries. If cordless microphones are not an alternative for your church, consider these safeguards:

- ❑ Suspend the microphone from the ceiling above the baptistery.
- ❑ All electrical equipment surrounding a baptistery should be plugged into a GFCI outlet. A GFCI outlet is an electrical device designed to detect ground faults, an unintentional path from an electrical source to the ground. It will sense when an electrical current is "leaking" and turn off the power flowing into that path. Be sure to have a certified electrician install the GFCI and check that it is working properly.
- ❑ Baptismal water heaters should be installed by a licensed electrician and must be property grounded. Periodic inspection of the water heater and its grounding by a licensed electrician is recommended.

This photo illustrates a corded microphone installed in the baptistery. The risk of electrocution is present for anyone in the baptistery who could contact the microphone. The microphone in this photo should be relocated and suspended from the ceiling or replaced with a cordless microphone.

GUIDEONE INSURANCE

Slips and Falls

A 68-year-old church member in Indiana slipped and fell down the stairs of the church's baptistery, fracturing his hip and tearing the rotator cuff in his shoulder. Surgery was required to implant a plate and seven screws to stabilize the member's hip.

The area surrounding a baptistery will more than likely be wet, especially after a baptism, which could result in someone slipping and falling. Individuals being baptized also can slip and fall when entering and exiting the tank or from slipping on the floor of the tank itself. In addition, falls into the baptistery even when it is not in use happen with some regularity. Choir members, actors, or others involved in stage or choir productions can be at risk for falling into uncovered baptisteries, especially those located toward the rear of the stage.

Several safeguards should be taken to prevent a slip or fall, including the following:

- ❑ Adding no-slip adhesive on the stairs leading into the baptistery;
- ❑ Using handrails that extend just beyond the stairs so people can enter and exit the baptistery safely;
- ❑ Having carpet or other no-slip floor covering installed around the baptistery;
- ❑ Using signs or cones to warn people that the area is wet;
- ❑ Keeping the area around the baptistery well-lit; and
- ❑ Making sure to cover the baptistery when it is not in use.

The above baptistery is a good example of providing a carpeted surface around the tank to reduce slips and falls as individuals enter and exit the tank. However, this tank still poses a slip and fall hazard as there are no handrails for the steps leading into the baptistery. The lack of handrails will significantly increase the likelihood of a fall.

The above baptistery is raised above the floor and would pose some of the same hazards as when entering and exiting a household bath tub. Balance will be an issue as individuals would periodically have to place their weight on one leg when entering or exiting the tank. Slips and falls could be reduced by applying a non-slip surface to the bottom of the tank, as well as placing carpet or a non-slip floor mat outside the tank. An additional measure that could be taken is to provide grab bars to assist with getting out of the tank.

Water Damage

The person responsible for filling the baptistery started to fill the tank for a baptism being performed the following morning. He thought it would take approximately three to three and one-half hours for the tank to fill, so he left the church leaving the tank unattended. Approximately five hours later he remembered and returned to the church. Unfortunately, by this time the water had overflowed entering the basement, two restrooms, and the pastors' office, damaging the carpet and sub floor of the church.

When filled, baptistery tanks can contain several hundred gallons of water. If overfilling or leaking of the baptistery tank occurs, water damage can result. Prevent water damage from occurring by:

- ❑ Always having someone monitor the baptistery when it is being filled.
- ❑ Inspect all water lines and connections for possible leaks, including fill lines and drain lines.
- ❑ Once the tank is filled, monitor the water level closely. If you notice a drop in the water level, this is a good indicator that the tank is leaking and the water is going somewhere.
- ❑ Having an overfill prevention pipe installed. Make sure the pipe remains clear.

Safeguard Your Ministry

Taking preventive measures with your baptistery will mean avoiding a situation, such as what happened in Texas. It's easy to safeguard your ministry by following the tips given here on electrical safety, slips and falls, and water damage. These tips will not only protect your congregation, but the foundation of your church.

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