

Why Your Church Should Take Storm Damage Seriously

It is estimated that nearly 1,800 thunderstorms are occurring at any moment around the world. Most of us are so use to thunderstorms that we rarely consider them major threats. Yet, they actually do significant damage. Consider the following:

- More people are killed on an annual basis from lightning strikes than from tornadoes.
- More church fires start from lightning than from any other cause.
- Electronic equipment, such as computers, telephones, fax machines, and electronic organs can suffer severe damage from power surges.
- Water leaks create all kinds of problems from stains on ceilings to damaged insulation and carpeting.
- Wood can rot due to moisture buildup.
- Strong winds can cause limbs to fall from trees hitting cars, people, and buildings.
- Shingles can fly off roofs, contributing to water leaks.
- Hail can damage roofs and vehicles.
- Flash floods are also possible.

And all of this normally occurs in a span of about 10-20 minutes. The good news is that with minimal effort, you can take steps to reduce, and, in some cases, eliminate these problems.

How to Minimize Damage from Thunderstorms

Thunderstorms can occur quickly without warning. Others can be seen approaching. Danger signs for thunder storms include dark, towering, or threatening clouds and distant thunder and lightning. To estimate the distance in miles to a flash of lightning, count the seconds between the lightning and the thunder and divide by five.

If a thunderstorm watch is issued, church and school leaders should be prepared to respond. A thunderstorm warning indicates a need to remain in a safe place. A severe thunderstorm can spawn a tornado.

Precautions Before a Thunderstorm Occurs

Some steps that churches and schools can take prior to severe thunderstorms include the following:

- ❑ Install lightning rods in new buildings. Have older buildings inspected to determine if a lightning rod should be installed.
- ❑ Routinely trim dead branches off trees. Strong winds can cause branches to fall and do considerable damage.
- ❑ Secure outdoor objects that can blow in strong winds.

- ❑ Keep a battery-powered radio available in the church or school office with extra batteries.
- ❑ Have a professional electrician install a commercial surge protector at your circuit board to protect sensitive electrical equipment such as organs, computers, telephones, copy machines, and fax machines. Make sure that electrical circuits are properly grounded.
- ❑ Clean the gutters every spring and fall. Make sure they are clear of leaves, twigs, and other debris that can cause drainage problems.

Precautions During a Thunderstorm

If a thunderstorm occurs, instruct staff members to take the following precautions:

- ❑ Do not handle electrical equipment or a telephone when lightning is striking. The lightning can follow the wire.
- ❑ Turn off electrical appliances such as air conditioners. Power surges from lightning can overload the compressors.
- ❑ Avoid water faucets and sinks because metal pipes can transmit electricity.
- ❑ Students in gym classes should not take showers during thunderstorms.

If lightning or thunder occurs, those who are outdoors, such as ground's keepers or children participating in athletic events, should come inside. It does not need to be raining for lightning to strike. It may occur as far away as 10 miles from any rainfall. Rubber-soled shoes and rubber tires provide no protection from lightning.

Use the following safety precautions if you are caught with a group outdoors during a thunderstorm:

- ❑ Attempt to get into a building or car.
- ❑ If no structure is available, get to an open space and squat as close to the ground as possible.
- ❑ If in a woods, find an area protected by a low clump of trees; never stand underneath a single large tree in the open.
- ❑ Be alert of the potential for flooding in low-lying areas.
- ❑ Avoid tall structures such as towers, tall trees, fences, telephone lines, or power lines.
- ❑ Stay away from natural lightning rods such as gold clubs, tractors, fishing rods, bicycles, or camping equipment.
- ❑ Stay away from rivers, lakes, or other bodies of water.
- ❑ If you are isolated in a level field or prairie and you feel your skin tingle or your hair stand on end (which indicates that lightning is about to strike), bend forward, putting your hands on your knees. A position with feet together and crouching while removing all metal objects is recommended. Do not lie flat on the ground. Rather, minimize your contact with the ground.
- ❑ If you are driving, pull safely to the shoulder of the road away from any trees. Stay inside the car and turn on the emergency flashers until it is clear to drive.

Checking for Damage Following a Storm

Once the thunderstorm is over, check for damage; and respond to problems quickly in order to protect against further damage.

- ❑ Look for loose or hanging limbs from trees.
- ❑ Do a visual inspection of the roof for loose or missing shingles.
- ❑ Check trouble spots for leaks around windows or ceilings.
- ❑ Remove any debris or obstacles that create tripping hazards from sidewalks, parking lots, and outdoor stairs.

Since thunderstorms are so common, often we fail to recognize the serious damage they can cause. While it takes little effort to implement a storm protection policy, the benefits can be enormous. Why not take action now to prevent these problems?

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