

EMERGENCY PLAN **eBOOK**



StartCHURCH Emergency Plan eBook

Introduction

Across the nation and the world, churches and other Christian based organizations have faced lawsuits, suffered injuries, and experienced loss of life and property due to smoke emergencies, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, violence, and false alarm panic. To protect congregations and staff, efforts need to be made to prepare the church to adequately respond to situations and prevent loss whenever possible. Additionally, in looking at the risks for churches, this century has seen a new risk as society has become more litigious and churches continue to see an increase in lawsuits for sometimes frivolous reasons.

According to 2 Timothy 4:2, pastors are called on to “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

In looking at the responsibility God has given pastors for their church, the verse states to “be ready in season and out of season”. What does that mean for you and your church? Are you prepared for emergency situations? Could you safely evacuate in case of an emergency? Do you know how to document accidents to help protect the church from legal action? As a pastor or church leader, the safety and wellbeing of your parishioners falls on you. While it is impossible to foresee the future and what obstacles you will face as the shepherd of your congregation, proper planning and preparation in case of an emergency situation can alleviate many long-lasting headaches and possible litigation.

Every church is unique and faces different threats and challenges. There are many natural and manmade hazards you can prepare for including weather related events, earthquakes, suspicious packages, accidents, and fire and smoke emergencies. A well-developed emergency plan is a proactive approach to church safety that can help keep parishioners safe and the church more resilient and protected. In planning for a church, you must address the specific needs of each individual church and that will vary widely by size, geographic location, and area hazards. In order to provide insight to a variety of churches with different needs, the following information has been compiled. This is meant as a resource for pastors and church leaders that want to take a proactive approach to protecting themselves and the people they have been called to lead.

This information is meant to be a guide to aid church leaders in their efforts to develop and maintain an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). This guide is a merely a “virtual toolbox” of recommendations, best practices and planning ideas, not a sample EOP.

Each church's EOP must reflect the specifics of that church including the hazards that it is vulnerable to and with the resources it has or can obtain to respond to an incident.

What is an Emergency Operations Plan and why is it important?

An Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) is a plan for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from various hazards, accidents, and incidents. The information includes actions that can be taken before, during, and following an incident to mitigate the loss of property, injuries or loss of life and it outlines proper reporting procedures for incidents. A comprehensive EOP is imperative when running a church as anytime people gather in a location, there is an opportunity for an emergency to occur, leaving the church vulnerable. It is safe to say it is not if you will encounter an emergency or accident, but when. The level of planning and readiness of your church can be the difference between a minor hiccup and a major lawsuit. Unfortunately, we live in the most litigious country in the world and many churches are closed each year due lawsuits that may have been avoided with proper emergency planning. We hope, if nothing else, this may open your mind to another important issue that is often overlooked in the church world.

We encourage you to include other church leaders and staff in the planning process to ensure a better and more socialized EOP for your church. To accomplish this it is a good idea to form a planning team that will work on the EOP together to ensure the best product possible for your church. A church EOP planning team may consist of a few leaders, someone well versed with the operations of the church, someone very familiar the physical location inside and out, and representatives from ministries within the church. A sample list may look like this:

Planning team

- Assistant Pastor
- Operations Manager (or equivalent title)
- Custodian
- Children's Ministry Pastor
- Young Adults Ministry Pastor
- Administrative Assistant (important for capturing discussions and providing write-ups)

Section 1– Hazard Identification

This resource is designed as a best practices guide and some customization is required to make this material relevant for your church. Certain things, like the hazards you face and distances to exits and rendezvous points, will vary based on the layout of your space. We are confident, however, that incorporating these guidelines will greatly decrease your risk as a church leader and increase the confidence with which you respond to an emergency.

It is imperative, when planning for your church, to understand the most likely hazards and risks you face. By understanding these, your team can make smart decisions about how to protect parishioners and staff, avoid litigation, and manage incidents more successfully. The word **risk** is used to describe the probability of a negative result stemming from an incident, accident, event, or occurrence. **Hazard** is the term that refers to the actual danger or threat. An example is a tornado (the hazard) has the risk of causing property damage and the loss of life.

In the beginning of the planning project, your team should research and collect information on possible hazards for your church and threats associated with them. The first step of research will focus on gathering information about the area in which your church is located and the hazards it faces. Review disasters or emergencies that have occurred in the community, for example: tornadoes, windstorms, severe winter storms, forest fires, flooding, transportation accidents, etc. Consider the geographic location of the church in relation to possible hazards such as earthquakes, nuclear or chemical plants, major transportation routes, and neighboring sites which might be hazardous.

If you are unsure of the hazards your local area faces you can contact your local emergency management agency who will be happy to provide you with a list. State and local emergency management agencies are an excellent resource for information and are happy to assist in church planning as it helps to build a more disaster resilient jurisdiction for them. Nearly every county and jurisdiction in the country has its own emergency management agency and plan and the agency can be quickly identified with an internet search. Therefore, the heavy lifting is already completed for your church when it comes to major hazard identification. The list may include natural hazards and the possibility of accidents (proximity to nuclear plants, chemical plants) or possible terrorist threats in your area.

In addition to the major hazards that your church faces, you will need to identify church specific hazards. These will vary widely from church to church. Examples include, but are not limited to: being located in a heavy crime area, a flood prone area, near a major railroad or major highway (potential for automobile or pedestrian crossing accidents), etc. A good way to compile this list is to walk around your church with your team and seek out ways in which someone could hurt him or herself or hurt others if not careful. A checklist to aid you is provided below:

Once you have identified the hazards relevant to your church, it is a good idea to prioritize them based on how likely they are to occur and what the risks are to your church and parishioners should they occur. This will allow you to decide which threats or hazards will be directly addressed in the plan. One example of how to do this is to create a risk assessment worksheet.

In the first column, you identify the hazards that are common for your area. The second column is the probability that it will occur (information that can be found through local emergency management). The next column is how much warning you will have to take action. Using a scale of 1 to 3, estimate the possibility of each listed hazard

1. Unlikely = low possibility

2. Likely = average possibility

3. Highly likely = high possibility

In the next column (labeled Impact), use a 1 to 3 scale. Estimate the possible impact of each hazard on the church, its staff, and parishioners.

1. Low impact (few hours lost productivity, nick and scratch injuries, slight property damage)

2. Moderate impact (loss of short-term productivity, serious bodily injury, moderate property damage)

3. High impact (loss of life, destruction of property)

If the two numbers in the Probability and Impact add up to four or more it is a hazard you should consider in your planning.

Hazard	Probability	Impact	Planning Priority
Fire	2. Likely	3. High Impact	High
Flooding	3. Highly Likely	3. High	High
Tornadoes	1. Unlikely	1. Low	Low

In addition to this chart, another way you can help identify your risks is to answer the following questions. Then, based on your answers, plan accordingly.

- What are the natural disasters that have occurred in your local area in the life span of your church? (Plan accordingly)
- Has a building ever burned down in your town? (Fire planning/evacuation is always necessary)
- Are you located near major highways, railways, or chemical/nuclear facilities? (Shelter-in-place /Evacuation planning)
- Do your parishioners have to cross a busy street to enter or exit? (Safe exit planning during evacuations)
- Has your church ever received a bomb threat, threat of violence, or been the subject of public scrutiny? (Address active shooter, suspicious package, and bomb threats)

Section 2. Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) considerations–

As stated in the introduction to these materials, an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) is a plan for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from various hazards, accidents, and incidents. One way in which to approach this is to divide your plan into sections such as these:

- **Basic Plan–**
 - The basic plan is the foundation that the rest of the plan will be built upon. This part of the plan provides an overview of church operations before, during, and after an incident. It will address the actions the church will take regardless of the type of threat or hazard. This section provides the fundamentals for the plan and should not duplicate any other portion of the plan, but may reference to other sections.
 - This part of the plan contains emergency contact sheets, generic emergency procedures, and other materials that are not specific to a specific hazard or ministry.
- **Functional Annexes**
 - These annexes are aptly named, as the definition of functional sums it up:

“Having a special activity, purpose, or task; relating to the way in which something works or operates.”
 - These annexes address critical operational functions and the courses of action that need to be taken to achieve them.

- Contains overall information for emergency procedures. Examples of annexes would be:

☒ Evacuation– See next section

☒ Shelter-in-place– A shelter-in-place annex will outline the actions necessary to keep people safe during an incident that requires everyone to remain indoors for a long or short time frame. There are many different hazards that would require you to shelter-in-place including tornados, chemical or nuclear release in the area, hurricane, etc. For this reason, your shelter-in-place annex should address the processes and procedures for how to successfully move to the designated shelter areas and secure and/or seal them. Hazard specific information will be addressed in the appropriate hazard annex. Some considerations for sheltering-in-place:

- Are the shelter areas safe for use for the different types of hazards that would require them?
- What are the procedures for sheltering-in-place within the main building and other buildings on campus?
- What supplies will be needed in each designated shelter to seal the room and to provide for the people sheltered there? (i.e. water, food, first aid kit.)
- As with all planning, special consideration should be given to children's ministry as you are moving the children without their parents and must provide a secure and safe environment even in an emergency.

☒ Medical emergencies– Describes the procedures for handling and reporting medical emergencies. Lists medical team members (if the church has a medical team), where medical kits are located, reporting criteria, and incident reporting sheets.

☒ Security lockdown– Focuses on activities that need to occur in order to secure buildings and facilities during an incident that poses an immediate threat of violence. The purpose of a lockdown is to secure everyone safely and quickly in areas away from the danger. Some things to consider:

- Location of all windows and doors
- Process for locking all doors and when it is or is not safe to do so

- How to initiate a lockdown (who has the authority, how is the call made)
- **Hazard-Specific Annexes**– Hazard-specific annexes focus on the specific identified hazards that your church has decided to address. The annex will identify the actions that will need to be taken to keep people safe from these hazards. These sections will not repeat what is included in the church functional annexes. For instance, you will shelter-in-place for a chemical spill, so the procedures for sheltering-in-place are in the functional annex. Then any information you need to stay safe during a chemical spill would be in that hazard specific annex (i.e. close vents, turn off AC, tape bags over windows etc.) Hazard specific examples include:
 - Tornadoes
 - Chemical or radiological event
 - Hurricane
 - Earthquake
 - Smoke emergency
 - Suspicious package
 - Active shooter
- **Ministry specific Appendixes**– These annexes are required only as needed. If you have ministries that are operating on a different day, in a different building or location, these ministries would need to have a section of the plan that specifically addresses the needs and specifics of those facilities and parishioners.

Make sure that your church reviews and updates the plan annually to ensure the most accurate information.

Section 3. Evacuation Planning Guidance

No matter what types of hazards your planning team has decide to address, one thing is certain. You will need an evacuation plan. Being able to safely evacuate your church without panic is the number one priority that you should have as a leader. Even a faulty smoke alarm or fake bomb threat called in can lead to serious bodily injury (and litigation). If people panic, they become a danger to themselves and others trying to exit the building. Additionally, parents instinctively will not go to the exits and leave their children in a dangerous environment and can actually clog exit routes trapping both them and their children in a building that may be on fire or dangerous due to some other hazard. **If you contact your local fire department or fire marshal, they**

are happy to send firefighters to your church to assist in identifying evacuation routes and rally points at no charge. Additionally, they can help identify other items you should address in your evacuation plans.

Evacuation route considerations:

- Distance to the exit
- Ease of access (stairs, step up, steep incline, etc.)
- Anything blocking the exit (inside or out)?
- To reach the exit will they be blocking others from exiting (i.e. children's ministry)?
- Are the doors unlocked during service, at other times, and if so, is there a way to easily exit the doors?
- How many people can exit the doors at one time?
- Do the doors work properly?

In order to have a safe evacuation plan you must consider the following:

Equipment/resources:

- Smoke alarms, carbon monoxide alarms, weather radios, etc. Are they regularly tested and batteries maintained?
- Signals throughout the facility that include both audible alarms and flashing lights
- Overhead public address system, walkie-talkies in classrooms and key areas, or another means of internal communication
- Exit lighting, backup lights and flashlights available in classrooms and other key areas
- Evacuation route maps and signage
 - Posted visibly throughout the facility
 - Specific to each area
- Pre-identified rally points for the main sanctuary and children's ministries

Next, address the key staff needed for a safe evacuation during service, business hours, or a special event. This will vary depending on the number of people in the building and the key staff to coordinate the evacuation.

Roles to consider:

- Situational awareness: weather alerts (weather radio), news, etc.
- Which church leaders will activate an evacuation or shelter-in-place order (and the all clear to return)?
- Activation of alarms and warning systems/signals (alarms, overhead announcements, walkie-talkie messages, etc.)
- Coordinators to lead people from different areas of the building (volunteers– Evacuation maps in each room so that anyone can see the nearest/fastest exit)
- Communications coordinator– Who is providing messaging during the evacuation?
- Operational awareness– How many people are in your building at any given time?– Need to ensure they are all out and accounted for
- Contacting and talking to emergency personnel (police, fire, medical, etc.) anyone can dial 911, however, you should have identified staff able to remain calm during an incident to take over this communication function when possible

As stated earlier, there should be evacuation route signage and evacuation maps displayed prominently throughout the church. These maps should include:

- Easy to read visible display that do not require a command of the English language or good vision to see– Large print and clear pictures
- The maps should be printed in black and white, except for the path to take from the location you are evacuating from
- On the map it should clearly state where you are in the building and the path to take from that location
- Ensure that emergency exits and designated rally points are clearly labeled
- Areas for people to assemble—rally points should be a minimum of 150 feet away from the building
- For shelter- in- place emergencies you should have separate maps that lead to the locations designated as the shelters for your church

Special Considerations for Children's Ministry Evacuations

- All children's ministry rooms should do a quick review of information with volunteers each session to give an overview of the vital information:

- Review the location of the evacuation map for that room and where the evacuation checkpoint is that they should take the kids to in emergencies
- How do you get small, non-mobile children out of the building? If in a baby room where children will have to be carried, review procedures (evacuation in rolling cribs, carrying two babies, agreed upon assistance from ushers, etc.).
- Remind them to do a head count before and after an evacuation
- Parents will understandably want to seek out their children during an emergency
 - It is the responsibility of the church leader to communicate vital information to parents. Inform them that their children are already being evacuated and will not be in the rooms where they were dropped off, this will ensure them evacuating as planned.
 - Give parents one specific location to report to pick up children. Children should not actually be at this location, but a church leader or staff member should be there with a list of what classes are at what rally points. This helps keep parents moving without confusion. If you tried to give out different locations while still evacuating, there is bound to be confusion and possibly panic.
 - Parents must still adhere to pick up policies to ensure child safety. If you require ticket, or number, or other type of identification, they should provide this to collect their child from the rally point as well. There may be individuals who try to take advantage of confusion to abduct a child, or just an aunt or uncle trying to be helpful that can cause panic by taking a child without a parent.
- If possible, evacuation routes for children should try to keep them out of the path of evacuating adults to avoid confusion and injury.
- **Protecting the children that have been placed in your care is one of the highest priorities during an emergency.**

Section 4. Safety tips and best practices–

Benjamin Franklin famously said, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” Many church leaders will never take the time to plan for emergencies because they believe that they are unlikely to occur. However, should an emergency occur and the church is not prepared, it can make a bad situation even worse. While we all hope and pray that your church never has to face an emergency, one way to ensure the safety of your church and parishioners is to prepare for one. Pastors and church leaders should

definitely consider taking the time to develop a church emergency operations plan and socialize the plan to other church leaders, staff, and volunteers. In the interim, here are some very simple steps to help protect your church:

Avoiding hazards– While many hazards are out of your control, there are measures you can take to prevent or mitigate other hazards. For instance, your church can take steps to avoid fires, injuries, security threats, and even frivolous lawsuits. The key to avoiding hazards is knowing how to identify possible triggers and taking action.

- **Fires**– Many fires start in electrical wiring, due to lightning strikes, or a natural gas problem. However, the majority of fires can be traced to human error. This is especially true for facilities with kitchens, fireplaces, wood burning stoves, grills, propane tanks, and natural gas appliances (kitchen, heat, water heater). All of these things used and maintained properly will not pose a threat to your church, however, there needs to be policies and procedures in place to ensure their proper use.
 - The first step to minimizing the damage and possible injuries related to fires is to have properly working smoke detectors. It is also imperative to have a schedule for checking that they operate correctly and that the batteries are still functioning. Other useful tips are:
 - ☒ Do not block exits.
 - ☒ Make sure all exit doors are unlocked during services.
 - ☒ Confirm that all exit signs and emergency lights are properly working.
 - ☒ Service all appliances on a regular basis to ensure they are properly functioning.
 - ☒ Regularly check fire extinguishers to ensure they are up to date and working.
 - If your church is in a fire prone area (forest fires, wildfires, etc.) make sure that the grounds are kept clear of shrubbery, dead trees, and flammable materials. (If your church is in an area with a high risk of wildfires, speak with your local fire department and they can assist you with planning to protect your church.)
 - Use an electrical power strip to plug in electronics, never overload an outlet, or run a cord under a rug.
 - All appliances, heat sources and anything with an open flame should only be operated by people properly trained to do so and never left unattended while in use.

- Establish a “double check” system for anytime these items are utilized. If there is a church dinner and volunteers cook and clean the kitchen once the activities are complete, a church leader should do a walk through to ensure all appliances have been powered off. The double check method should always be used when operating or working with or on something that has the potential to start a fire.
 - Keep clutter and papers to a minimum, especially near any possible sources of fire. Do not store kindling or old newspapers near a fireplace.
 - Do not allow candles to be used anywhere outside of the main sanctuary and then utilize the double check method to ensure all open flames are properly extinguished before exiting the building.
 - Always keep space heaters or other sources of heat at a safe distance from other items.
- Fall related Injuries– A major concern for any church is the safety of its congregation, but in today’s litigious environment the church must also concern itself with protection from legal actions. One way to accomplish both is to prevent falls and other injuries whenever possible.
 - First, identify and address possible tripping hazards inside and outside of the structure.
 - ☒ Inside: loose carpet, throw rugs, damaged carpets or floors, electrical cords, wet entry points during inclement weather, etc.
 - ☒ Outside: poorly maintained parking lots, walkways, steps, and landscaping. Poorly marked steps, rises, speed bumps, and curbs.
 - After identifying and addressing the hazards, you should also be prepared for recording incidents (see incident reporting form for example). Record exactly what happened, names of the injured, of witnesses, and any staff that were present. Try to photograph the area (and the person if possible). Additionally, immediately take action to replace, repair, or close the area that caused the injury.
 - Medical Emergencies– Medical emergencies are not something you can always avoid, but they are something you can be better prepared for. When a person has a medical condition that requires immediate attention, it is imperative to have individuals trained to handle the situation. If the church is large enough, it is good to have a “medical team”, a group of volunteers who are trained medics

or Emergency Medical Technicians. In smaller churches, it is a good idea to have staff, leaders and lead volunteers take CPR training. By just providing first aid/ CPR, you can possibly save a life by providing basic life support until the arrival of first responders.

- Security Event– Security events can take many shapes. Suspicious packages, violence at the church, active shooter, assaults, and anti-Christian aggression can occur at any time and with little warning. Leaders should be trained in proper reporting and response actions to these events. Additionally, members of your local church should consider the following in order to minimize the loss of life and or injuries.
 - All emergencies or security issues should be reported immediately via 911.
 - Take every measure necessary to secure people in a safe location.
 - Lock as many doors behind you as possible when fleeing a violent situation.
 - Ensure all members are evacuated immediately.
 - Never attempt to confront a hostile or violent individual.
 - Active shooter resources are provided by the Department of Homeland Security at <http://www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness>
- Identify Emergency Communication Methods
 - Identify methods for alternate communication to send out notifications and in the case that phone lines and cellular service are out. Such methods may include:
 - ☒ Internet communications (e-mail, social media)
 - ☒ Text messaging may still be operational even if voice service is not
- Promote Volunteer Preparation– Regularly encourage volunteer coordinators to engage volunteers in reviewing emergency procedures. Also, as part of new volunteer orientation, review the roles that the volunteers will have in evacuations and other aspects of your emergency operations plan.
- Have Emergency Supply Kit(s) available:

- The kit should contain emergency instructions for sheltering-in-place and the evacuation routes from where the kit is stored
- Water and non-perishable foods
- First aid kit
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Battery-powered radio and extra batteries
- Sanitation supplies (hand sanitizer, garbage bags, baby wipes, etc.)
- Basic Leader Responsibilities
 - Staying calm and summoning help when required for emergency
 - Knowing how to correctly report emergencies
 - Knowledge of placement and operations of manual fire alarms and extinguishers
 - Completing proper notifications and announcements during an emergency
 - Knowledge of/access to facilities lock-down/shelter-in-place procedures, designated shelter areas, and precautions to take in the event of an emergency
 - Familiarity with exit routes and alternate exits for evacuation
 - All leaders should know the emergency evacuation routes and procedures for the building, and their designated assembly area outside the building.

Emergency Contact Sheet

For All Emergencies Dial 911

(For areas without 911 service list emergency numbers)

Church Address: _____

(Person making the call may not know the exact address to provide)

Poison Control: _____

Local numbers for non-emergency:

Fire: _____

Police: _____

Medical Services: _____

OTHER IMPORTANT NUMBERS

Pastor(s): _____

Church office: _____

Call these numbers for:

- Non-emergency assistance
- Reporting lost or found items (IDs, valuables etc.)

Building Maintenance: (contact person)

Call this number to report unsafe conditions or to report issues:

- Leaks, plumbing and drainage
- Building structural issues
- Lighting

If available:

Medical Response Team Members: _____

Emergency Response Team Members: _____

Incident Report

The following form is an example of an incident report. These should be filled out in the case of ANY incident whether it is for an injury, a complaint of inappropriate behavior, or misconduct. It is important to maintain accurate records of any incidents or injuries sustained at the church.

Date: _____

Person: _____ (this is the injured person or the person reporting a non-injury incident)

Type of Incident: _____ (injury, complaint, report of misconduct, etc.)

Anytime someone makes an allegation that has a criminal element this form should be filled in and law enforcement contacted immediately. Failing to report an accusation of a crime puts you and your church at greater risk. It is not for the church to decide guilt or innocence on any allegations, but to report them to the proper authorities.

What area of the church did the accident occur: _____

Try to take pictures of the area immediately and of the injury if possible. Photographing an injury can be very tricky and must be handled with grace and tact. However, having the pictures can aid the church should a suit be filed later.

Completed by: _____ (who completed the form)

Where were you when injury occurred:

What happened _____

This should be a brief statement of the fall, injury, or complaint. (In instances of criminal misconduct or abuse allegations, do not ask the person reporting the incident to tell the entire story. Write down the type of complaint and call authorities. Allegations and rumors can start if this form has too information). Offer the back of the sheet if more space is needed.

Witnesses:

(Preferably, two at least in addition to any church staff who witnessed the incident. Staff should not be the only witnesses if there are others available.)

Action Taken/Medical Treatment Provided:
