

Preventing Slips, Trips and Falls

Ministry Protection Memo

“MPM” is a series on various topics relative to Church and safety. Send your comments and interests to the Northern Illinois Conference.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Gallagher

Religious Practice
2850 Golf Road
Rolling Meadows, IL 60008-4050
888.285.5106
religiouspractice@ajg.com

or

Dwayne Jackson

Director of Risk Management
Northern Illinois Conference
of The United Methodist Church
312.783.5945
djackson@umcnic.org

ajg.com/religious

Local churches seeking to improve the safety and efficiency of their properties should look carefully at potential sources of slips, trips and falls. Whenever bodily injury accidents occurring on church property are analyzed, half of these accidents were slips, trips and falls.

Falls outside of church buildings can be caused by cracks, holes, depressions and raised sections of sidewalks and other exterior walkways, raised fuel oil fill plugs and water shutoff valves, or in paved and unpaved parking areas and playgrounds. Overlooked and disregarded tripping hazards create dangerous situations that may result in injury. Slips and falls may also occur due to ice, snow or wet leaves on exterior property. Building interiors may have exposure to slips and falls when there are slippery floors and stair surfaces, worn and torn carpeting, inadequate lighting, electrical extension cords or poor housekeeping conditions. Water from rain, snow and ice may be tracked into a building, extending this hazard inside on normally dry floors.

Anyone can clip on altar steps or fall into unguarded organ pits. Senior citizens are more likely to fall due to physical limitations and deteriorating eyesight and agility.

Areas used by young children are also susceptible to additional hazards. Children in normal play situations are often unpredictable and prone to injury.

What can local churches do to control accidents involving slips and falls? The first step is to take an inventory of potential exposures within the local church facilities. Next, develop a list of remedial actions that can be taken. You will then be able to implement these plans. Unsatisfactory conditions should be corrected on a priority basis according to available resources. Repair the worst and most hazardous conditions first and develop a timeline to repair the rest. Consider the



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amount of traffic and the type of people who use an area with hazards when prioritizing repairs. For example, a sidewalk may be in need of a complete replacement, but funds for such an extensive job may not be available. The church should seek to patch and repair the worst and most hazardous sections first and develop a plan to replace the sidewalk. Some hazards may require special fundraising efforts to obtain the necessary financial resources. Very serious hazards, such as slippery floors, can often be cured by simple and inexpensive means, such as stripping the floor finish and substituting a different, less slippery finish. Priorities should be set based on hazard correction needs rather than allowing cost to determine if and how you will respond.

Exterior Walkways

Sidewalks and other exterior walkways represent a 24-hour exposure to tripping and falling. They are used not only by the church members but by members of the public and should be frequently inspected. Regular maintenance will help prevent these hazards from developing. Adequate snow removal equipment needs to be on hand. Timely snow and ice removal from exterior walks and stairs is essential in order to prevent numerous accidents during winter months. Short of removal, salting or sanding of icy walking surfaces is strongly recommended. Pay close attention to areas which are shaded, since they are more prone to ice buildup. In extreme cases, icy areas should be blocked off until the hazard is alleviated. Alternate entrances or passageways can be used pending removal of the dangerous condition.

Building Entrances

Floor surfaces inside and outside church entrances are best constructed of flooring material which is slip-resistant, even when wet. Carpeting inside the church provides a superior slip-resistant surface over tile or wood. Carpeting can also provide some cushioning benefit in the event of a fall.

Mats used in entrances will minimize slipping hazards on hard-surface floors and help to reduce the amount of moisture that is tracked into buildings during inclement weather. The mats should be water absorbent and a type that do not present additional tripping hazards. Permanently installed recessed mats are preferred. However, if surface mats are used, they should have beveled edges and should be thick enough (3/8") and large enough not to curl or slide easily. Where removable rubber mats are used during inclement weather, care must be taken in storage to prevent raised ends when they are re-laid. Rolling mats on alternate sides each time they are stored reduces permanent irregularities in their surfaces. Thresholds or saddles within the doorways should be no more than 3/4" high and should slope at the edges to minimize any transitional or tripping hazard. These should also be grooved or otherwise slip-resistant and set securely in place.

Stairs

Interior and exterior stairs should have uniform tread riser heights and depths. Tread riser heights should be about 7" and tread depths should be about 11". Handrails placed at 34"–48" above enclosed steps are essential. Handrails should be on both sides of the steps. Consideration should be given to a separate handrail for small children, which should be placed below the adult rail. Stair-tread surfaces tend to be slippery, especially when wet. Such surfaces should be treated with slip-resistant resurfacing material or with abrasive stripping. Luminous or brightly colored paint could be applied to highlight tread edges or nosings. Adequate lighting should always be provided for both interior and exterior stairs.

Interior Walkways

Rubber runners should be used to cover aisles during inclement weather. These will provide a relatively non-slip floor covering and protect the floor from water accumulation. Warning signs should also be posted.

Washing or treating floors is best done when the premise is unoccupied. If the work has to be done while the building is occupied, partition off the work area with barricades. Where the floor is washed with soap, flush it clean with clear water to remove any soap residue. Some detergents require little or no rinsing and are formulated not to leave the floor slippery when they dry.

Dressing or Treating Hard-Surface Floors

Because local church flooring is used often and for a variety of purposes, local church representatives should discuss their flooring and floor-dressing requirements with a flooring-supply dealer. Floors should be treated with wax-based products, either in paste or emulsion form, as well as with synthetic resins. Wood and concrete floors should be painted or sealed prior to floor treatment to prevent slips.

Terrazzo floors should be treated with a semi-permanent seal and then cleaned with a neutral liquid detergent followed by the application of a slip-resistant dressing.

To prevent falls, a product should possess a satisfactory coefficient of friction (the measure of the slipperiness of a floor surface). The higher the number (up to 1), the more resistant the surface is to slips. Surfaces with a coefficient of friction above .50 are considered satisfactory. Your flooring supply vendor can provide information concerning slip-resistant floor dressings, including the comparative coefficients of friction of the various dressings available for the type(s) of floors in question.

Occasionally, floor waxes and dressings should be removed from the floor (stripping). Follow manufacturers' instructions carefully in order to ensure successful and total removal of the old floor dressing. Contact with toxic cleaners should be avoided by the use of rubber gloves and protective clothing. If possible, use a nonflammable floor stripper. Allow enough time after stripping the floor before applying the new floor dressing.

Carpeting

Carpeting in good condition and properly secured will reduce slip and fall problems. However, ripped, torn, lumpy or overly worn carpeting can present hazards. Repairing or replacing of such carpeting is recommended. In selecting carpeting, consideration should be given to heavy duty, easy-to-clean carpeting, which will provide durability and added safety.

General Housekeeping

General housekeeping, or the lack of it, is a significant cause of trips, slips and falls. No matter what floor covering is selected, it will not protect a local church from the hazard of food dropped during the potluck in the fellowship hall, coffee spilled in the parlor after the service, rainwater coming in through an open office window or crayons, balls and toy trucks in the Sunday school hallway.

Persons responsible for church events, especially those involving food and drink (with possibilities of spillage) should monitor the floors carefully during and after the event and ensure spills and debris are cleaned up promptly.

Designate a responsible individual to pick up toys and other items after classes and events involving young children are over. Windows should be checked to ensure they are properly secured to avoid rain or snow leaks.

Use of extension cords in heavily traveled areas increases trip and fall hazards. Extension cords should not be used as replacements for electrical outlets. Where extended use of one or more extension cords is contemplated, there usually is a deficiency in available outlets. Never run an extension cord where building occupants will need to walk over it.

Exterior sidewalks should be swept and kept clear of leaves, twigs and other debris. Interior halls and rooms should be free of clutter, which can be stepped on or tripped over. The more local church members are made aware of potential hazards conducive to slips, trips and falls, the closer you are to solving these problems.



SELF-INVENTORY FORM

Slips, Trips and Falls Hazards

EXTERIOR

- Sidewalk in good condition (free from cracks, holes, depressions, raised slabs and other tripping hazards).
- Basement window wells have gratings at grade level or other barricades to prevent “falling into.”
- Parking area in good condition (free from recognized tripping and falling hazards).
- Snow and ice removal is adequate during winter months.
- Stairs in good condition (equipped with adequate handrails).
- Lighting is adequate during hours of darkness (where and when needed).

ENTRANCE/EXIT

- Adequate lighting during hours of darkness.
- Inside/outside mats in good condition and properly set.
- Railings/handrails where required.

INTERIOR

- Stairways in good condition (with adequate handrails).
- Lighting is satisfactory (when needed).
- Floor surface slip-resistance is satisfactory.
- Carpeting is securely set (free from recognized tripping hazards).
- Housekeeping is properly maintained.
- Walking surfaces are free from electrical wiring, raised floor outlets and other recognized tripping hazards.

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