

Increased Awareness Results in Action

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With their eyes opened to fire hazards commonly found in religious properties, building managers, sextons, and volunteers wasted no time in cleaning out combustible items from boiler rooms, storage spaces, and attics, reducing risk immediately at no cost. Adding fire extinguishers, exit signs, emergency lighting, and lock boxes with keys for access by firefighters were low-cost steps taken by many over the summer. Addressing electrical hazards ranged from eliminating extension cords to deciding to overhaul antiquated electrical systems.

Owners evaluated existing automatic fire detection systems and began planning systems in buildings with none. The examples below show what can be accomplished in a short time by motivated, informed stewards of religious properties. People took a hard-headed look at fire hazards, identified problems, and took action. Although the cost of installing automatic fire detection systems and related improvements to comply with building codes is substantial, these congregations seem committed to making fire protection a priority. St. Martin's Church David Kamara, Sexton of St. Martin's Church in Harlem reported that he went straight to work throwing out combustibles in the boiler room and elsewhere. The workshop also made him aware that a spark could ignite fallen paint chips from water-damaged plaster. Repairing leaks to prevent further damage has been a priority this year, and the church has begun a program of scraping loose paint, repairing plaster, and repainting. The congregation is also proceeding with the installation of a new fire alarm system with a central reporting station, smoke detectors, manual pull stations, horns, and strobe lights. A \$50,000 system, designed by Warren Davis of D&W Central Station Fire Alarm in Manhattan, will protect the church, parish hall, and rectory of St. Martin's as well as its parish chapel, St. Luke's. Says David Johnson: "When we changed insurance companies to reduce costs, the new insurer required us to install an up-to-date, code compliant fire alarm system. We estimate that savings on insurance will pay back the cost of the system in five to six years."

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

"The workshop 'lit a fire' under me to clean out debris and stored items we no longer needed," said Gail Kroop of Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, New Brunswick, NJ "It made us much all much more sensitive to fire prevention." Evaluating exit signage is on the agenda; the synagogue already has an automatic fire detection system.

St. George's Parish

The Reverend Dr. Frances Kwan of St. George's Parish in Flushing, commented that "the workshop was very helpful. Before then I didn't know about these risks." The church has already improved exit lights and added fire extinguishers. With battery-powered smoke alarms in place at present, the church is considering a fire alarm system as part of its long-range plan for repairs and restoration.

Congregation Beth Elohim

Nancy Rubinger, Executive Director of Congregation Beth Elohim located in Park Slope, said that "the workshop underlined concerns about hazards that I've had since I got here six years ago." Chief among these was the inadequate electrical system dating from the building's construction in the 1920s. A comprehensive upgrade of the electrical system, fire detection and alarm systems, and emergency lighting is now underway to bring everything up to code. This was the priority in the master plan for the sanctuary and temple building that the synagogue has been developing with an architect. Ms. Rubinger has been "looking at the building with new eyes," and directing the maintenance staff to clean out spaces and store materials properly.

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims

Kenneth Griffin, a member of Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn Heights who is coordinating a phased building restoration program, remarked that "the main thing I realized from the workshop is the need to update our insurance coverage. The church has made a lot of improvements to its buildings since it changed insurers five years ago." A building conditions survey prepared by Building Conservation Associates four years ago incorporated recommendations by mechanical/electrical engineers Ambrosino, DePinto & Schmieder, such as upgrading electrical systems and adding emergency and exit lighting to the sanctuary. A new automatic fire detection system in the main building, full code compliance in a building renovated for a nursery school five years ago, and a complete electrical system upgrade of another building currently underway are among the major improvements. The church is now working with its insurers to update its policy. "We need to inventory our fine arts and get appraisals," added Mr. Griffin.

Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity

Ron Cosby, who is responsible for maintenance and security, at the Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn Heights, discarded rags, old clothes, books, paint cans, and other combustibles from the boiler room and other areas, and found a safe place for storing maintenance supplies. Adding more fire extinguishers was a low-cost task easily accomplished.

Part of the property has an alarm system, and installing sprinkler and alarm systems in the sanctuary will be considered in the future. Church of St. John the Baptist and Capuchin Friary Clive Boney, Facilities Engineer at the Church of St. John the Baptist and Capuchin Friary in Manhattan, installed more exit signs and emergency lighting at escape routes, and "No Smoking" signs in various locations. The buildings already have automatic fire detection systems. He realized that he had not been storing combustible materials safely and cleaned up the basement and boiler room.

Church of the Ascension

Jim Bagley, Senior Warden, and Philip Ragland, a church member who is also an architect with O'Brien and Kreitzberg, inspected the Church of the Ascension in Greenwich Village soon after the workshop. "The biggest problem we found was too much debris, especially in the basement," said Mr. Bagley. They discarded paint cans, building materials, broken equipment, paper, and other items. In the church attic, wood splinters from roof work, old light bulbs, and packaging were strewn around near 1000-watt ceiling bulbs. "We realized that we need to communicate housekeeping expectations to the maintenance staff." Although the parish hall has a fire alarm and sprinkler system and the rectory has fire alarms, the inspection revealed a need for a fire detection system in the sanctuary and attic. An emergency plan and an inventory of contents also need to be prepared, said Mr. Ragland.

Mamaroneck United Methodist Church

Catherine Howard of the Mamaroneck United Methodist Church discussed the workshop with other trustees and concluded that "the church is in good shape" with respect to fire protection. Thanks to the oversight of a trustee who is a volunteer fireman, the church has sound storage practices and an automatic fire detection system. The trustees decided to increase nighttime lighting and install a lock box with a key for firefighters to protect the historic wooden exterior doors from damage by axes.

Friends Meeting House and Seminary

Martin Van Ord, Plant Manager at the Friends Meeting House and Seminary in Manhattan found that he could easily implement a few minor fire safety improvements, like adding battery back-up units to emergency exit lighting, and from the Friends School to a fireproof vault. Insurers have recommended the installation of a central monitoring system for its complex of buildings. The buildings are of different dates and have a patchwork of grandfathered fire detection systems, only some of which meet current codes. Designing and installing a centralized, connected system for a complex which includes a private school would be unusually costly in this situation.

Church of Our Savior

Louis Godfroy III, a Vestry member at Church of Our Savior, New Lebanon and a volunteer fireman, spearheaded a battery of fire safety improvements at the stone church and wood-frame community house and rectory built by Shakers in the mid- 19th century. A decision was made to use artificial greens and electric candles for Christmas decorations, instead of fresh evergreens and real candles in the windows. They eliminated extension cords and relocated lighting fixtures, and plan to upgrade electrical wiring in the organ and choir area. Old signs, mops, wooden folding chairs, and other combustibles were removed from the furnace room, and Christmas decorations and other items removed from the attic of the Friendship House. They decided to prohibit storage in the attic permanently to prevent items from accumulating.

The church has begun planning for an automatic fire detection system with a central alarm, which would benefit both the church and the preschool in the Friendship House. Mother Allison wrote an article for the local paper about Mr. Godfroy's attendance at the workshop and his willingness to assist other churches in improving fire safety. Says Mr. Godfroy: "The seminar made it easy to take a look at ourselves and admit that we have many overlooked hazards too."