



Danger at church!

TN33 Training Notes series: Administration

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Health and safety is a major area of concern these days, and rightly so. If you are seeking to provide a risk assessment for your church premises, here is a checklist of eleven of the most common areas of danger that I observe. At the end there is some advice on how to prepare an assessment.

The list is far from exhaustive, but should get you off to a good start and prevent you omitting areas you might otherwise overlook. You can also use it to apply to any specific activity, though you will need to select from it in this case. The list is not in any particular order.

1 **Work undertaken by volunteers**

It is all too easy for well-meaning volunteers not to be sufficiently aware of the risks of lifting heavy items, repairing or working with electrical equipment, working at heights, using chain saws in the grounds, and so on. How do you alert people to the dangers and train them how to work safely?

2 **Children on site**

Many churches regularly have children, from toddlers to teens, on site. Can they stray into the kitchen, touch a hot radiator, fall over obstructions, touch an electrical socket, hurt themselves on toys in the crèche, get their hands on dangerous chemicals, or run around the car park when cars are reversing out of spaces?

3 **Work with children**

Staff and volunteers who work with children or adults at risk (as group leaders, holiday club helpers, etc.) require up-to-date, enhanced DBS checks, and the church is required to have and adhere to a Safeguarding Policy. This is a specialist area of taking care which cannot be covered in any detail in these notes.

4 **Fire precautions**

Churches may have large numbers of people on site at certain times of the week, whether the regular congregation or those hiring the premises. Has proper care been taken to warn of smoke and fire, and can the building be easily evacuated without panic? Is emergency lighting available? Do staff know the fire drill and who is responsible? Are you up-to-date with the latest statutory requirements? You have to assess the fire risk, provide fire-fighting equipment and ensure safe exits.

5 **Church kitchens**

The first risk concerns equipment of a type and size that many people may not be used to in their homes: industrial cookers, water boilers, etc. What training and advice do you provide? You are also obliged to carry out regular inspections of all gas and electrical equipment. The second risk relates to the whole area of food hygiene – a subject in its own right.

6 **Slipping and tripping**

This is the cause of a large number of accidents, especially in and around older buildings where there may be trailing cables or slippery paths (especially under yew trees). Watch out for steps that are not easily visible, uneven floors and paving, grease or water on kitchen and toilet floors, slopes without guard-rails, etc. Remember that visitors and occasional users of your premises may not be as familiar with hazards as your congregation.

7 **Ventilation, heating, lighting, sanitary facilities, etc.**

I see large copiers sited beside church office desks without ventilation, poor levels of lighting, and sometimes unsuitable heating arrangements in an old building where there may be dangerous heaters, sometimes with large mesh guards that trap small children's fingers. Are toilets cleaned regularly and properly? If in doubt, take advice.

8 **Isolated workers**

The idea of a church Lone Worker Policy is now in focus. If you have staff or volunteers working from an isolated building which is sometimes visited by people who need help, you owe it to the staff and volunteers to make the building as safe as possible. There is special danger if a building is in an isolated position, or surrounded by a dark churchyard. Have you taken advice on crime prevention? Do you have suitable locks and, if necessary, entry phones/cameras? This issue extends to home-working too: many clergy have callers at their doors who can prove dangerous.

9 **Confidentiality**

Personal records, databases and certain minutes (in hard copy and digital forms) need to be kept in such a way to minimise the risk of unauthorised people being able to access them (including by theft of computers). Churches need to take great care in what information they put on their website, especially telephone numbers and email addresses, pictures of children who can then be identified, etc.

10 Online risks

This item has been added to these notes in 2024 as it is now a major risk. Churches with volunteer workers are in particular danger from fraud and scams. Ensure your IT systems are adequately protected from malware of all kinds and those who answer church phones know the signs of a scam call, especially of anything unexpected with financial implications. See Training Notes TN143, *Protect your church from scams*, for more on this.

11 Special risks

Churches with offices need to ensure proper seating for computer work to avoid the danger of Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). Those in areas of high vandalism may need CCTV for both building and car park to minimise the risk of criminal damage and arson. Those taking children to special events in private cars need disclaimers for parents to sign and awareness of legislation affecting car seats. And so on. Specialist advice is usually available on such issues (see below for some sources). Take it.

If you are organising any activity you should check to see what insurance cover your church policy provides. You may need to take out extra insurance for specific events.

Preparing a risk assessment

To prepare a detailed risk assessment, best practice is to format it across a landscape oriented sheet in columns as follows. The sheet should be clearly titled and dated.

- 1 The potential hazards or areas of risk you have identified (these may be accident, theft, damage, illness, financial loss, loss of use of facilities, damage to reputation, etc.). This will need to be a descriptive listing. A complex item may need to be split into different parts.
- 2 The likelihood of each one of these occurring: all you need to state is one of 'high', 'medium' or 'low'.
- 3 The potential impact of such an occurrence: 'high', 'medium' or 'low'.
- 4 Action you are taking or procedures you have in place to minimise the chance and impact of such an occurrence. This needs to be a descriptive statement or listing.
- 5 If action in column 4 has not yet been taken, the person who is responsible and the target date for completion and review. It is also wise to identify the person responsible for review on procedures already in place.

Exercise

Here is an exercise to try if you want to apply the lessons within these notes.

Your church is organising a work-party day on a Saturday later this month and encouraging as many as possible to come. The aim is to hire a machine to turn the soil over, then to plant in new flowerbeds, to lop some of the trees in that area, to tidy up some of the old gravestones that are leaning over, and to finish off a concrete path to the main church door.

The church kitchen and storage cupboards are also due to be given a spring-clean, cleaning the ovens and moving the freezers to a new position. If enough people come, the aim is also to paint the inside of the small hall, using scaffolding towers on loan from a friend of a church member. There will be a family picnic at the mid-point of the day. There will be outdoor games in the church grounds for the younger children.

Prepare a detailed risk analysis for this day.

Websites

For more detailed advice in general cases, try the following websites.

http://www.churchsafety.org.uk	for general information on all aspects of church safety
https://thirtyoneeight.org	for issues affecting safeguarding practices in churches
https://www.hse.gov.uk	for all aspects of Health and Safety legislation
https://ratings.food.gov.uk	for food hygiene

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN33. See also Training Notes TN85, *Preparing a Lone Worker Policy*, TN111, *A church policies checklist*, TN135, *How to conduct a disability audit*, and TN143, *Protect your church from scams*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN33 under Administration.

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