

WINTER HINTS AND TIPS – MINIMISING THE RISKS

Winter is on its way, bringing the usual problems associated with cold weather, and chapels face even more risks than domestic buildings. The following are simple but practical measures which, if undertaken regularly, can save churches a great deal of time and trouble by pre-empting expensive repair or replacement costs.

Burst Pipes

The inconvenience caused by a burst pipe can be considerable. Even a small rupture can release large quantities of water, damaging masonry, carpets and electrical equipment. Following a few simple steps can reduce the chance of such a calamity:

- Ensure water pipes are well lagged
- Service the boiler and heating system regularly
- Make sure that the relevant people know where to turn off the water supply.

If a frozen pipe is discovered, first turn off the water supply and then slowly thaw the affected pipe by introducing gentle heat to the area. Use a hairdryer, space heater or hot water bottle. Do not use a blow torch or other open flame.

If a pipe does burst, immediately turn off the water supply at the stopcock. Try to reduce the spread of water and do not use any electrics if you believe they may have been affected. Engage a professional electrician to assess the situation.

Gutters and drains

Downpipes only work if clear of obstructions. In the autumn, gutters can quickly fill with leaves. Blockages will cause water to accumulate, eventually triggering damage. If trapped rainwater freezes, downpipes may crack or shatter. A sign that gutters are not working efficiently is soil being washed away at ground level or splashes of soil at the base of walls. It is recommended that blockages be dealt with by a contractor who is able to work safely at height.

Roofs

If tiles are loose or missing, a roof can be easily damaged by rainwater getting in. It is far more economical to maintain roof tiles than repair or replace roof timbers. If there are any keen birdwatchers in your congregation, they may be persuaded to lend their binoculars on occasion so that the roofs and gutters can be efficiently checked without the diaconate resorting to ladders or cherry-pickers.

Pathways

In snowy or icy conditions, slips and falls can easily happen and churches have a duty of care to ensure that members and visitors alike are safe. Churches should take actions that are 'reasonable in the circumstances'. For instance, keeping entry and exit routes free of anything which may cause a person to slip. Preventative measures, such as clearing and gritting paths, should also be taken.

Keep in mind that the longer snow and ice remain on the ground, the greater the likelihood of it being considered reasonable for some attempt to be made to clear it. However, as long as there is one safe route available to access the building, it is not necessary to ensure that every available path is immediately cleared.

Temporary Heating

Should a church's main heating system fail during the winter months, it is recommend that electric convector or fan-assisted heaters (with thermostatic cut-outs) are used as a temporary measure.

Position portable heaters well clear of woodwork or other combustible materials. Where possible, fit guards to protect against the possibility of the heaters being accidentally knocked over. Never leave temporary heaters unattended for long periods or when a building is unoccupied. In addition, never move a heater once it has been switched on.

It is advisable not to use liquid petroleum gas (LPG) heaters. These give off lots of water vapour which can have an adverse effect on buildings, even leading to the onset of rot in woodwork. Equally, electric radiant heaters and paraffin/oil fired heaters should never be used, even as a temporary measure.

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