

Dirty jobs: Professionals can help maintain church facilities

By Laura J. Brown

**HELP
WANTED**

CHURCH MAINTENANCE SUPERVISOR

Job Description: Must perform routine cleaning duties. Other tasks may include unclogging sewer lines, exterminating insects, sealing bell towers, tarring roofs, resurfacing parking lots, cleaning gutters, trimming trees and other miscellaneous chores.

Hours: Must work days, evenings and weekends.

Start date: ASAP

Anyone who maintains a church or Christian school knows that keeping buildings clean can involve a lot of dirty work. On top of just being nasty, some of the worst jobs — unstopping toilets or removing bird waste, for example — involve health hazards too. Others, such as pest control, are simply difficult. The trick comes with knowing when to do these jobs yourself and when to call in the professionals.

Snaking sewer lines

Clogged sewer lines can lead to some messy problems in a church building. Sounds like an understatement, doesn't it? But if the pipes stop working, black water can gurgle up through drains and damage the carpet, floors and walls. That leads to more problems. If water isn't removed promptly, mold will grow. Running a plumber's snake through sewer lines every year or two can save you from performing an even dirtier and more expensive job. They also remove clogs that standard drain cleaners won't, such as the plastic action figure a toddler tossed in the toilet last Sunday.

Matthew Demorest recalls snaking the lines at a Christian college's cafeteria frequently to keep sour drain water from backing up into the kitchen. "Every few months, it was backing up," says Demorest, a church facilities manager. "It would come up through the floor drain and run from tile to carpet. Once it got on the carpet, it made a real mess." The black water reeked of decomposing food — not a very pleasant smell for a cafeteria, Demorest says.

While clogged sewer lines can cause some big problems, there is hope. Julie DuVall, subrogation specialist for Brotherhood Mutual, says most sewer and drain backups are preventable. "If churches would hire a professional to check their drains every year or two and clear them if needed, just think of the disastrous mess and hassle they could avoid," DuVall says.

Although your church insurance policy will pay for cleanup involved with a dirty job like this, it won't cover your congregation's pain and suffering. In Martinsville, VA, an Assembly of God congregation spent more than a year dealing with the effects of a sewer backup. Its new fellowship hall was flooded after a neighbor flushed a mop head down the city sewer line and clogged it. About two inches of sewage water backed into the 300-person hall, damaging new carpet, walls, tables and chairs.

Professional cleaners mopped up the mess within two days but the cleanup left behind a chlorine odor that still clings to the building and its contents. "It has just been a nightmare," Pastor Alvin Nunley says. "I lost some members of my church because they were allergic to the chlorine smell."

"If you have a plumber or service technician check all of your drains annually or biannually, they can identify a lot of problems before they become emergencies," says Paul Abrams, a spokesman for Roto-Rooter Inc.

Having a maintenance schedule with a plumber also leads to better customer service, Abrams says. "There's familiarity. You have a relationship. If there's an emergency, you're not going to wait in line."

Terminating termites

Termites are found in every state except Alaska, and they don't know the difference between a tree and a church. They devour wood 24 hours a day, causing damage not covered by most insurance policies—damage that can cause stairs or floors to collapse. If you suspect that termites have taken sanctuary in your church, it's time to call an expert. This is a dirty job that you shouldn't tackle on your own.

Do-it-yourself treatments are available, but they often focus only on the termites you can see. That may be a fraction of the termites living in the walls or the soil around your building, says Clint Briscoe, a spokesman for national pest control company Terminix. Termites are smaller than a grain of rice and can slip through cracks as thin as a few sheets of paper, he says.

HAVE TERMITES JOINED YOUR CHURCH FAMILY?

A termite colony may begin attending church services long before you know they're there. Here are some signs that you have new members:

- An indoor swarm of white flying insects in the spring
- Discarded papery wings near doors and in windowsills
- Straw-sized mud tubes along beams or your building's exterior
- Wood that sounds hollow when tapped

"Unless you know exactly what you're looking for, often it's hard to determine if you have a termite problem until the damage has been done," Briscoe says. In addition, you may not want your employees or volunteers handling the types of chemicals required to eradicate these pests. Terminix recommends that you have buildings professionally inspected annually to stop termite infestations early.

Eradicate bat and pigeon excrement

A few times a year, Randy Thompson climbs into the attic of Emmanuel Lutheran Church to lower three heavy chandeliers for cleaning. Every time, he finds bat droppings spattered on the attic floor. He knows bats frequent the 140-year-old church because he has seen them in the sanctuary.

The maintenance supervisor was posting hymn numbers at the front of the church one Friday when he saw a brown bat a few inches away. The bat was sitting in the first pew, as if waiting for the service to begin. "I jumped about a mile high," Thompson recalls. Thompson grabbed a five-gallon bucket and shooed the bat into it, releasing it after a brief show-and-tell at the school next door.

If your church attic has become a roosting paradise for pigeons, bats or birds, you have some seriously dirty work ahead. Piles of bird droppings, feathers and debris are a welcome mat for flies, lice, ticks and airborne diseases. It's best to contact an environmental engineering consultant and leave the mess to someone equipped to deal with it. If only a few birds or bats have left droppings behind, you can clean the roosting area with soap and water, as long as you take steps to minimize your risk of getting sick.

These are only a few of the dirty jobs that need to be addressed for proper church maintenance and managing the potential hazardous risks to your workers, volunteers and congregation. An organized and detailed maintenance schedule along with consultation and help from licensed professionals will help keep your church operations running smoothly.

Laura J. Brown is a writer and communications specialist with Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, IN. [brotherhoodmutual.com]



OTHER DIRTY JOBS AND WHY YOU SHOULD TACKLE THEM

Cleaning out gutters, drain pipes: Prevents water from backing up on roof which causes costly damage.

Sealing asphalt parking lots annually: Limits cracks that lead to potholes and twisted ankles.

Maintaining vehicles (oil changes, tire rotation, etc.): Reduces likelihood of accidents and breakdowns that can cause injuries.

Checking steeples, towers and shingled roofs (every few years): Prevents leaks leading to water damage.

Inspecting boilers and furnaces annually:

Prevents fires caused by faulty equipment.

Cleaning air ducts every few years: Improves furnace efficiency and prevents fires caused by an overworked furnace.

Trimming trees and brush: Prevents dead branches from falling on people or vehicles.

Emptying grease trap: Removes congealed grease below kitchen sinks that can clog drainage pipes and lead to sewer and drain backups.

Cleaning ventilation hoods: Removes grease buildup above kitchen stoves that can lead to fires.



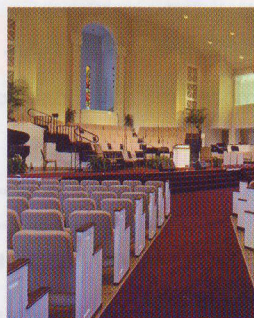
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