

# Could It Happen at an Adventist Church?

Carina Franca posted on February 07, 2013 02:00



The headlines tell the story of a horrific nightclub fire in Santa Maria, Brazil, which claimed the lives of over 230 people and injured hundreds of survivors. The fast-moving fire incited panic. Most of the victims were killed by toxic fumes and smoke or trampled as they tried to evacuate from the burning building. What lessons can the Adventist Church learn from this tragedy? Could the same thing happen on a Sabbath morning or during a school day?

During a five-year period (2006 – 2011) Adventist Risk Management (ARM) received claims involving 283 fires at Adventist churches and schools. ARM staff members annually conduct site visits at churches and schools. Often they observe many unsafe conditions that could result in a fire and have the potential to cause serious loss of life. Five unsafe conditions are most commonly found during these inspections.

1. **Unsafe Electrical** – Thirty-four percent of the 283 fires reported were from electrical causes. Some of the most typical irregularities are unsafe wiring, overloaded circuits, and the use of inappropriate electrical devices. Extension cords are to be used on a temporary basis only. All extension cords should be grounded and UL approved. Multi-outlet power strips should be fused and never connected together in series. Decorative lighting and spotlights should not be used for extended periods of time—beyond ninety (90) days—unless properly installed and wired directly into the building's electrical system. A recent visit to a youth Sabbath School room found three power strips plugged together in a series to power numerous pieces of electrical audio-visual equipment. This is a fire waiting to happen.
2. **Blocked Hallways** – When a fire occurs in a building, the immediate evacuation of all individuals is critical for the life-safety of your church members and students. If the means of egress is blocked with items being stored in hallways or blocking exit doors, panic can create a stampede during the evacuation process, which often leads to serious injury or even death. Recent observations in churches have found hallways lined with storage boxes, tables, and chairs. In one church stairway that lead from the basement Sabbath School rooms and fellowship hall

an aluminum extension ladder was stored along the wall and fastened to the handrail. During a fire emergency, all exit ways must be clear from all obstructions to ensure safe evacuation from the building.

3. **Blocked Exit Doors** – A second critical element during evacuation is the proper operation of exit doors. All exit doors should have appropriate exit signs and fully operational panic hardware which is unlocked and can be opened at all times in the event of an emergency. Exit doors should never be locked with a chain or tied closed with rope. Deaths have occurred in fires where people have been trapped at blocked exit doors and died of asphyxiation and smoke inhalation. During one church site inspection ARM staff found one of two double exit doors in the main narthex entrance roped shut with a large planter in front of the doors. The panic hardware was broken and the church had not taken time to have it repaired. Remember in a fire you have only a critical few seconds to exit the building. Eighty percent of the people will try to exit the building through the same way they entered.
4. **Poor Housekeeping** – How is the housekeeping in your church or school? Are storage rooms kept clean and organized with more than 24 inches of clearance between the ceiling and the highest item stored? Are walls kept clear of combustible materials or artwork (less than 20 percent of the surface area), which could rapidly spread a fire in a Sabbath School classroom? Does your church or school require only the use of non-combustible paper products? Flammable liquids should always be stored in fireproof cabinets and there should be a minimum of three feet of clearance in front of all electrical panels and HVAC equipment. ARM statistics reveal that poor housekeeping caused 13 percent of the fires reported during the past five years. Good housekeeping practices can help to keep your facilities safer as you reduce these potential fire hazards.
5. **Overcrowding** – During special holiday programs or musical concerts the congregation is excited because of the large number of people who attend these special events. Seating capacity of the sanctuary, gymnasium, or auditorium has been exceeded. What should you do? Resist the temptation to add additional seating using folding chairs along aisle ways or along the back walls. All meeting rooms have a maximum capacity and this number should always be maintained. Over-capacity crowds can overwhelm the exit ways in the event of an emergency. Unsecured chairs can cause obstructions and block aisles or doorways which are critical throughout the evacuation process. It is always safer to use a video feed into an overflow room or schedule multiple performances that can accommodate the capacity of your building safely.

These five fire safety lessons can mean the difference between life and death at your church or school. It is possible to prevent fire losses if appropriate care and maintenance of buildings is done on a regular basis. ARM encourages all churches and schools to have a local church safety officer and to be constantly aware of these hazards. For more resources on fire prevention visit [www.Adventistrisk.org](http://www.Adventistrisk.org).



**By Arthur F. Blinci,**  
VP Chief Risk Management Officer at Adventist Risk Management, Inc.

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