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The Ins and Outs of Inventories

Be prepared before disaster strikes

If you don't have a church inventory when disaster strikes, your biggest problem may not be the fire or flood that destroyed your property. It may be trying to complete the inventory you need before a claim can be settled.

Clients without inventories have spent six months to a year trying to complete their inventories, says John Webster, Assistant Vice President of Claims for The Church Insurance Company of Vermont. For these clients, constructing the inventory is a slow, painstaking process that includes going through old photographs and interviewing vestry board members and parishioners.

Speed the claims process

In contrast, churches with inventories often experience a speedy claims process, so they can immediately start rebuilding their church.

"I've had total loss fires where they had an inventory and we were able to turn the claim around in a couple of weeks," says Webster. "I can't stress it enough. Having an inventory is definitely a win-win. It's good for the insured as well as the insurance company."

Another danger of creating an inventory from memory is that there may be items that churches never recall.

"There are times when people don't get compensated for what they had because they can't remember what they had," says Webster. "We obviously want to pay them for what they had. Documentation makes it a lot easier to do that."

Conducting an inventory

Every good inventory has three key pieces of information about each item:

- a detailed description
- the quantity
- the approximate value

Webster says the more detailed the description, the better. For example, when listing electronic equipment like a computer or television, be sure to write down the model number. This makes it much easier for the claims adjuster to accurately determine the current market value.

Fine arts items typically have separate coverage with different limits, so it's important that they are given special attention. Because the value of fine arts items can be more difficult to determine, Webster recommends having them appraised. Items like stained glass, paintings, tapestry, mosaics and musical instruments may fall into this category.

Keeping it safe

A working copy of the inventory may be kept at the church, with changes made to it as needed. In addition, Webster recommends keeping digital copies of the inventory stored in several offsite locations.

"Obviously, if it's on a hard drive, you run the risk of losing access to the information if the computer gets damaged," says Webster. "The best thing to do is to make a couple of digital copies and store one on the premise and several off premise. Or back it up at a hotspot."


Getting it done

If you don't have time to do a comprehensive inventory right away, take video or photographs in the meantime. While a written inventory is best, videos and photographs are better than nothing. Once the written inventory is complete, videos and photographs make a helpful supplement.

For video documentation, Webster recommends walking the church property with a video camera and scanning all of the items in each room. "The nice thing about that is it documents exactly what's there," he says. "There are no surprises."

You may also want to enlist help from church volunteers. Each volunteer could be assigned to do a complete inventory of one room. Or, when having a church dinner, have the kitchen staff write down everything they used or saw in the kitchen.

Whatever your method, don't wait to start your inventory. A little work today will save you a lot of work (and potential loss) in the future.

Parish Inventory	View
Standard Inventory List	

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