

Closing Your Parsonage – Are You Going Away for Extended Time?

A parsonage that is not properly cared while occupants are not living in the facility can lead to costly claims. A few precautions when you leave the parsonage unoccupied can help assure damage will not occur.

This guide is specific for cold weather areas. Parsonages where there is no threat of freezing plumbing will not need to have water drained from systems; for these parsonages, everything else applies.

Unless you plan to heat your parsonage and have someone to check on it regularly, it's best to take precaution to protect the church property. Many things can happen in your absence to cause great damage.

The enemies of your parsonage are the same as the enemies of any type of dwelling. A small drip in the wrong place can soak into walls, floor or foundations causing degradation. An unsealed gap in the wall, roof or foundation can invite unwanted guests. Deferred maintenance can reach emergency status while you are not there.

The number one agent of damage to your home is uncontrolled water. The roof is the first line of defense against outside water penetration. Make sure your roof is in good condition and the gutters are clean. Be certain that the water shed from the roof drains away from the foundation.

Check caulking around windows and weather stripping around the outside doors. Gaps at these places can allow entry of mice. Mice can squeeze through holes only $\frac{1}{4}$ " in diameter. Rats can make it through $\frac{1}{2}$ " gaps.

Walk around the parsonage. Look for places where pipes, wires and vents go through the wall or roof. If there are even small gaps around these penetrations, seal them. If all entry points for insects and rodents are sealed it is less likely you will have these guests. Check at your local hardware or building supply for the proper sealing material for the specific job.

All vents and open drains must be covered with wire mesh or air operated flaps. Vents with flaps can be covered with mesh as long as it doesn't interfere with operation of the flaps. Screen should never be used to cover dryer vents. This can create a fire hazard when used.

Make sure there is no place where the dirt is piled against the foundation closer than 6" from the siding. This gap helps keep insects from gaining access to the wood in the sill plate, framing and siding.

If trees or other plants contact the sides of the parsonage or roof, this provides access for rodents like squirrels and insects. If trees hang over the roof, gutters can fill with pine needles or leaves. A blocked gutter can cause major damage. The branches also pose a danger to the roof itself if blown or broken by storm. Rotting needle or leaves hold moisture that promotes insect growth and decay of some roofing materials. Clear off any buildup.

If you have a chimney or stove pipe, make certain they have spark arrestors covering the top. A spark arrestor will also keep animals out.

When you leave the parsonage for extended periods, it is best to evacuate all water from the plumbing system. Burst pipes can be a nightmare in the damage they cause, not to mention the repair cost. The first step is to turn off the main water valve. If you have a pump, turn off the power. Drain the pressure tank if applicable. Connect a hose to the drain cock and run the hose outdoors away from the foundation. Open the drain.

The pressure tank accumulates water and builds pressure to distribute water throughout the parsonage. If you don't have a pump, you probably don't have a pressure tank.

Open all faucets to allow water to drain. Water in pipes can freeze and burst. A frozen pipe may not leak until spring thaw or may choose an illogical time to spew water everywhere. It's as unpredictable as the amount of damage it can do if left undiscovered.

If water pipes are under the floor in a crawlspace you must drain these pipes, or protect them from freezing. You can wrap them in electrical heat tape or take other measures. Your local hardware store will know what works best in your geographical area. If there is not a drain at the lowest point in the fresh water system consider having one installed. It's a small price to protect the parsonage pipes.

Drain the water heater tank. A burst water heater can gush a lot of water - fast. Before you open the drain, turn the control knob to **off**. Connect a hose and drain outside.

If the parsonage has a hot water heat you will most likely need the help of a plumber to drain the system.

If the parsonage has a forced air furnace, turn off the emergency switch. It may be located outside the furnace room. Drain and clean the humidifier if present.

Electric heat requires only to be turned down or off.

If you plan to leave the heat on, consider installing a low temperature thermostat. Most thermostats have a lowest setting of 55°. A low temperature model can be set as low as 40°.

In areas with intense summer heat, it is not a good idea to turn off air conditioning completely. You may consider turning the thermostat up to 80 degrees. This will help dehumidify a parsonage and keep the parsonage from turning into an oven.

Bathrooms have several places where water might freeze. The toilet, sink, tub and shower all have water traps that prevent sewer gas from backing up into the parsonage. These traps need to be cleared and protected.

Flush the toilet to drain water from the tank. Dip the water from the bowl. Water will remain in the trap. If this water freezes, the porcelain will break. Use a plunger to force water through the trap. Pour about a quart of 50/50 mixture of water and antifreeze in the toilet, propylene glycol is preferred. It has an unpleasant taste for animals and is said to be more environmentally sound. This will eventually be flushed into the septic tank. Be as kind to it as possible.

Repeat the process of plunging out water and replacing with antifreeze mixture in the sink, tub and shower drains. A pint in each should be sufficient. Drain any hoses for handheld showerheads.

Find all floor drains in the house and repeat.

Repeat the process in the kitchen. Drain the sprayer. Disconnect both ends of the dishwasher supply hose and drain. Remove the drain hose and place end in a bucket. Operate the dishwasher on the drain cycle for a moment to be certain all water is cleared. If possible, disconnect the power supply.

Washing machine hoses cause 150 million dollars a year in damage. While preparing the washing machine for your absence, take a good look at the hoses. If they are worn or have bubbles plan on replacing them before you use the machine again.

Disconnect hoses and drain the hoses. Run on fill cycle to clear inlet valve. Run on warm water setting for a few seconds. Run the drain cycle for a few moments to clear water from the pump. Drain the drain hose.

Clean washer, dryer and dishwasher and apply a coat of appliance polish to protect the finish from corrosion.

Empty the refrigerator and freezer. Unplug the power. Block the door open with a piece of wood to prevent stale odors. Clean and polish.

Check in pantry, cupboards and bathroom for things that can freeze and break. Remove these items. Take food that could be a meal for bears or other animals, or store in metal containers.

Hide or remove items that might tempt a burglar. Things like tools, televisions or stereo equipment are sources of quick cash for thieves. Make the parsonage as unenticing to burglars as possible. Look through the windows, if anything of value can be seen, move it or remove it.

Before you leave, place the makings for a fire in the fireplace or woodstove so you will have a quick source of heat if you return in cold weather. Close the flue to cut down on cold air entry.

As you are leaving, place this guide where you can easily find it when you return, to help restore everything to working order. Turn off electricity and gas if you are not leaving the heat on or relying on electrical heat tape.

It takes a little time and effort to properly close down a parsonage but it pays off. The time and money you spend on repairs cuts into your living conditions. A little precaution pays big in the long run.

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