

Administration: Hiring Maintenance Personnel

Choosing appropriate personnel is an important step in assuring the long-term health and preventive maintenance of historic religious structures.

Hiring someone to care for historic houses of worship is one of the most important, and potentially difficult tasks a congregation can undertake. Ironically, despite the high quality and pride in craftsmanship which went into the construction of many historic houses of worship, these days maintenance and repair of those structures is an underappreciated, and often low-paid position. In 1991, *Your Church* magazine conducted a survey of sextons and custodians and found the average salary for part time work was \$7.16 an hour. As Andrew Rudin, Project Coordinator of the Interfaith Coalition on Energy (ICE) observes, "the job of sexton used to be a respected position, but this has devolved." Which is unfortunate because it is such an essential position. Good facilities management can ultimately save the congregation money, insure the structural and aesthetic integrity of a historically and spiritually significant building, and improve the overall experience of parishioners and others within the community. But it's a tall order too -- Mr. Rudin characterizes the position this way: "This job can be described as having the ability to walk on water with alligators just below the surface nipping at your ankles."

Mr. Rudin has worked collaboratively with diverse institutions to develop a workshop designed specifically for those responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of religious properties. In addition, there are two other useful tools that can be acquired from the Nonprofits Energy Savings Investment Program (NESIP) through e-mail or on disc: a comprehensive job description, and a test for current and potential facilities managers. Both documents were developed using feedback from workshop participants and can be customized to suit a particular congregation or building. Mr. Rudin says the first crucial step in hiring a facilities manager is defining the position and the title. "It is critical that details and expectations be defined from the start. We made a list of job titles for this position and we came up with thirty different ones -- from custodian to sexton."

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The Hiring Process

In defining the position, the building committee or individuals in charge of the task should begin with the basics -- is the position full or part-time? What are the wages and benefits? Who will supervise the individual, and what buildings or properties will they be responsible for? Will the person be responsible for budgets and purchasing? The format Mr. Rudin helped develop then guides the definition process through identifying qualifications, responsibilities, and expectations regarding style and workmanship. Once the committee hammers out the job description, an advertisement for the position may be posted. The clearer and more detailed the ad, the more appropriate a pool of candidates will (hopefully) apply.

During interviews, ask questions which relate specifically to technical qualifications, and also be sure to ask questions which help evaluate the candidate on a more personal level. The ability to work well with others such as volunteers, contractors, and committee members is important -- as Mr. Rudin advises: "hire for attitude, train for skill." The distinct culture and politics of a congregation is unique to the institution -- Mr. Rudin says "A religious property is like a little eco-system -- a little planet -- nobody owns anything and everyone contributes -- mastering the politics is critical."

When considering applicants for the position of facilities manager therefore, good personnel skills and commitment to the institution may be as important as technical expertise which can be augmented through training and experience. Mathew Sweger, Head of Repair and Maintenance at the Rochester Zen Center in Rochester, New York acknowledges, "I am learning as I go." In order to evaluate technical expertise and identify areas which would require training, the most promising candidates can take the test from NESIP, adapted for the particular needs of the property.

Nuts and Bolts

As discussed at length in the Common Bond article *Building Repair Records*, a method of record keeping should also be established and utilized by the facilities manager. Mr. Sweger, who is responsible for a compound of landmarked buildings and extensive gardens, has learned how important institutional memory is -- luckily for him, a thorough method of record keeping was developed early on. Mr. Sweger has brought the Center's "MAP Book" (Maintenance and Preservation Programs) into the 90's by putting it on CD-ROM. He tracks everything -- "we document what we do and who we've given work to." And although he always solicits bids from multiple contractors for projects, he prefers to hire contractors who have worked on the buildings over time. Included in the Center's MAP Book are monthly checklists of cyclic maintenance tasks for predictable and known systems. Of course it's the unknowns which are difficult to plan for.

Prioritizing large scale capital needs and allocating funds is a challenging task -- Mr. Sweger juggles three distinct budgets and says getting decisions made is done on a case-by-case basis. Establishing a clear process for decision making is wise, as is having a thorough conditions survey completed by a professional in historic structures. A survey will enable the facilities manager to make long-term plans for capital projects and help the congregation develop budgeting and fundraising strategies. This kind of big picture thinking helps address small problems before they become large scale deterioration.

Another factor not to be overlooked is the state of the work environment. Too often Mr. Rudin says facilities managers are relegated to unseen work areas which he calls "profane places" (as opposed to "sacred places") -- "Congregations want problems to be invisible, to go away, to be behind a door that says 'No Admittance' which is usually dark and dank and poorly lit with nothing labeled." Access is another important factor -- you can't expect regular roof check-ups if the only way up is on a rickety old ladder.

Matt Sweger has a well-equipped and well-lit wood shop to work in, though it is attached to the large meeting room rented to a yoga

group for exercise and meditation -- "it's a challenge getting anything done in the shop when there is a yoga class going on!" Accommodating the diverse cooperative-use activities common at many houses of worship is just one of the many challenges facing a resourceful and flexible facilities manager.

Training

Mr. Rudin, in collaboration with NESIP, ICE, the Cultural Facilities Fund, YMCA of Philadelphia, and the Preservation Alliance, designed the Basic Building Operation workshop after bringing together a focus group of people responsible for maintenance of historic houses of worship. They were asked what they felt they needed to know and where they got their training. The focus group identified four areas of expertise necessary for effective building management, and said most training was acquired through vendors - a situation which is implicitly problematic. As Mr. Rudin observes, if a vendor of a chemical cleaning compound has trained the practitioner in its use, it "probably means they are using too much!"

The workshop covers "Dirt & Germs," "Seeps & Leaks," "Bulbs & Boilers," and a "Tool Box Session" where qualified contractors and vendors are available for questions from participants. In addition to an information-filled manual and the practical and technical information derived from the different sessions, each participant fills out a questionnaire detailing their background, skills, and contact information. This not only serves as an opportunity to survey individuals involved in the field, the contact list of past and present workshop participants is distributed to all attendees. Mr. Rudin explains, "We are hoping to build a network so people in these positions can call each other with questions and for advice."

Facilities managers are faced with the daunting task of caring for significant and historic religious properties with numerous mechanical systems, structural anomalies, surfaces, materials, and decorative objects. As Mat Sweger says, he thought he would have lots of time for meditation at the Zen center, but has found (as anyone involved with old buildings knows) "there are always a million things to do!" Any training opportunities which arise -- from boiler maintenance to conservation of gilded objects, gutter systems to proper methods for cleaning marble -- will help your facilities manager become a pro-active and effective steward.