

After Irma: Debriefing on UUCS Hurricane Preparedness and Safety September 2017

The Church survived in good shape, but there are always questions to be answered and lessons to be learned. So here are some of our thoughts one week after Irma.

Why not put up shutters around the sanctuary?

We have talked about this in the past, but found that it would be extremely expensive to purchase the shutters, there would be no place to store them, it would be virtually impossible for volunteers to put up the shutters, and it would be very expensive to have to pay to have them put up. We have been told that shutters on the east and west walkways would have to be placed on the outside of the walkways, causing additional difficulties. All in all, the task of putting up and taking down shutters hasn't seemed practical, particularly when once everything had been installed, the large oak trees in the memorial garden could crash in and ruin the sanctuary anyway.

In addition, the Board has commissioned a committee to look at facility use and one possibility is that the Sanctuary size may be increased. If so, a large-scale investment in shutters doesn't seem wise at this time.

If not shutters, why don't we do hurricane resistant glass in the sanctuary?

We have had many discussions about doing this. Cost estimates ranged as high as \$90,000 to replace the window glass and all the doors. Buildings and Grounds, the Finance Committee and the Board concluded that, as mentioned above, even if we replaced the glass, there would still be the possibility of having one of the large oak trees in the memorial garden come crashing down on the roof, destroying much of the sanctuary. The decision was not to replace the glass.

What about flooding?

Tropical Storm Gabrielle in September of 2001 had torrential rains. The east parking lot was completely flooded as was the front parking lot. Bobby Jones Golf Course was almost completely under water and yet no water approached any of our buildings. Neither did water from the "near miss" hurricanes of 2004 and 2005. And the recent deluge of twelve inches of rain brought no threat of flooding (other than the parking lot - see below). There were no problems from Irma.

We replaced all the courtyard drains that run under the surface a few years ago and since then the courtyard has had no significant puddling, even when there are heavy rains.

What about the parking lot flooding of a couple of weeks ago?

Over those few days we had about 12 inches of rain. The flooding was caused by a blockage in the concrete culvert that runs under the front driveway. Paul Lewis has remedied the situation with what he calls a "sheep fence" which is a small fence in the ditch that stops the debris from going into the concrete pipe. If the debris piles up, the water will flow over it. It worked perfectly during Irma.

What about the rest of the buildings?

The East and West Wings have hurricane resistant windows on the outside walls. The Lexow Wing has hurricane resistant glass in the big south facing windows and the windows to Roger's office and Roberta's office have been replaced with hurricane resistant windows. We would recommend that we replace the small courtyard windows of the East and West Wings as that could make them very safe places to shelter during the storm.

How did our buildings hold up with Irma?

Excellent! We had some small leaks in the sanctuary, but they are the ones we had been dealing with before Irma. There was no building damage or water intrusion in the East, West or Lexow Wing.

What other problems did Irma cause?

Electricity was off until Tuesday night and Comcast was out until Wednesday morning. We are a heavily treed property, but remarkably no large branches came down. However, with the wind howling and the rain pelting we incurred lots of debris. It covered sidewalks and the parking lots and took 16 hours of a really good group of volunteers to sweep and rake the debris into piles on Tuesday. We did some more work ourselves during the rest of the week and were pretty cleaned up by Sunday.

What is going to happen to the large piles of brush I see around the property.

The City has hired a firm called Cerces Environmental to pick up storm debris at no cost to city residents. We are planning on this being done!

What conclusions would you draw from the way the church responded to Irma?

Thanks to Roberta, and to the hard work from the volunteer garden crew, things went really well. Benches were put inside, pots were placed in the sheds, pictures were taken and computer back-up was in place. We also took down the courtyard shades and will put them back up in the near future (waiting to see how Maria develops).