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The Presbyterian Church at Gila Crossing closed its doors in late November last year after asbestos was discovered throughout the ceiling of the forty-four-year-old building. The problem was first noticed when members of the congregation attempted to paint the ceiling but instead disturbed the thin layer of sprayed material into a fibrous dust. “When the asbestos crumbled from the painting – it burst in the air like the rosette of a dandelion,” noted one of the members.

“We knew something was not right when we tried to roll on the paint and it wouldn’t stay on the ceiling,” said Robin Fohrenkam, one of the Elders of the Presbyterian Church assigned to handle the asbestos situation. “That’s when we decided to stop and call in the Environmental Health Department to look into this.”

Upon further inspection, health officials discovered that not only did the ceiling material contain asbestos, but indoor air measurements also detected the harmful fiber. This information led the church to close the building until appropriate action could be taken.

“Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral,” reported Randall Lange, Senior Health Specialist for the Gila River Indian Community Occupational Safety and Health Office (GRIC OSH) at the Hu Hu Kam Hospital in Sacaton. “Asbestos is of great concern, though, if it gets in the air and can be inhaled.”

The congregation has been instructed to stay clear of the building where the asbestos was discovered. Several members of the church voiced concern that it wasn’t clear how far away to stay from the building.

“We are grateful for the District Six Service Center to allow us to continue our services in their Learning Center,” Fohrenkam acknowledged. “In the meantime we are meeting with the Office of Tribal Projects and Program & Evaluation, as well as contacting Presbyterian U.S.A. for emergency funding and assistance.

The mention of asbestos stirs such public concern because of the consequences of infection. Its presence, however, does not assure illness, experts said. The mineral helped the Romans build an empire and provided brakes to locomotives. At its peak, asbestos had more than 3,000 uses. A strong, flexible, heat-resistant material, asbestos was ideal for insulating, fireproofing and soundproofing, as well as coating automobile parts. But it really found a home in construction, in bricks, roofing material, wall plaster, pipes, flooring and ceiling tiles.

It was widely used in the United States until the 1970’s, when its health problems became clear. After great debate, most of its uses were banned in 1989.

Still, GRIC OSH is responsible to do surveillance for asbestos as well as minimize the occurrence and impact of injuries, illnesses, and incidents. The office has conducted testing throughout the community and the information is available to the public for review.

Perspective on the risk is needed, however. Smoking causes about 80 percent of lung diseases, while asbestos is one of 20 sources that make up the rest.

Inhaled, they nestle in the crevices of the lungs. Decades later, they can cause a cascade of illnesses, from inflammation and scarring of the lungs' lining to a fatal form of cancer, mesothelioma, which claims its victims in 14 months or less.

“We know people can work in the same place and inhale the same kind of asbestos, and some will get sick and some will not.” Lange said. “Scientifically speaking, everyone is different so it's not clear how much dose or how much duration would be needed to exceed that threshold – we can't quantify the exposure.

“The best action we recommend for the members of the church is to report the asbestos problem to their doctor,” Lange said. “The doctors can then do the necessary testing to establish a medical baseline and begin monitoring as part of the annual check-up.”

“The annual check-up is an excellent way of monitoring to see if people have been exposed to asbestos. By taking pictures of the lungs through x-ray, we can then compare with others taken in the future.” Ron Cornett, X-Ray Technologist for the Northwest Hospital in Tucson, said “X-rays will be able to differentiate between lungs affected through smoking or asbestos exposure – unfortunately the monitoring will be a life-long requirement.”

The estimated cost is \$20,000 to \$40,000, according to Fohrenkam. “The church would like to salvage as much of the building as possible, because it was remodeled with a new roof,” Fohrenkam said. “We don't know what the actual costs could be after everyone gets involved, but we will learn as we go in facing the challenges.”

An elder member echoed the sentiment by commenting that this is a blessing in disguise; that it was discovered considering how old and dry the material was.

Lange encourages community members to contact him at (520) 562-3321 ext. 1226 before undergoing any major renovation or if they suspect something suspicious that should be investigated.