

*Arson*  
*The Major Threat to*  
*Places of Worship...*

...And How To  
Prevent It



## **MOST OF THE FIRES IN CHURCHES ARE BEGUN DELIBERATELY**

**274 FIRE CLAIMS POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED BY INSURER AS ARSON – COST £10M PLUS**

# **THE THREAT**

## **CHURCHES AND CHAPELS SEEN AS SOFT TARGETS**

As managers of other types of arson-prone buildings such as factories, shops, schools and hospitals have tightened their security arrangements, petty criminals look elsewhere for “easier pickings”; the thieves start fires to cover their tracks.

## **RELIGIOUS ARTICLES OF HIGH VALUE**

These are particularly attractive to thieves and it is a sad fact that many people no longer regard churches with the same respect or reverence which was once the case.

## **MINDLESS DESTRUCTIVE VANDALISM IS A REAL PROBLEM**

Arson and other malicious damage has become common in today's society and the culprits are all too often children.

## **CHURCHES ATTRACT VAGRANTS**

These individuals usually break in for shelter, and can start fires either accidentally or deliberately, possibly after drinking sprees.

## **OPPORTUNIST THEFTS**

Petty criminals often break in to churches to steal items that are readily converted to cash - not least to support drug addiction. Expensive electronic equipment such as PA systems, televisions and video recorders, computers and musical instruments are attractions.

# **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

You can prevent arson by considering the risks and learning from previous misfortunes. This leaflet tells you how.

# HOW TO ASSESS THE RISK

**points**

The church* is in an isolated location	12
The church is not in a good state of repair	12
The church is situated in an urban area	15
The church is open throughout the day (whether or not there is a responsible person present)	20
The church has a number of entry points most of which are kept open during the day	20
The church has suffered small fires, break-ins or malicious damage during the past two years	15
There have been fires and/or break-ins in other churches in the locality in recent months	10
There are articles of value on display in the church	15
The church is used by outside groups and/or is used as a community centre	8
The church has no special security policy or a nominated official to oversee security	10
The church has no fire protection equipment or has not sought advice from local fire officers during the last 5 years	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	

## DEDUCT

There is a system of management ensuring that when the church is open the arrival and departure of visitors is monitored	12
The church has an intruder alarm which is maintained by a qualified engineer	8
The intruder alarm is connected to a central monitoring station	12
The church has fire extinguishers and/or hose reels which are clearly visible	4
The church has a fire detection system connected to a central station	12
The church has locks to BS3621 on all external doors and key-operated window locks on all ground floor and other accessible windows	10
The church has external security lighting	8
The church has external CCTV cameras	12
<b>FINAL TOTAL</b>	

## SCORING

Less than 20	Not too much to worry about
20 -50	Potential hazard
50 - 100	Considerable hazard exists
Over 100	Disaster can be expected!

\* (Each reference to "the church" should also be taken to include church halls and community centres).

*Completion of the above form will assist you in completing your Fire Risk Assessment required under the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations which came into force on 1 December 1997*



# 24 WAYS TO STOP YOUR PLACE OF WORSHIP FROM BURNING

## RESPONSIBILITY

- In every church the most important single measure is for a particular individual (rector, priest or minister) to take responsibility for security. Responsibility may be delegated to another: vergers, secretary, administrator or a member of the congregation.
- The person responsible needs to carry out their own "risk assessment" to identify ways in which intruders, thieves or vandals could start fires, what the effect would be and how to prevent or reduce the risk. Help is available from the church insurer, police crime prevention officer and fire brigade fire prevention officer.
- If there have been any small fires or malicious damage to the church or in the locality (there may be a "fire-bug" at work) inform the police immediately. A small fire could be the warning of worse to come!

## SECURITY

The best defence against arson – as well as against theft – is to have an effective security programme. It does not have to be an expensive process!

- **Entry** The fewer entrance doors the better, preferably one only in common use.
- **Restricted entry** It is often the case that when the church is unoccupied the door is locked. Where it is required to keep the church open it is recommended that someone is on the premises. This may be achieved by having a roster of parishioners/members willing to give up an hour or so of their time to act as "caretaker". Arrangements have to be made for passing on the key, and for return of the key at the end of the day to the person in charge. Never hide keys or leave keys on the premises.
- **Doors and windows** In good repair and locked when not in use
- **Locks** Of good quality. Consult insurer, police.
- **Walls, fences, gates** In good repair.
- **Halls, community centres** These are favourite targets for thieves and vandals. Ensure that doors and windows are securely locked after use, keys returned to the person in charge and that there is a general inspection before the last person leaves.
- **Valuables** As far as possible should be securely locked away
- **Vestry/church offices** When not in use keep locked. These are areas where many arson fires are lit.
- **Organ space** Another area where arsonists light fires. If possible keep locked shut.
- **Neighbours** If appropriate enlist the help of neighbours in keeping an eye open for suspicious behaviour and in telephoning a warning to the person responsible, or the police.

# ARSON BECOMING ANOTHER STATISTIC

- **Sheds/outbuildings** may contain tools which help intruders to break into the church or flammable liquid to help an arsonist start a fire. Keep outbuildings securely locked.

## GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

Vandals or thieves (to cover their tracks) will use any “fuel” to hand to light their fires.

- Try to ensure there is no combustible material lying around for an arsonist. This is particularly important where churches are used for recreational and educational uses and in church halls.
- Don't let rubbish accumulate - inside or outside the church.
- Wheelie-bins should be kept in their own locked compartment or kept well away from the church.
- Matches, candles, paraffin, petrol and liquefied gas can all be used to start a fire and help it spread. Keep all such materials locked away.

## END OF EACH DAY

- The person responsible for security should carry out these checks at the end of each day:
  - No combustible material left lying around
  - Any flammable liquids locked away
  - Any valuables safely locked away.
  - No unauthorized person left in the church
  - Alarms (if any) switched on
  - Outside illumination (if any) switched on

## EQUIPMENT

Based on perception of the risk, and the ability and willingness of the church authorities to provide the necessary money, thought should be given to installing some or all of the following equipment. Make sure the equipment is “approved” by your insurance company.

- **Intruder alarm** which will sound an audible warning and which should preferably be linked via a central alarm station to the police.
- **Fire extinguishers/hose reels** for use by people on the spot (who must be trained in their use).
- **Fire detection and alarm system** for certain parts of church buildings which, if linked to the fire brigade via a central alarm station, will automatically summon help when the church is unoccupied.
- **Security lighting** Intruders (including arsonists) like to work in the dark. Security lighting of areas adjacent to doors or windows can be a powerful deterrent.
- **CCTV** Installation of one or more closed-circuit-television-cameras (even if not operative!) may well act as a deterrent to intruders.

Advice on choice and installation is available from your insurer, police or fire brigade.



# LEARN FROM THESE PAST ARSON FIRES

## BREAK-IN THROUGH WINDOW

Two boys broke a rear window, climbed in, drank a large quantity of Communion wine, lit the altar candles and set fire to a Nativity crib and a piano. The fire spread with devastating speed destroying the floor, screen, organ and much of the roof – damage £400,000. The boys were eventually caught and admitted burglary and arson.

*“A great many big and expensive fires are started by children. Windows providing easy access should be examined with a view to giving them greater protection (wire grills, metal bars). Candles should be locked away - so should Communion wine.”*

## MEETING HALL BURGLARY

An unemployed 17-year-old girl broke in to steal then set fire to song sheets in a meeting hall of an historic church to wipe out her fingerprints. The meeting hall and much of the church were destroyed – damage £650,000. The kitchen window had been forced from the inside by the girl getting out. Two months later she gave herself up and said she thought she had stamped out the fire before leaving. She asked for 42 other offences to be taken into account.

*“Meeting halls are favourite targets for thieves and all possible entry points should be made more secure. Valuables should be locked up and material that could be used to start a fire cleared away.”*

## FUEL FOR THE FIRE READILY AT HAND

A 13-year-old boy started a blaze which caused over £90,000 damage to an ancient church. The boy who was in the care of Social Services and living with foster parents, claimed that he had lit a candle to look for kittens in the church. A fire investigator discovered four separate fires had been started using candles lit by matches.

*“Matches and candles should not be left accessible in churches. If possible there should be a system by which neighbours keep a watch on the church.”*

## SIGNS OF WORSE TO COME?

A 31-year-old man scattered papers on the floor of a church and set them alight. The resulting blaze was only minor and the fire service was not needed. The man was said to have a problem

with alcohol but was receiving medication. He had been placed under a hospital order after he admitted an arson attack at the same church two years earlier.

*"Any small fire in a church should act as a warning that others may follow. Notify the police. Tighten up on security."*

## **SERIES OF BREAK-INS**

A number of previous break-ins had taken place at a Salvation Army hall and windows in the rear addition temporarily boarded up. In the early hours intruders removed the boarding and set fire to books and clothing. Damage amounted to £215,000.

*"Earlier break-ins were a warning of worse to come. Such premises are targets for opportunistic thieves and would benefit from improved security. Repairs where there have been break-ins need to be carried out as quickly as possible to avoid any appearance of neglect."*

## **SERIAL ARSONIST**

One of London's most beautiful churches was left a smouldering shell after the entire interior was destroyed by a fire begun deliberately. The cost of damage to the Victorian church, subsequently restored, was £2 million. A 21-year-old man was charged with arson. He was also responsible for a series of other fires in churches at Dover, Canterbury and, the night before the fire, at another neighbouring London church.

*"A fire like this could have been avoided had there been a better "intelligence service" as between police and churches. The benefits of having a surveillance system cannot be emphasized enough."*

## **FIRES IN THE VESTRY**

An intruder set fire to paper and fabrics in the vestry of the church destroying a substantial part of this historic building. The fire spread from the vestry into the main body of the church before it was discovered. Fire spread was accelerated by the presence of several butane gas cylinders. Cost was £400,000.

A fire occurred on Good Friday in the choir vestry where duplicator spirit and candles were used to start it. The fire spread through the timber floor to involve the timber roof. Ninety per cent of the roof was destroyed and the entire contents, floor and roof of the bell tower were severely damaged.  
Cost £700,000

*"The vestry figures frequently as the starting point for arson fires and it is worthwhile to consider additional security precautions, in particular, to this part of the church. Gas cylinders should never be left in church premises"*

## PERSISTENT VANDALISM

Arsonists started a fire which destroyed most of the twelfth-century church on the edge of Dartmoor. It was discovered by police at 4.30a.m. The church had been a target for vandalism and the fire had been begun by an intruder who broke in at the rear of the building. One theory was that people involved in occult practices may have been responsible.

*"Here were ample warnings in advance of a disaster to come!"*

## ARSON WHILE THE CHURCH WAS OCCUPIED

Twenty-five people escaped safely from a first-floor meeting room at the back of the church when fire broke out at ground level. Firefighting was complicated when a 45 kilo propane gas cylinder became involved in the fire. The fire, which started in the nave adjacent to the organ loft stairs, destroyed eighty per cent of the roof and ceiling, part of a timber balcony and balcony staircase, and severely damaged the organ. The cost was £315,000.

*"The message is that someone has to keep an eye on what is going on in the church."*

## DISUSED CHURCH PREMISES

A disused Sunday school building suspected of being used by youths for drug and solvent abuse was set on fire – damage £20,000.

A disused church hall was set on fire with damage of £10,000. It was a mission-type hall where the congregation had amalgamated with another church.

*"Disused buildings are prime targets for attacks by vandals and the sooner they are disposed of the better. Meanwhile they should be made as secure against intruders as possible and the police asked to keep an eye on them."*

## DANGER

A Deacon was stabbed by a 15-year-old, one of three youths he discovered on church premises with theft or vandalism in mind.

*"Take care in tackling intruders. Call the police."*

COVER PICTURE: The burnt-out ruins of St Peter's Church, Eaton Square, London, following an arson attack. Picture by Brian Smith