



Churches: Arson Prevention

It is worth remembering that unlike an accidental fire, it is the arsonist's deliberate intention to set fire to the building and to cause catastrophic damage. This may include the use of an accelerant such as petrol, or starting fires in more than one place.

Why are places of worship vulnerable to arson?

- Attract homeless: Many places of worship are left unoccupied during the week and they can be extremely vulnerable to break-ins by people seeking shelter. Typically, these people may set fires accidentally (often while under the influence of alcohol) or deliberately.
- Attract professional thieves: Professional thieves are usually after valuable artwork or antiques. The stolen items command large sums on the black market. The thieves often start fires to hide the evidence of theft.
- Attract petty criminals and drug addicts: Petty thieves view places of worship as 'soft targets' since they are often empty and have less sophisticated security than commercial establishments. They often break into places of worship to steal smaller items that can be readily converted to cash, such as computers, musical instruments and other electronic equipment. Again, fires are started to cover thefts.
- Targets for hate crimes: Unfortunately, places of worship are considered to be ideal targets for sending politically or racially motivated hate messages. These crimes are calculated to be picked up by the media and viewed by sympathizers. Crimes range from graffiti sprayed on exterior walls and doors, to malicious vandalism and destruction of property by arson.
- Attract youth fire-setters: Juvenile fire setters range from those who set fires accidentally, those who set fires as an emotional cry for attention, and others who are delinquent fire setters. Since many places of worship are unoccupied during weeknights and there

is often little or no security, the youths view this as a quick and easy opportunity to commit the crime.

So what can you do?

Arson is basically a security problem.

By improving the security of your property, you can substantially reduce the risk of becoming a victim of arson. Many of these improvements won't cost a significant amount of money.

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS TO REDUCE THE RISK OF ARSON:

- Regular surveillance – encourage members of the church and neighbours to visit as part of their daily routine.
- Speak to your neighbours and have them be vigilant and report any suspicious activity immediately to the police. Be part of the Neighbourhood Watch.
- Church halls should be locked when not in use.
- Leave only one exterior door unlocked during the day, this should be easily visible from nearby properties.
- Avoid leaving money inside the church, whether in a vault, safe, or vending machine.
- Be aware that vandalism may precede arson! Report vandalism, thefts, or any other crime affecting church property to your police department immediately and carry out vandalism repairs quickly, minor damage is often followed by more serious incidents including arson if not addressed quickly.
- Secure wheelie bins by chain / padlock to a post away from the building.
- **Good housekeeping is vital:**
 - Do not accumulate garbage and combustible waste in or around the church.
 - Candles and matches should be locked away.
 - Boiler houses should be locked with no combustible materials stored in them.
- Fire and intruder alarms should be remote signaling to a receiving centre to ensure a 24 hour response to any activation to help mitigate losses as far as possible.
- Contract a private security firm in your area to check the building at unscheduled intervals.

Building Exterior

- Illuminate exterior buildings, doors and parking lots from sunset to sunrise.
- Use wire-mesh glass in windows for additional protection from break-ins.
- Consider installing video security cameras (CCTVs) at entrances and other key areas.
- Keep doors and windows locked when the building is unoccupied.
- Trim shrubs and tree limbs around windows and doors to eliminate potential hiding places for arsonists and criminals.
- Ladders should not be stored outside the building at the end of the day. Instead, secure ladders and tools in a locked shed or inside the building.
- Consider fencing the areas or sides that are not readily visible to patrols or neighbours.
- Narrow spaces and gaps between buildings should be blocked off with fencing or other barrier.

Building Interior

- Consider using timers for lights and/or radios during evening hours.
- If possible, install a central station monitored security and fire detection system. Also consider installing a fire sprinkler suppression system.
- Ensure that smoke and heat detectors are operational and that fire extinguishers are in place and have been regularly serviced.
- A balanced system approach, which includes a complete fire detection and alarm system and a complete sprinkler system, is highly recommended. Without some type of automatic extinguishing system, a fire rapidly increases in intensity until the fire department arrives.
- Make sure that flammable liquids are stored in a fire-proof / fire-rated cabinet, away from any heat sources, such as heating equipment.
- Restrict access to areas containing valuable or combustible materials by locking interior doors.