



Churches: Arson Prevention

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Arson is the leading cause of fires affecting Canadian places of worship, with up to 50 incidents a year across the country. That is an average of nearly one church arson incident each week!

Arson is a frightening and potentially devastating crime and when it occurs at a place of worship, the physical and emotional damages can be enormous. Damages can include the total or partial destruction of a heritage building; irreparable damage to furnishings, stained glass windows or other unique architectural elements; the destruction of invaluable religious items; communities can also lose local history, unique objects and ancient records; and the temporary, or even permanent, loss of a community's consecrated place to congregate.

Ecclesiastical, a leading insurer for places of worship, points out that there is a pattern of activity or 'tell-tail' signs leading to arson: graffiti, breaking windows, tearing down signs, leaving broken bottles or trash on the property. These repeated acts of vandalism can ultimately result in the more serious arson attack. Other risk indicators include: fires and/or break-ins in nearby places of worship in recent months; threatening letters or phone calls; groups of youths have been seen loitering near your building and empty alcohol bottles or cigarette packages are found on the grounds.

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, and since there is growing international demand for religious artifacts, 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

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- **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

Arson prevention program

To combat this, places of worship should develop and implement an arson and crime prevention program, which should include identification of the risks, assess existing controls, establishing safe procedures to control high risks, providing education and training, which when combined can help prevent a potentially disastrous incident. Review both the exterior and interior of the premises, and use the following practical tips checklist as a guide to assess your risks.

Practical tips to reduce the risk of arson

By regularly reviewing and taking simple steps to improve the security of church property you can significantly reduce the risk of becoming a victim of arson or crime at little or no cost.

- Create the impression the building is visited regularly. 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 Crime or Arson Watch, or Crime Stoppers programs
- 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
- Keep internal doors closed to prevent fire spreading
- Use the church as much as possible including for community functions
- Do not advertise on church signs or bulletins when church will not be in use
- Keep church leaders informed of problems
- Avoid leaving money inside the church, whether in a vault, safe, or vending machine
- Be aware that vandalism may precede arson!
- Carry out vandalism repairs quickly, minor damage is often followed by more serious incidents including arson if not addressed quickly

- Report vandalism, thefts, or any other crime affecting church property to your police department immediately
- 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
- Maintain adequate replacement cost insurance. Make a list of all church property and duplicate all documents, computer disks, and other records that are stored at the church
- Complete a comprehensive inventory of all furniture and equipment, to include serial numbers and value. Evaluate your insurance coverage and involve your insurance agent in your arson prevention plans. Videotape or take photographs of the interior and exterior of the building. All duplicate documents and inventories should be kept in a bank safety deposit box
- Engrave valuables with an identifying number and photograph or video tape items which cannot be engraved
- Post identification stickers at every door to the church building to warn thieves that all items of value have been marked for ready identification by police
- 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
- Ensure fire extinguishers are maintained regularly and church officials have been trained in their use
- Contract a private security firm in your area to check the building at unscheduled intervals



- Ensure that telephones are easily accessible for 911 emergency calls and post emergency numbers
- Develop a written protocol for dealing with threats. Educate church personnel handling phone calls on the methods developed for dealing with telephone threats. All threats should be documented and reported to local law enforcement. If telephone threats persist, a trace may be placed on the line to determine the origin of the calls
- Do not touch suspicious packages. If a suspicious package or letter is received, call local law enforcement immediately. Do not touch the object! Be alert for letters or packages that have excessive postage, contain grease stains, have a strange odor, or have no return address
- Develop a comprehensive Business Continuity Plan and include emergency readiness and response procedures to reduce the risks of personal injury and damage to your property

Building Exterior

- Illuminate exterior buildings, doors and parking lots from sunset to sunrise
- Consider the installation of motion-activated lighting near doors and windows. Mount fixtures out of reach of people who might disable the lights to avoid detection
- 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
- Plant thorny bushes under windows
- 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
- Ensure exterior doors are of solid core (not hollow) construction and are fitted with quality deadbolt locks and, if hinged on the outside, with tamper-proof hinges
- Do not allow church signs to block the view of the building
- Many churches have basement entries that are hidden from view, these should be secured with locking ground-level doors when church is not in use
- Park church vehicles in different locations on the property throughout the week to vary routine
- 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 barriers

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 U.L. listed fire cabinet, away from any heat sources, such as heating equipment
- Restrict access to areas containing valuable or combustible materials by locking interior doors
- Keep track of individuals who have access to church keys. Limit the number of people on the list. Recalibrate locks if any keys are lost or stolen. Change locks periodically. Or better, consider installation of a keyless electronic entry system
- Never leave keys hidden on church property which would provide anyone access to the buildings
- Limit unescorted access to the building and consider the use of a sign-in/out sheet



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