

know risk

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Members of the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group

Preventing arson in places of worship

It really does happen...

“Arsonists destroyed an historic church in Northland as the local community were preparing to celebrate its centenary.”

A fire at historic Wellington church that was deliberately lit caused significant damage to both the church itself and a 100 year old pipe organ”

“Arsonists are to blame for a fierce fire that destroyed an old wooden hall belonging to a church in central Palmerston North.”

“A blaze at a historic timber church in Wellington was started by ‘stupid people’ lighting cardboard boxes, according to the church’s vicar.”

The majority of fires in non-residential buildings are deliberately lit and anecdotal evidence suggests that this is even more the case where fires occur in churches.

From 2004 to 2008 Ansvar Insurance was notified of 31 major church fires which were attributed to arson, the total repair bill for these churches was in excess of \$29 million.

The risk of arson is often identified by the following indicators:

- Numerous incidents of burglary, vandalism or graffiti at your location
- Insufficient perimeter security, e.g. fences, gates,

locks on doors and windows etc.

- Inadequate external lighting
- The availability of combustible materials and insecure waste storage arrangements
- The absence of or inadequate intruder alarm systems

The psychology of arson is complex but it’s worth noting that the main underlying characteristics involved in an arson attack are revenge, alcohol/drug addiction or mental problems. Arson is also often used to conceal another crime, e.g. fraud or theft.

Reducing the risk of arson

If your place of worship is experiencing burglaries or vandalism regularly you need to take action. Try to establish why you are being targeted and take steps to address these motives. You may want to consider the following measures:

- Remove combustible materials that could be used to fuel a fire. Often cardboard boxes, timber, old furniture or clothing are used to start a fire.
- Use a metal bin with a lockable lid to store your rubbish. Keep it located away from the building. Many bins have been set alight and pushed against the side of a building.
- A perimeter fence provides a physical and psychological barrier to potential arsonists.
- Upgrade the security on your doors and windows. Install grills on windows and reinforce doors which

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are concealed by fencing or other buildings.

- External lights provide a good deterrent, especially when they cover all aspects of the building.
- Install an intruder alarm which is monitored by a security company.
- Befriend your neighbours and ask them to watch over your buildings and to notify you or the police if anything is amiss.
- Where the buildings are only used once a week, have someone check up on the buildings regularly. This may be a professional security service or simply a member who walks their dog past each day as part of their daily routine.
- Where you have identified that people are sleeping or loitering near your buildings, take steps to deter them. This can be done by adding extra lighting, trimming or clearing away bushes, or having them moved on by the police.

This material is for information purposes only. It is not intended to give specific legal or risk management advice nor are any suggestions, checklists or action plans intended to include or address all possible risk management exposures or solutions.