



FIRE MARSHAL BULLETIN

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Fire Prevention in Churches

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The following provides valuable information for preventing arsons in places of worship. The burning of American churches is a serious problem, but there are several steps that can be taken to prevent the problem. Nationally, church fires result in an annual average property damage cost of \$37.5 million. An average of four churches burn each day in the United States. Usually, the contents and valuables that are lost are priceless historical articles that cannot be replaced. The number of fires in churches must be drastically reduced.

Assessing church vulnerability to arson or fire is important. Listed below are potential areas of vulnerability:

- Churches located in isolated or rural areas.
- Churches left unattended for extended periods of time.
- Churches with unsecured doors and/or uncovered windows inviting forced entry by intruders.
- The absence of an adequate burglar alarm system, providing a criminal with extra time to perform criminal activity.
- Heavy shrubs and outside vegetation, and/or the absence of sufficient perimeter lighting. This provides unwanted security for criminals.

The following measures can be taken to reduce the potential for an arson, fire or burglary at a church. All twenty of these measures may not be feasible for some churches. Remember that there is no perfect system or plan for preventing arson. However, these suggestions could greatly reduce the possibility of an accidental fire, arson or other criminal activity at a church.

Local law enforcement agencies should be consulted concerning additional security measures.

1. **Install perimeter floodlights outside the building.** Arsonists and other criminals often operate at night. Adequate lighting that illuminates points of entry is a deterrent. Interior lights in areas visible through exterior windows should be left on during darkness. Lights should be routinely checked and serviced. Motion activated lights or timing equipment may be purchased to automatically turn exterior lights on and off.
2. **Install an adequate burglar alarm system.** Check with local law enforcement agencies to learn about any burglar alarm standards that might exist.
3. **Organize a neighborhood watch effort or community patrols.** Neighbors near the church can monitor suspicious people or vehicles in the area. Meet with neighbors or nearby businesses and ask them to keep an eye on the church. Put neighborhood watch signs up at points of church entry. Develop a patrol of church members to check the

church on a rotating daily basis. Conduct security training seminars with congregational members regarding identification of potential suspects, fire prevention, crime prevention and issues of overall security. Consult local law enforcement agencies for assistance.

4. **Eliminate doors with outside hinges.** Install entrance/exit doors with interior hinges and hinge pins to prevent an intruder from removing the door. Solid wood or sheet metal faced doors are better than hollow core doors. A steel door frame is important. Door locks should be long throw dead bolts made of hardened steel. Doors should be locked from the exterior, but non-locking against egress from the interior.
5. **Cut back heavy shrubs and greenery.** Windows are a popular point of illegal entry. Shrubs and vines should be kept low to the ground so they do not conceal criminals. Trees that allow access to upper windows should be removed to prevent intruder entry.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **Remove potential fire hazards. Do not store gasoline or flammable chemicals on church property.** Trash, lawn clippings and other combustible debris should be cleaned from church property. Flammable and combustible liquids or materials should not be stored in or around a church.
9. **Get a physical description.** Physical descriptions of any suspicious persons noticed around the church can be very helpful, including descriptions of the vehicles they are driving. License plate numbers are extremely helpful and should be written down and given to local law enforcement.
10. **Do not advertise on church signs or bulletins when church will not be in use.**
11. **Keep church leaders informed of problems.** Be aware of individuals who may be disgruntled or likely to cause damage to church property through arson or vandalism. Be aware that vandalism may precede arson!
12. **Engrave valuables with an identification number and videotape all church contents of value.** Those valuables that cannot be engraved should be photographed or videotaped. Use stickers or signs to inform intruders that all valuables are marked and engraved.
13. **Install fire alarm detection/suppression systems in conjunction with a security system.** A centrally monitored system is best. In the event of a fire, the importance of early

detection and suppression of a fire cannot be overemphasized. A balanced system approach, which includes a complete fire detection and alarm system and a complete sprinkler system, is strongly recommended. A correctly designed, installed, and maintained fire detection and alarm system provides a high degree of life safety and guarantees early warning of a fire. Some degree of property protection can be assured if the alarm system is connected to a central station or directly to the fire department. Automatic sprinklers have proven their value in the reduction of fire losses and should not be overlooked for places of worship. Without some type of automatic extinguishing system, a fire increases in intensity until the fire department arrives. At that time, the fire department is forced to extinguish a much larger fire and greater damage will occur. Both interior and exterior horns for the fire alarm/security systems are recommended.

14. **Keep church doors locked and maintain a list of who has access to church keys.** Limit unescorted access to the building and consider the use of a sign-in/sign-out sheet. Remember that doors should be locked from the exterior, but non-locking against egress from the interior.
15. **Consider the services of a private security company to patrol the perimeter of the church. If feasible, closed circuit time elapsed video cameras are valuable for the exterior of the building.**
16. **Consider perimeter fencing around the church.** Chain link fences should be used on at least three sides of the church, if not all four.
17. **Schedule an inspection of the church electrical system.** Many churches are older buildings that utilize antiquated electrical systems. Have a certified electrician or electrical inspector evaluate your system to help prevent electrical fires. If possible, schedule a fire safety survey of the entire building by the local fire department.
18. **Provide A-B-C type fire extinguishers at designated locations throughout the church.**
19. **Pay particular attention to furnace rooms or heating devices.** Rooms that house heating devices, furnaces, water heaters, or other heating equipment should be of minimum one hour fire resistive construction and should have an automatic sprinkler. Fire safe building construction, fire walls, fire rated doors, and hardware play a significant role in slowing and preventing the propagation of smoke and fire.
20. **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.

These recommendations do not assure the prevention of a church fire. The care, maintenance and safety of a church is the responsibility of the local trustees. A safety committee should be formed, keeping open

communication and involvement with local fire and law enforcement officials. Involve the local fire department and building official when selecting a fire protection device or system for the building.

If a fire does occur, the fire department should be contacted immediately. If the fire is believed to be an arson, the Office of the State Fire Marshal's Hotline should be called at 1-888-684-FIRE. Do not enter a burned church, especially if arson is suspected. Do not allow anyone but fire or law enforcement officials to enter the burned church. Nobody other than those involved in the arson investigation should remove anything from the burned building. Cooperation with the arson investigation team will increase the chances of solving the arson. The following telephone numbers are provided in the event of an emergency situation at your facility.

ATF National Arson Hotline	Toll Free 1-888-ATF-FIRE
ATF National Bomb Hotline	Toll Free 1-888-ATF-BOMB
ATF Detroit Field Division	1-313-393-6019
Michigan Arson Hotline	1-800-44-ARSON
MSP Fire Marshal Division - Headquarters	(517) 322-1924
Fire Marshal Division Investigation Services	1-888-684-FIRE (24 Hour Toll-Free)

For additional information on the prevention of church fires, consult NFPA 912, Recommended Practice for Fire Protection in Places of Worship.

Please be advised that recipients of any Fire Marshal Bulletin may treat the contents as a news release. Feel free to insert your department, association, or individual name where appropriate when contact is made with local news media or other sources of dissemination.