

know risk

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Preventing arson in churches

It really does happen...

“Arsonists destroyed a 107-year-old church in Melbourne, devastating its congregation.”

“Arsonists were to blame for a massive church fire in the early hours of the morning. Police believe a flammable material was forced under the church door and lit.”

“A third church in the Brisbane area has been gutted by a deliberately-lit fire in as many days.”

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.

In 2004 - 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/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 often used to conceal another crime, e.g. fraud or theft.

Reducing the risk of arson

If your church 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 grilles on windows and reinforce doors which are concealed by fences 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.

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