

## Strategies to Reduce Arson Risk for Parishes

It is an unfortunate trend for churches to be increasingly targeted for arson attacks. Arson losses in general are increasing in all walks of life. According to reliable sources, they now probably account for 40% of all fires. The Presbyterian Church has suffered a number of arson fires from time to time over the years but in recent years there have been a number of such losses that have cost a very substantial amount of money. It is important to try and reduce the incidence and financial impact of arson losses; otherwise it is inevitable that insurance premiums will rise. The best form of defence (full sprinkler protection) is simply not an option in most cases due to cost, retrofitting difficulties or water supply issues. The next best approach is therefore to try and make it as difficult as possible for an arsonist to start a fire in the first place.

Parishes have a number of risk factors in common. For example:

- Older buildings built with a high timber content
- Set back from road locations often with bushes, trees and garden vegetation screening buildings from sight.
- Easy access often with an open door policy to all
- Buildings with wide porches which sometimes screen persons entering and leaving
- Buildings which are often left unlocked, unattended and unsupervised for long periods of time
- Contents which are known by criminal elements be easily disposable such as datashows, laptops, remote microphones and cash
- Buildings with little or no protection in the form of monitored fire/smoke/security detection/protection
- Properties which are community centres for collection of combustible materials such as recycling bins, used clothing, etc.

The most practical/effective and economical ways for Parishes to reduce their arson risk include;

- Making sure that all external access and building's boundaries can be seen from surrounding streets and buildings.
- Removing trees and bushes which could hide persons or provide them with materials to start a fire.
- Making sure all access points into or under the church are secure when not in use. This includes even the smallest ventilation grill or hatch. Secure all windows and doors. Lock and bolt all doors from the inside and leave only the minimum of doors that can only be locked from the outside. Doors affording means of escape must be available for persons legally on the premises to use without recourse to the use of a key for the door.
- Ensure all windows are securely closed after the building has been used.
- Cover large external windows especially stained and/or leadlight glass with polycarbonate sheeting.
- Make sure all recyclable materials are secured. Collection bins, waste/wheelie bins, etc must be a minimum of 10 metres from the external walls of a building and preferably locked when not in use.
- Removing cash from the premises and posting a sign "no money left on premises" outside.
- Securing (out of sight) all valuables. Recording and especially securing/protecting artefacts/relics and the like.
- Having the electrical installations checked and inspected at least every five years
- Installing a manual fire alarm system with supplementary automatic fire detection (Smoke or heat detectors as appropriate to the risk and environment). These alarms should be linked to the NZ Fire service and comply with NZS 4512. Alarm systems can be fitted with devices that automatically isolate the systems during church services so as avoid false alarms.