

Commentary

(Adapted from Methodist Insurance material)

The causes of fires are numerous and varied but there are some very simple, practical things you can do to minimise the risk of a fire breaking out in your church. Making regular checks of the building's electrical wiring and heating system is strongly recommended. Candles, and any naked flames, are a clear risk and need to be treated with great care and handled accordingly.

Building and repair works in a church are one of the most common causes of fires. So-called hot works, in which builders are using welding equipment or a blow torch, are commonly associated with blazes and need to be managed effectively.

Arson can be an issue, particularly for empty buildings – perhaps a church hall that has been closed temporarily. Ensuring the building is secure is vital: this prevents potential arsonists gaining entry. Removing any inflammable material being stored on the premises is also important as this minimises the amount of combustible material present. If a Church suffers minor vandalism, this is a warning to increase security as the vandals' next step may be an attempt to start a fire.

One of your most important defences against fire is your fire-fighting equipment. Legislation requires every church to have a minimum of two portable fire extinguishers – one filled with water and the other with carbon dioxide. But the larger the church, the more equipment will be required.

The latest legislation - the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, often called "the fire regulations" - applies to Places of Worship. The Fire Safety Order placed duties on a 'responsible person' to protect anyone that could be affected by the fire. In a Church, the Responsible Person is likely to be the minister as Chair of Church Council acting as local trustees and therefore in overall control of the premises and with a say over the precautions that are put into place.

The law is enforced by the Fire and Rescue Services, who can prosecute individuals for failing to comply with the regulations. Cases could see criminal sanctions including fines and even imprisonment.

Central to the legislation is Fire Risk Assessment. The simplest form of assessment looks at how a fire can start, along with the precautions that are in place to reduce the risk of fire, and mitigate against it should it happen. The main outcome is to prevent fire in the first place, but should there be an outbreak, suitable measures need to be in place to detect it, control it or limit its spread.

Methodist policies require churches to undertake a thorough risk assessment to identify any possible dangers and risks, as well as individuals who may be placed in jeopardy.