

Quick Guide...

Fire Safety in Church Buildings

Prepared by the Committee on Church Art and Architecture

Congregational Responsibilities

Members of Kirk Sessions and Boards are often worried about the risk of life threatening catastrophes in view of their responsibility for the safety of the people in the church. It is necessary to have a fire safety protocol that suits your church and your buildings use, but following this guide should help you achieve peace of mind and minimise the risk of the very unlikely event of a fire in a building full of people.

The legal requirement

Every public building requires compliance with the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 to assess and manage the risks. The detailed legislation can be daunting, but this guide should help you understand what, in practical terms, the general issues are.

Each church should have a fire exit strategy, produced by those who know the buildings and how they are used; you should also consider obtaining professional assistance with carrying out risk assessments .

With an existing building, what you need to do

Fire Risk Assessments for when the church is in use and when unoccupied – consider the likelihood and causes for a fire to start, where are the exits and are people aware of them?

Fire Evacuation Plan having a practical policy is the most important duty you have and this should include:

- Evacuation training for staff and volunteers/stewards
- Identifying suitable exit routes to be kept clear at all times
- Assessing distance to travel and the safety of using the exit routes
- Ease of use of door handles and locks
- Designation of a safe place of assembly

The policy needs to be widely known by church members, so have a rehearsal with the congregation to test that it is effective.

What to Consider

Churches are low risk with regard to fire safety during services and when in use:

- Minimal conditions to start a fire - computers and electrical equipment are not left on, church should be a tidy space without piles of papers and other flammable materials.
- If candles are used, they should not be left unattended, be safely fixed and displayed (well away from fabrics and papers), and extinguished with care.
- Traditional construction materials used for church buildings have a low flammability risk, but carpets, fabrics and seat cushions should be fire treated. Church buildings will burn, but it is likely to take some time for a fire to establish itself, allowing time for evacuation.
- Good all round vision in a worship space allows for early warning of an outbreak of fire.
- Congregations are usually attentive to the proceedings and will be quick to comprehend and respond if a fire

alert is raised and trained stewards are in attendance to help with evacuation.

- Smoke is the main risk to building users. Church spaces with a high ceiling have a large volume in which to accommodate the smoke generated, which rises above floor level.
- An orderly layout of pews, furnishings and chairs with aisles makes evacuation simple.
- The majority of services take place in daylight hours, so exit routes can usually be seen without any artificial lighting.

Alterations, New Buildings and the Building Regulations

Compliance with current building regulations is necessary for all new buildings and may apply for areas of alteration work. Generally full compliance is not necessary for an existing building unless undergoing significant alterations. Moving pews, aisle alterations, providing detection and alarm systems, emergency lighting and signage etc. can sometimes ruin the aesthetics of a historic building and are not necessary in many situations. However, assessment of the regulations and their application should take place when planning a building works project.

The exception are churches requiring a permanent **public entertainment licence**, which is necessary if it is used for very regular events attended by members of the general public, in which case you should take advice from the church insurance surveyor and the local fire officer.

About the Authors

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Fire prevention and detection

- Carry out regular condition inspections of electrical and heating systems.
- Develop good practice for the storage of flammable materials, such as paint tins.
- Encourage a policy of switching off electrical equipment and banning unattended naked flames.
- Take advice on the provision of portable extinguishers.
- Detection systems, emergency lighting and alarms are normally unnecessary in a traditional sanctuary; but an appropriate level of monitoring equipment that suits how the church is used should be considered, and advice from an architect or specialist is recommended.

Finally, fire fighting is NOT your responsibility

Your responsibility is to minimise the risk of fire. If one starts, raise the alarm, get people out and wait for the professionals to arrive.

Whom to Contact

Anyone wishing to contact the Committee should complete an enquiry form which can be found on the Resourcing Mission website (www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/carta) and email it to: gentrustees@churchofscotland.org.uk. Alternatively, you can telephone 0131 225 5722 and ask to speak to someone in the CARTA office.

CARTA Quick Guides

Other Quick Guides include advice on lighting, audio visual, stained glass and communion ware. These can be found on the Resourcing Mission website (www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/quick-guides).



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