



Threat Assessment Guide for Houses of Worship

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Welcome

Since 1995, over 1,500 houses of worship have been damaged by fire or bombing. Since that time, the [National Church Arson Task Force \(NCATF\)](#) has monitored every incident and identified common causes of fires. Many fires are preventable. The purpose of this booklet is to share what we have learned with the hope that it will help members of the faith community protect their facilities.



This online booklet includes checklists designed to assist in determining your vulnerability to fire and bombing incidents. These guidelines have been developed from years of investigating and studying causes of fires, as well as from consultations with insurance companies and fire prevention experts. Leaders in the faith community are encouraged to utilize these checklists to see where improvements can be made. The lists are not all inclusive. You are encouraged to contact your local fire department, law enforcement agency or insurance representative for additional assistance. Church Mutual Insurance Company offers a 13-minute video with steps to protect your house of worship. The video is available at no cost by calling **1-800-554-2642**.

You may communicate with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) with any concerns or information regarding fires or bombings at houses of worship. The ATF Church Arson Section may be contacted through ATF's website at www.atf.treas.gov. Once in the website, go to the related sites section where you will find the link. There you will find the annual reports to the president, this threat assessment guide, as well as a link which you may send an e-mail. We encourage you to use the site for education and to provide any pertinent information you have regarding crimes at houses of worship. You may also visit the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) website at www.fbi.gov.

ARSON [Go to Top](#)



Since 1995, the NCATF has recorded incidents of arson at almost 900 houses of worship in the United States. Arson remains the leading cause of fire at worship facilities. The first step in prevention is to be aware of the potential for arson at your facility. Motives vary widely: vandalism, pyromania, to cover up evidence of other crimes (such as burglary), financial profit, retaliation, and racial/religious discrimination (hate crimes).

Assess your particular organization's potential to be a victim of an arson attack. Are there disgruntled persons or disputes that could motivate someone to commit arson? Also, be aware that if your congregation is involved in controversial social or political issues, you may be at risk of an attack.

Houses of worship are particularly vulnerable to arson due to their frequent periods of vacancy. Many houses of worship are only occupied a few hours a week. This allows an arsonist a wide window of opportunity to commit a crime. Help close this window of opportunity by requesting that members of your congregation be attentive to the facility on their way to work or shop. Many of your members are likely to drive by your worship center many times during the

week. Encourage them to take a few moments and drive through the parking lot and check the building. Increased activity around a house of worship may discourage an arsonist.

Advise them that if they encounter a suspicious person or activity, they should call the police.

Also, contact your local law enforcement agency and establish a rapport with the officers who routinely patrol your area. Familiarize them with times of worship and activities so that they will be alerted when people are present during off hours.



Nearby residents or business people may be an excellent resource in protecting your house of worship. Get to know them and ask them to be on alert for suspicious activity and to report it to the police. Provide them with a contact person's name and telephone number to call if they are not sure a vehicle or person should be at the building.

Studies have identified that more fires occur on Halloween and Independence Day. Ask your neighbors, members and police department to be especially watchful during these times.

If possible, install fire and burglar alarms at your house of worship. Alarms often cost less than people think and can save your facility in the event of a fire.

To protect persons who are present in the event of a fire, prepare an emergency evacuation plan. Post the plan on bulletin boards and make sure all are familiar with it. Consider conducting periodic fire drills. These are especially important if you have numerous children in your congregation.



Use the [arson prevention checklist](#) in this booklet to help assess your vulnerability to arson. Your local fire, police and insurance representative may provide additional assistance.

Finally, consider the following steps to help prevent arson at your worship facility:

- Cut shrubbery and trees to provide better visibility.
- Do not allow signs to block the view of the building.
- Secure ladders and stairways that give access to the roof. Consider decorative or wrought iron protection for windows.
- Install floodlights to the exterior of the building.

ACCIDENTAL FIRES [Go to Top](#)

During the past five years, the National Church Arson Task Force has studied all houses of worship fires nationwide. We have learned that many of the accidental fires could have been prevented.

Some common causes of accidental fires at houses of worship and ways to prevent them include:

- Construction/Maintenance Tools - **Never** leave construction/maintenance tools such as propane torch or soldering tools unattended.
- Improper Storage of Combustible Material - Always store flammable liquids/materials such as paint, paint thinners, cleaning solutions and propane in a safe environment. Never store these items or any other flammable materials near heat or flame.' Never store combustibles near a furnace or water heater. Also, never store combustibles

inside or in storage areas near the building.

- Kitchen Stoves/Coffee Makers (Appliances) - If you have kitchen facilities, never leave kitchen stoves, coffee makers or any other electrical appliance unattended. Always turn off and unplug your appliances before leaving. Have a Type K fire extinguisher in your kitchen and be sure all personnel know how to use it properly.



Weather Related Fires (Lightning Strike) - Houses of worship are particularly vulnerable to lightening strikes. Your best protection is a lightning protection system that has been certified by the Lightning Protection Institute (LPI) or Underwriters Laboratories (UL). Your insurance representative or fire department can provide more information.

- Malfunctioning of Furnace/Air Conditioner - Annual inspections by qualified personnel are recommended on all heating and air conditioning units to ensure they are in safe working order.
- Malfunctioning or Overheating of Water Heater in Baptismal Pool - Most manufacturers and insurance representatives recommend the water be drained from baptisteries after use. If draining the baptistery is not desirable, consider turning off heaters and motors when the building is vacant. Always have repairs conducted by qualified technicians
- Poor Electrical Wiring - Always make sure that your electrical wiring is up to code and have a qualified electrician do the repairs. If your building is over 30 years old, it is advisable to have the wiring inspected by a qualified electrical contractor.
- Unattended Space Heaters - Never leave space heaters on while unattended. Always make sure that the heater is turned off before leaving the premises. If an extension cord must be used, make sure it is the appropriate type and never overload an electrical outlet.
- Unattended Candles/Incense - Never leave candles or incense burning while unattended or overnight. Always make sure these items are placed on a heat resistant surface and that they are not left burning near combustible materials such as cloth. (See Improper Storage of Combustible Materials above.) Make sure lit mate. Is are cool before disposal. Remember, the use of lit materials should be supervised by an adult.



Here are some additional tips for preventing accidental fires at your house of worship:

- Discourage smoking within or near the exterior of the structure.
- Inspect all electrical cords and extension cords in use. Discard any frayed, cracked or dried out cords.
- Make sure that all wall sockets and light switches are equipped with faceplates.
- Store gasoline and gasoline operated equipment in vented storage areas or fire resistant enclosures.
- Insure that proper size fuses are used in fuse boxes.
- Never store combustibles/flammable liquids near heat or flame. Store away from church property in a safe place.
- Never leave holiday tree lights or candles on overnight or while unattended.
- Make sure all draperies and furnishings are made of fire retardant fabrics.
- Make sure electronic musical instruments are turned off while not in use. If left on, the motor can overheat and cause a fire.
- Keep kitchen stoves and appliances in good working order.
- Make sure all kitchen appliances are turned off before leaving the building.
- If you allow persons to sleep in your facility , be aware there is an increased risk of fire and other property damage. If you intend to let people sleep in your building, be sure to first check with local authorities to make sure you are not in violation of local habitation codes. It is also wise to provide supervision, prohibit smoking and cooking and to install an early warning fire alarm.

Fire Extinguishers: Your worship facility should have at least one fire extinguisher for every 2,500 square feet and a minimum of one extinguisher on each level of your building. There should be no more than 75 feet of travel from anyplace in your building to a fire extinguisher. Local ordinances may require more, so check with your fire department for information specific to your particular area.



Fire extinguishers are classified by types of fires on which they are effective:

- **Type A** - effective on ordinary combustibles such as paper, cloth, wood or trash.
- **Type B** - effective on flammable liquids such as gasoline, paint, oil, grease or tar.
- **Type C** - effective on electrical fires.
- **Type K** - for use in kitchens on combustible cooking materials.

A fire extinguisher rated as **Type ABC** is recommended in all areas of your worship facility except kitchen areas. If you have a kitchen, place a Type K extinguisher near the kitchen exit and within 30 feet of cooking appliances, but not immediately above or beside them.

Fire extinguishers should be inspected monthly by a trained person. Staff and members who are regularly at your facility should be familiar with each extinguisher's operation.

In deciding whether or not to fight a fire with a fire extinguisher, keep the following in mind:

- Has everyone left the building and has the fire department been called?
- Is the fire confined to a small area and not spreading?
- Do you have an unobstructed escape route? Is your extinguisher rated for your fire?
- Do you know how to use the extinguisher properly?

If in doubt about any of these questions, leave immediately, close off the area and wait for the fire department.

BOMBINGS [Go to Top](#)



Bombs can be constructed to look like anything and can be placed or delivered in any number of ways. The probability of finding a bomb that looks like the stereotypical bomb is almost nonexistent. The only common denominator that exists among bombs is that they are designed and intended to explode.

What can you do to help prevent a bombing disaster? First, consider whether you or your organization could be a possible target. Motives for bombings include revenge, extortion, terrorism and business disputes.

If your organization is active in controversial political and/or social issues, be aware that you could be targeted for violence.

If a suspicious object or package is found in your facility, under no circumstances should anyone move, jar or touch the object. Removing and disarming a bomb must be left to the professionals. Call your local police department immediately!

While waiting for their arrival, take the following steps:

- Identify the danger area. Generally, a 300-foot area should be considered in the danger zone, including floors below and above the object.
- Follow your evacuation plan and evacuate the building
- Open all door and windows in order to minimize damage in the event the device explodes.
- Do not reenter the building until bomb squad personnel tell you it is safe.

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Unfortunately, bomb threats do occur at houses of worship. Instruct all staff and members who answer the telephone how to respond to bomb threats. Proper planning for these incidents can reduce panic, instill confidence in leadership and help ensure a calm and safe response.



A calm response to the caller provides the best chance of obtaining additional information. Often, the bomber wants to avoid injuries or deaths. If the caller is told that the building is occupied and cannot be evacuated in time, the bomber may be willing to give more specific information on the bomb's location.

Remember, the caller is the best source of information about the bomb. Place a copy of the Bomb Threat Checklist (see appendix) by each telephone in your worship facility.

When a bomb threat is received:

- Keep the caller on the line as long as possible. Ask him/her to repeat the message. Write down what the caller says.
- If the caller does not volunteer the location of the bomb, ask him/her where it is.
- Calmly inform the caller that the building is occupied and that people may be injured or killed.
- Listen for background noise, such as motors running, music playing, and any other sounds which may give a clue as to the location of the caller.
- Pay particular attention to the voice of the caller (male, female), voice quality (calm, excited), accents and speech impediments.
- Report the threat immediately to your local law enforcement agency. After you have reported to your local law enforcement agency, you may also report the threat to ATF through our web site at www.atf.treas.gov.
- Remain available for law enforcement to interview you.

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- Mail bombs may have excessive postage. Normally a bomber does not want to mail a parcel over the counter and have to deal face-to-face with a window clerk.
- The return address may be fictitious or nonexistent.
- The postmark may show a different location than the return address.
- Mail bombs may bear restricted endorsements, such as "Personal" or "Private." This is particularly important when the addressee does not usually receive personal mail.
- Mail bombs may display distorted handwriting or the name and address may be prepared with homemade labels or cut-and-paste lettering.
- Parcel bombs may be unprofessionally wrapped with several combinations of tape used to secure the package and may be endorsed 'Fragile - Handle With Care' air 'Rush-Do Not Delay.'
- Letter bombs may feel rigid or appear uneven or lopsided.



- Package bombs may have irregular shapes, soft spots or bulges
- Mail bombs may have protruding wires, aluminum foil or oil stains and may emit a peculiar odor.
- Be suspicious of any letters or packages arriving before or after a phone call from an unknown person asking if the item was received.
- Packages wrapped in string are automatically suspicious, since modern packaging materials have virtually eliminated the need for twine or string.
- If your organization does not normally receive mail from foreign sources, be cautious of packages containing foreign writing, addresses or postage.

NOTE: To utilize these guidelines it is important to know the types of mail your organization receives.

If you become suspicious of a mailing and are unable to verify the contents, observe the following safety precautions:

- **Do not** open the article.
- Isolate the suspect parcel and evacuate the immediate area.
- Do not put the article in water or a confined space, such as a desk drawer or cabinet.
- If possible, open windows in the immediate area to assist in venting potentially explosive gases.
- If you have any reason to believe a letter or package is suspicious, do not take a chance or worry about possible embarrassment if the item turns out to be innocent. Contact your local police department immediately. They would rather respond to a false alarm than respond to a blast scene.