



## PERQUIMANS COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES

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### *House of Worship Fire Prevention Recommendations*

This document provides a quick look at ways you can minimize the threat of fire at your facility. We look at some of the primary causes of fire and give you tips on their prevention. We've used a handy checklist form so you can see how your facility rates for fire safety.

The first and most important step you can take is to make your whole congregation aware of the threat posed by fire. By starting your fire prevention program now, you're helping to protect your worship center and its members from possible loss and tragedy.



#### *Fire statistics: cause for alarm.*

According to the National Fire Protection Association, there are more than 1.3 million reported fires each year. Thousands of these fires occur at worship centers, causing millions of dollars of damage.

But the ultimate tragedy is that approximately 14,600 American civilians are injured and 3,400 killed by fire every year – many in fires that were preventable.



#### *What causes fires in worship centers?*

Arson is a leading cause of fires at worship centers. A fire might be deliberately set for a variety of reasons: as an act of vandalism, or pyromania, to cover up evidence of other crimes (such as burglary), for some twisted sort of "revenge" and in some cases even arson for profit. In worship centers, vandalism and cover-up are common.

Faulty wiring is another leading cause of fires at worship centers. Many facilities are old, and in some instances might predate the use of electricity. Consequently, the wiring in some older buildings might not be adequate to handle the electrical demands of air conditioning, P.A. Systems, organs and other appliances and equipment found in worship centers today. If your building is more than 30 years old, you should have the wiring inspected by a qualified electrical contractor.

Other common cause of fires at worship centers are lightning, faulty furnaces and stoves, overheated organ motors, carelessness with smoking materials and careless use of candles and holiday decorations.



#### *Simple measures reduce risk of arson.*

Worship centers are easy and frequent targets of arsonists. Though you cannot eliminate the risk of arson at your worship center, there are simple steps you can take to substantially reduce its likelihood.

OK      NEEDS  
          WORK

- Maintain adequate exterior lighting to eliminate hiding places.
- Use motion detection lights to alert neighbors of activity.
- Put interior lighting on sequential timers to give the impression of occupancy and activity.
- Trim or remove shrubbery that block the view of possible entries to your building.
- Trim tree branches that might allow second story access.
- Ladders offer easy access to your roof. Store them properly.
- Keep all doors (including interior offices and closets) locked when unattended.
- Install locks on all basement, ground floor and second story windows.
- Make sure valuable items are not visible from the outside.
- Keep track of keys. Change locks periodically.
- Remove and secure gasoline and other fuel sources from inside and around your building.
- Establish a neighborhood watch program. Notify law enforcement authorities of suspicious activity – do not confront suspects yourself.



### *Take an inside look at fire prevention.*

To make your fire prevention program most effective, it needs to be an ongoing effort. For instance, you should make a quick tour of your building interior once a month.

Look for places where a fire might start — in piles of old rags, overloaded electrical sockets, etc. It just takes a moment to remedy these situations — and cut down your chances for a serious fire.

Take this document along and use it as a checklist.

Make a note of any situations that need to be corrected, and get going on plans to improve your fire safety.

## Structural

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- All exit doors should open outwards, with no locks or fasteners to prevent free escape from the inside of the building.
- Keep exits free of obstruction at all times.
- Make sure all exits are clearly marked with lighted signs.
- Be sure to acquire a building permit for any remodeling, additions or repairs, so that it can be inspected by the fire marshal for compliance with local fire codes.

- ○ If your building is undergoing repairs, remodeling or painting, make sure workers are following fire safety procedures. Blowtorches, painters' rags and roofers' pots can be fire hazards.
- ○ Have your furnace cleaned and professionally inspected once a year. Late summer or early fall is the best time, before the heating season.
- ○ The walls and ceiling of the furnace room should be lined with fire-resistant material such as concrete block or fire code sheetrock.
- ○ The furnace room door should be lined with fire-resistant material or be replaced with a UL-approved fire door.
- ○ Keep the furnace room door closed at all times.

## Housekeeping

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| ○  | ○             | Be careful with combustible decorations, especially around the holidays. Keep flimsy paper and cloth decorations away from light bulbs, wiring and other sources of heat or flame.                                     |
| ○  | ○             | Make sure all upholstery, draperies and furnishings are fire-retardant fabrics.  |
| ○  | ○             | Use candles in your services only when ritual prohibits any substitute. Otherwise, use safe candle-type light bulbs. Only a bit of the symbolic nature is lost, but a large measure of safety is gained.               |
| ○  | ○             | Check the organ frequently to make sure it's turned off. If left on, the motor can overheat or short out, causing a serious fire hazard.   |
| ○  | ○             | Most worship centers are smoke-free. However, if you do permit smoking, designate a special area for it, and provide an adequate number of safety-type ashtrays. Check ashtrays often for smoldering ashes or matches. |
| ○  | ○             | Clean up debris from social gatherings on the same day and place in proper receptacles outside of the building.  |
| ○  | ○             | Don't use the heating room for storage of combustibles.  |
| ○  | ○             | Don't keep any gasoline or gasoline-operated equipment on your premises, unless it is in a well-vented, fire resistive enclosure.  |
| ○  | ○             | Keep kitchen ventilating hood filters clean and free of accumulated grease.  |
| ○  | ○             | Kitchen stove burners should be maintained in good condition. They should ignite as soon as gas is turned on.  |

In times of emergency some worship centers serve as temporary shelters. This might be a worthy ministry but does add to your risk of fire, other property damage and injuries. If your facility intends to serve as a temporary shelter, check with us first to make sure you are not in violation of local habitation codes. It's also wise to provide supervision, prohibit smoking and cooking, and to install an early warning fire alarm. Keep your exits unobstructed at all times.



## *Don't let your house of worship suffer from exposure.*

Exposure fires – those originating outside and spreading to your building – can be caused by a number of things. Certainly the fire that spreads to your building from another building is a circumstance beyond your control, but you can help eliminate the most common causes of exposure fires with a bit of common sense.

OK      NEEDS  
WORK

- If you have a lightning rod system, inspect to make sure rods are properly in place. Wires should run unbroken to the ground, attached to the ground rods sunk eight to ten feet into the ground.
- Be careful when burning sticks, leaves or grass. Don't do it near your building or in the presence of hazardous conditions such as a severe dry spell or high winds. Obtain a burn permit from NC Forestry.
- Keep the grounds clean, free from piles of leaves and rubbish. This way, vandals have less fuel to start a fire, too.
- Remove birds' nests from chimneys or steeples. You can prevent birds from rebuilding with wire mesh across openings.
- Keep chimneys clean, free of soot and other obstructions.



## *Early warning systems.*

Early warning systems range from battery-operated smoke detectors to hard-wired central station alarms. All provide valuable warning in case of fire.

As a minimal protection for the people in your worship center, install detectors throughout your building. Smoke detectors are preferred over heat detectors except in areas where heavy dust or other air particles would cause frequent false alarms.

Detectors should be cleaned and tested regularly. Batteries weaken over time. Replace them as recommended by the manufacturer or at least once a year.



## *Fire extinguishing equipment.*

Portable fire extinguishers.

A fire extinguisher is a basic tool in fighting small fires. You should have at least one extinguisher for every 2,500 square feet, with a minimum of one extinguisher on each level of your building.

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

**Type A** extinguishers are for ordinary combustibles such as paper, wood, cloth or trash.

**Type B** extinguishers are for flammable liquids such as gasoline, paint, oil, tar and grease.

**Type C** extinguishers are for use on electrical fires, including electrical equipment, motors, switchboards, wiring and other electrical apparatus.

**Type K** extinguishers are for use in kitchens on combustible cooking media.

Because of their versatility, we recommend the use of Class ABC extinguishers throughout your facility, except in kitchens. These extinguishers are light, easy to operate and can be used on three classes of fires.

For your kitchen, provide a Class K extinguisher. It should be mounted near a kitchen exit and within 30 feet of cooking appliances, but not in the immediate area above or around them.