

archdeacons' news



Winter 2006

Fire risks a seasonal update

New fire legislation, The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, requires churches to undertake an assessment of all fire risks.

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Candles at Christmas

So long as you're taking proper fire precautions today, the new legislation shouldn't have a dramatic effect. However, it does act as a prompt reminder to review your fire precautions.

And at this time of year, candles pose a particular fire risk, so it's wise to revisit your risk assessment procedures. Your assessment must take into account the risk that candles pose – especially to children – and the precautions you need to put in place. We would strongly suggest that you record your assessment in writing.

We're not saying that you shouldn't use candles – the use of candles in church is a very important part of worship, particularly at Christmas – just that it's important to remember that they can be the cause of major fires and serious injuries if not used correctly.

Just remember to take the new regulations and common sense into account. Simple precautions should mean that candles are used safely.



Fire safety

advice for your church

■ Choice of candle

Good quality slow-burning candles are best. Cheaper, catering-quality candles will burn down quickly, and the flame may soon get dangerously close to foliage or decorations.

■ Hand-held candles

Great care needs to be taken where the congregation are given candles to hold, especially where large numbers are involved. Apart from the risk of igniting service sheets etc., molten wax can cause damage to clothing and is very hot. Purpose-made candles are available, and should be used with proper slide-on card drip trays.

Where children are involved, even greater care is necessary. Children should be properly supervised and care taken to ensure that they do not stand too close together, or too close behind one another, as there's a risk of both clothing and hair being set alight. Processions while holding candles are probably best avoided.

■ Placing of candles

Candles must be kept well clear of all combustible materials including flammable decorations, foliage and electrical equipment. Ideally, candles should be placed in metal

holders on non-combustible surfaces such as stone or brick. Candles should never be placed directly onto Christmas trees.

■ Fire extinguishers

Every church should have at least two extinguishers of the appropriate type, and these should be examined and serviced at regular intervals.

Water extinguishers are the most suitable for dealing with burning foliage, paper and wood, but must not be used on electrical equipment.

Stewards must know where the extinguishers are and how to use them. Training can be provided either by your fire extinguisher supplier or the local Fire Brigade.

■ Fire blanket

A fire blanket may be a better way of dealing with certain fire situations, and you should have at least one available for the service. They are particularly suitable for dealing with burning clothing.

■ Means of escape

If a fire should start, you must be certain that people can get out of the building quickly.

All doors must be unlocked before the service and capable of being opened quickly.

A steward should be located at each door and at least one person should be given the task of calling the Fire Brigade.

■ Lighting

Stewards should have torches so that any minor problems can be dealt with quickly without bringing on the main lights. But in the event of a fire, or other serious emergency, the main lights must be brought on immediately.

■ Procedures

It's strongly recommended that a team of stewards is appointed and that each person has specific duties in accordance with a list of written procedures.

A specific steward should be appointed to each door and must ensure that it opens easily before the service starts.

Similarly, responsibility for fire extinguishers should be given to specific stewards who know how to use them.

The person leading the service should be aware of the fire risk, and in the event of an emergency, be ready to ask everyone to leave in an orderly fashion following the directions of the stewards.

For large services, a trained first-aider with first aid equipment should be available.

Candles must never be left burning when there's no responsible person left in the church and always check that all candles are extinguished before locking up.