

# Fire Precautions

## *1 General*

- 1.1 As part of their general responsibility for the maintenance of church buildings, church halls, and the like, Incumbents and PCCs have always needed to make appropriate arrangements for dealing with the outbreak of a fire. Most architects point out, as part of their Quinquennial Inspection reports, the suitability or otherwise of lightning conductors and fire extinguishers.
- 1.2 Similarly, church and church hall insurers frequently stipulate the provision of fire extinguishers. PCCs have always found themselves, as in so many matters, weighing the cost of substantial provision in this area against any legal requirements and stipulations of insurers.
- 1.3 Correct maintenance of electrical systems is one of the best ways to prevent the outbreak of a fire in a church building while unattended.

## *2 A new set of regulations*

- 2.1 The Government has, however, recently amended the Fire Precautions (Workplace) Regulations 1997 with an Amendment Act of 1999.
- 2.2 These Regulations in principle affect PCCs and churches. However, the Act is limited to making suitable provision if anyone is employed on church or PCC premises. The

courts have held that clergy are not for these purposes 'employed' persons, and volunteer workers are excluded too, even if they are given a small honorarium for their duties.

- 2.3 It may also be the case that organists paid for their services are contractors rather than employees, although this depends on the terms of the contract. But many larger churches (and some not so large) may nevertheless employ individuals to work either in a church building or a church hall or room within the PCC's responsibilities.
- 2.4 A recent circular from the Secretary-General of the Archbishops' Council suggests that any PCC which is not sure about the employment status of someone to whom it gives payment should check with the Diocesan Registrar.
- 2.5 If you do, within the terms of the Act, employ someone on your premises, then this new Act applies to the premises and imposes duties upon you.

## *3 What needs to be done?*

- 3.1 Clearly, it will be clear that a small stone building with limited internal use is likely to offer a much lower risk than either a large stone building with substantial interior woodwork and several offices, or a building of any size built in more modern materials.

3.2 Nevertheless, if the new Regulations do apply to you, you must:

- carry out a 'risk assessment', considering all your employees and all other people who may be affected by a fire, and you are required to make provision for any disabled people who may be present at your premises;
- identify the significant findings of the risk assessment and the details of anyone who might be especially at risk, recording this if you employ more than five people;
- provide and maintain such fire precautions as are necessary to safeguard those who use your workplace; and
- provide information, instruction and training to your employees about the fire precautions in your workplace.

3.3 There are other legal duties you need to know:

- Where it is necessary to safeguard the safety of your employees, you must nominate people (who might include yourself) to undertake any special roles which are required under your emergency plan.

- You must consult your employees about the nomination of individual people and about proposals for improving the fire precautions.
- You must inform other employers who also have workplaces in the building of any significant risks you have identified.
- You must establish a suitable means of contacting the emergency services, and ensure that they can be called easily.

#### ***4 What help is there?***

4.1 The Churches' Main Committee has produced a '*Fire Precautions Guide*' which is available at a cost of £2 (including postage) from the CMC at Fielden House, 13 Little College Street, London SW1P 3SH (telephone 020 7898 1861).