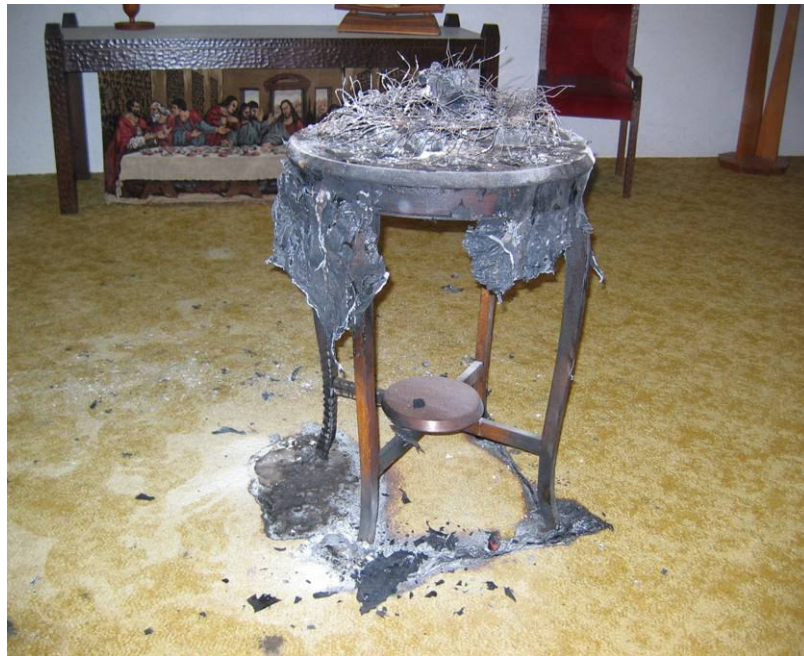


Christmas Blaze Cautionary Tale – ‘Touchstone’, February 2005

A potentially disastrous Boxing Day fire is a reminder to congregations to make sure their safety measures are up-to-date. An efficient alarm system and a good neighbour averted tragedy after a candle nearly set fire to St Stephen’s Methodist Church in Tauranga following the Sunday service.

St Stephen’s EDAC Auto Dialler connects the building’s smoke alarms to the security system, which automatically dials three people in the congregation when it goes off. One of the people called by the system on Boxing Day, alerted supply minister Rev Neal Whimp.

By the time Neal arrived at the church tenant Dave Hanna, who was living in the parsonage next door had rung the fire brigade. The church had filled shoulder-high with smoke but Neal and Dave were able to enter and use a fire extinguisher to put out the fire. “The fire brigade arrived 10 minutes later and they were pleased to know we had put the fire out. They used large fans to evacuate the smoke and checked out the building to make sure everything was okay,” Neal says. “The fire was started by a large white candle that was overlooked and left burning after the service. The candle was in the middle of an advent wreath on a small table. Both the wreath and the table caught fire and the table was about to tip over when we put the fire out. There was a small Jesus in a cradle full of hay nearby. It was a tinderbox that would have caught fire to the wooden floor.”



Another potentially painful lesson St Stephen’s learned that day is the importance of recharging fire extinguishers after they have been used. Several weeks prior to Boxing Day there had been a small oven fire that was put out with the fire extinguisher. It had not been recharged, and when Neal went to use it to put out the church fire it was empty. Fortunately Dave was able to relocate another one to douse the flames. Despite that lapse, past fires at two other Tauranga churches have made the St Stephen’s congregation aware of the danger. Every Monday morning they do a check of all electrical appliances on the property to ensure everything has been shut off after the weekend.

A silver lining to the fire was that cleaners had been able to remove all evidence of the smoke damage and by mid January the church was looking more spruced up than before the blaze.

Methodist Trust Association executive Greg Wright says there are three lessons to learn from the fire. One is the potential cost in terms of lost memories and belongings should a church burn. The second is the effectiveness of the alarm systems. St Stephen's was the second Methodist church saved by such a system in four months. And third is the importance of having good ties with neighbours and the community.