



## CHURCH SECURITY

It is a sad reflection on our society that many churches, among the most beautiful and historic buildings in the country, have to be kept locked because of the fear of theft, arson and vandalism. Yet there is also a great need in our time for places where people can sit quietly, reflect, pray, or simply be still. It is in balancing these two extremes that some simple church security measures will help, enabling the building to continue as a welcoming and open place of prayer while seeking to protect the building and the valuable objects it contains.

What follows will never be more than brief pointers. For further information you may wish to speak to your local crime prevention officer (contact your local police station for details), EIG, English Heritage, the Council for the Care of Churches, the local fire prevention officer (contact your local fire brigade for details) or the DAC.

- ❖ Decide if you want to keep your church open during daylight hours. Statistics show that a locked church is far more likely to be damaged than an unlocked one – by its nature you have to break in to see if there is anything worth stealing! If you do keep it open, it may be helpful to have a rota of people on duty to keep an eye on the building. They can act not only as guards but also as the human face of the Church. Many lay people will be happy to play their part in this, even those who are not regular worshippers. Alternatively, if you feel that the church should be generally locked consider having a key available for those who want to visit. A good notice stating from where the key can be obtained is available from EIG.
- ❖ Look at access and entry to the building. Ideally, there should be only one door open and any others should be securely locked. Is there a church gate? Is it usually open or closed? If it is wide enough for a hearse to drive through it is probably big enough for a thief's van to get through too. Consider if it is necessary to have such drives open all the time.
- ❖ Discuss with those who live closest to the church if they would keep a special eye open for mischief in or around the church. It is surprising how much neighbours notice, simply because it is out of the ordinary. Ask the congregation to pop into the church when they go past to the shop, the post office or when walking their dog.
- ❖ A clean, tidy, loved church is far less likely to be vandalised than one that looks uncared for.
- ❖ Make sure you know what you have got! The church is obliged to maintain an inventory; supplement this with good photographs and descriptions and it will be an invaluable asset should the unthinkable happen, giving the police, insurers, and you accurate details of what was taken. Include as many items as possible; silver is obvious but look also at paintings, frontals, carpets, carved doors and fittings, memorials, stained glass, interesting woodwork. Never underestimate a thief: if it can be stolen there is a good chance that somewhere in the country it already has been. Keep two copies, one in the church safe and deposit one with the Archdeacon or at Church House, just in case.

- ❖ Keep walls and boundary hedges in good order; hedges of hawthorn, hedging rose or holly have obvious disadvantages for those who try to get through them. Consider locking all gates at night. Lighting may be a good deterrent to thieves and vandals; passive infra red (PIR) devices switch lights on when someone walks past the sensor.
- ❖ Stained glass is an obvious target to vandals. It is surprising how many churches have piles of stones or rocks readily available for throwing at them! If there is a persistent problem with vandalism, look at the possibility of installing wire guards to protect the glass. The cost of these may seem large but if vandalism is ongoing it will prove its worth in the long-term.
- ❖ Locks and keys are the frontline of defence against thieves. Limit the number of keys available (does every flower arranger need one?) and keep a note of who has them. Don't keep them on hooks in the church that are clearly labelled as to which lock they fit. Do not keep keys in 'safe places' – they are not safe! There should be a 'safe area' in each church that can remain locked and secure even when the church itself is open. A vestry can usually be upgraded to provide such a space.
- ❖ Anything that can be stolen will be up for grabs. The silver may be locked in the safe but what about the little table used for a credence? Underneath its lacy covering it could well be Jacobean, easy to pick up and put in the boot of a car. You may consider securing it by a chain and bolt into the floor. Discuss the matter with the Archdeacon or the DAC for advice.
- ❖ The safe can sometimes be anything but safe. Some may look very sturdy, especially the older solid ones, but can be opened relatively easily, some can be cut open with a tin opener. Discuss the matter with your insurer or the crime prevention officer.
- ❖ Every church in the diocese was issued with an alphadot kit during 1999. The system is easy to use. It is a solution that contains tiny microdots that are printed with a unique personal identification number that is allocated to each individual church. It does not damage the item but at the same time is virtually indelible. Such marking of items provides undeniable proof of ownership and stolen items can be identified as easily as if you had your name and address written on it. Has your parish used it?
- ❖ Lock away matches, candles and other ignition sources. Try not to allow piles of combustible material to accumulate. Fuels of any sort should be locked away or made secure. Appropriate fire extinguishers should be available and must be regularly maintained.

It is amazing how many churches do not bother to report thefts or vandalism or arson. All too often we assume that little or nothing can be done. By undertaking some of the precautions outlined above there is a much greater chance that you will get your stolen items back. It may even prevent another church from falling victim to the same thieves.