



## Toolkit 3: Opening your Church with Confidence

A church locked to keep thieves and vandals out is also a church closed to its community and the people who need it most. Theft and damage to churches is not a modern phenomenon. Over the centuries churches have faced exactly the same issues that we are dealing with today. Locking the door is a natural and understandable reaction to a threat - but it doesn't have to be the only way to deal with this issue.



**FACT:** A locked church is more vulnerable to theft and vandalism than an open one.

This may seem like a ridiculous statement but more criminals attack locked churches because they are less likely to be disturbed. In an open church anyone may appear at any time.

The following tips will help you to understand this and plan your strategy for being open more regularly. Remember that buildings and 'stuff' can be replaced but damage to people is more difficult to handle.

### Your people

The safety of those volunteers and church workers who may find themselves in vulnerable situations in your building is equally, if not more, important than the security of your building. Flower arrangers, cleaners, musicians and tower captains are examples of those who may be alone in your buildings at certain times of the day. It is a good idea to work out a plan and a set of rules to help those who may find themselves alone in your building to deal with potentially challenging situations. You should take the following into account:

If you are planning to be in church alone remember the following:

#### ALWAYS

- tell someone where you are going and how long you expect to be.
- carry a mobile phone if at all possible.
- trust your instincts and don't be afraid to get out of a situation you feel threatened by.

#### NEVER

- go into church if you think someone might be inside committing a crime.
- get into an argument or a confrontational situation with anyone in church if you are alone. Walk away and, if necessary, call the police and ask them to deal with the situation.
- give anyone money but be practical in the help you can offer. Have information about available local support in church to give to those who need it so the address of the nearest homeless shelter, for example, or details of other organisations who can offer a hot meal or counselling.
- disturb the scene of a crime and always report it to the police immediately, no matter how small.

# Your building

## Think like a Criminal

Spend a few hours in and around your church and look at it the way that a vandal or a thief would. This will help you to make a risk assessment. Record what you have that could easily be taken and assess what you have in terms of valuables and replace significant items with those made of wood. Keep a section of your church – the vestry, for example - as a secure area, with a good quality lock.

## Tell Others

Once you have made the decision to be open decide who you need to tell. This isn't just about your congregation taking a collective responsibility for the building. It's also about those who live near to, or pass by your church, on a regular basis. Think of it as Neighbourhood Watch for Churches. Put flyers through the doors of those closest to your building. Tell them you intend to be open, giving details of the times. Also give telephone numbers of those people who should be contacted in an emergency should they notice anything suspicious. Your local community are the 'guardian angels' for your church.

## Talk to the Police

Make friends with your local Police Community Support Officers and let them know that you intend to be open regularly. Also contact your insurers and ask for advice. If you are insured with Ecclesiastical your premiums are not likely to increase if you decide to be open. Insurers actively encourage churches to be open as research shows that an open church is less vulnerable than a locked one

## Think about an Alarm system

They aren't as expensive as you think and the technology is changing all the time. At least think about alarming your vestry and keep this as an extra secure area. Most churches are not alarmed – do some research locally and find out which churches have systems and ask how effective they find them. Alarms have a down side. How many of us hear an alarm going off and ignore it?

## Cash

If you have a cash-box in the wall don't use it. More damage will be caused by a thief trying to prize it away from the stonework. Use a table-top box. If it gets taken, so be it. Make sure that any monies left in church are taken away regularly and say that this is your policy. An evident sign saying 'No money is left in this building at any time' will deter a petty thief who is looking for cash. If you do have a theft make sure you tell the police about it and get their help.

## Keys

Count up how many people currently hold keys to your church. Do you really know where they all are and who holds them? Having a clear protocol for key management is essential as you may need to create a rota for opening and locking up. Many churches now have automatic timed locking systems that work well.

The above basic information has been put together using the resources endorsed by Ecclesiastical Insurance Group. Their web-site contains extensive downloadable information about Church Security, Personal Security for Church Workers, Volunteers and Clergy.

[www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters/churchguidance/churchsecurity/index.aspx](http://www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters/churchguidance/churchsecurity/index.aspx)

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