

Keeping your church open and secure

If any building should operate an 'open door' policy, it's a church. Unfortunately, crime figures suggest that an open door to an empty church is an invitation to less-than-welcome visitors. However, there are things that you can do to protect your church and its contents and still keep the church open to the community.



At a recent conference looking at the problem of theft from churches, one crime reduction officer said: "My advice would be to lock up everything." Ecclesiastical endorses that advice, but adds the caveat, "except the front door".

Keeping churches open outside of services of worship is a vital element in the link they have with the community they serve. An open door enables people to find a quiet place to pray, it offers somewhere to sit and think, and it enables visitors to the area to enjoy any historical treasures you may have. A steady flow of legitimate visitors also helps deter those with criminal intent.

If you can, try to have someone on duty in the church at all times by having a rota of church sitters, or organise cleaning, grass cutting and other routine activities so that there is someone in the church or churchyard for as much of the time as possible. If that is not realistic, you may be able to achieve a compromise by organising set hours when volunteers are available, which can be displayed on the door.

Remember though that someone left on their own could be at risk, so you need to have measures in place for their personal safety. Ideally, church sitters should work in teams of two, they need to have some form of communication such as a mobile phone, and consideration should be given to providing personal attack alarms connected to an alarm system. There also needs to be someone readily available to respond to an alarm call.

All portable valuables should be marked with an Ecclesiastical-approved forensic marker such as SmartWater, and associated signage should be displayed prominently outside the church to deter thieves. Lock away in a safe as many valuable and portable items as possible - certainly any silverware and also, if possible, brass and pewter items as these metals also have a value to thieves. The vestry can be used as a lockable area for smaller items of furniture and furnishings. To reduce the risk of arson, anything that could be used to start or feed a fire should be removed or locked away.

If a theft does occur, recovery is very much easier if there are photographs of all valuables and portable furniture. Keep two sets of photographs, one in the safe and one in a safe place away from the church.

Making the church building a focal point for the wider community can be a way not only of attracting visitors, but also of having people on site whose presence will deter thieves. In communities where local facilities are scarce or non-existent, some churches are playing their part by hosting activities such as post offices, village shops and even farmers' markets. One such is St Giles, Langford in the Diocese of Chelmsford which has opened a small village shop in its vestry. The vision behind the project was to make the church more accessible to people, to provide a service for the village and to enable parishioners to get to know other people in the community. It has brought villagers together and the church has benefited from an increased number of visitors. Although complex to instigate, projects such as this do have the knock-on benefit of the broader community developing a stronger commitment to their parish church and also helping ensure its security because they feel a greater sense of involvement and ownership.

There are many ways of ensuring the security of your church whilst offering hospitality to people for whom this might make all the difference to their lives.

More advice and security guidance notes can be found at www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters

Useful information such as how your building can be used for the community can be found at www.churchcare.co.uk

The Church in Wales has an Open Churches Toolkit which is available from the Provincial Office at 39 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9XF.

You can also visit www.nationalchurchwatch.com for details of seminars on crime reduction for churches in the UK.



For more information or further advice, please speak to your local **Insurance Consultant and Surveyor** or call

0845 777 3322

visit www.ecclesiastical.com/churchmatters