



Toolkit 3:

Opening your Church with Confidence

A church locked to keep out thieves and vandals 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. Closing 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 at first sight 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. 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.
- **ALWAYS** carry a mobile phone if at all possible.
- **ALWAYS** trust your instincts and don't be afraid to run away from a situation you feel threatened by.

- **NEVER** go into church if you think someone might be inside committing a crime.
- **NEVER** 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.
- **NEVER** give anyone money but be practical in your help. Have information about available practical support in church to give to those who need it.
- **NEVER** disturb the scene of a crime and always report it to the police no matter how small.

Your building

- **Think like a Criminal** Spend a few hours going 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. (There is a good checklist on the National Churchwatch website or you can get a copy from us here in the office) Look at what you have that could easily be taken. 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 will not go up 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 they are 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 and get their help.
- **Keys** Have a mental count up of how many people currently hold keys to your church. Do you really know where they all are and who holds them? Someone needs to be responsible for the management of keys as you will need to have a rota for opening and locking up. Some churches in our Diocese have an automatic timed locking system that works well.

The above basic information has been put together using the resources endorsed and written by National Churchwatch, a project funded by Ecclesiastical Insurance. Their web-site contains extensive downloadable information about Church Security, Personal Security for Church Workers, Volunteers and Clergy. If you would like to speak to an expert in this field please contact Nick Tolson through the web-site at www.nationalchurchwatch.com

*If you would like help or support with any of the issues highlighted here please contact Divine Inspiration on 024 7652 1346 or by e-mail on helen.mcgowan@divine-inspiration.org.uk .
The full Toolkit can be downloaded from the Ambassador page of the website
Go to www.divine-inspiration.org.uk for more information and advice to help you improve your church's welcome to visitors.*

Divine Inspiration gratefully acknowledges financial support from the following:



The N C Bellefontaine Charitable Trust

Last updated: July 2009

