

Church security guidance

Church security



Unfortunately, churches do suffer from criminal damage. Insurance can provide monetary compensation but can never compensate for the loss of part of a church's history. It is better to reduce the risk of loss in the first place.

Use the notes below to check the security of your church and take action if necessary.

Locking up

If at all possible your church should be left open during the day for those who wish to pray, or who wish to find a place for quiet contemplation. It should also be open for tourists and other visitors with an interest in historic buildings. The presence of legitimate visitors will also help to deter those with a criminal intent. It is not the policy of Ecclesiastical to ask for churches to be kept locked during the day. There may be some cases where you have suffered repeated vandalism, theft or arson attacks where this is the only option and occasionally we may only be able to continue to provide cover if the church is kept locked. Hopefully, however, by following these guidelines it should be possible for the church to remain open for the use and enjoyment of all.

Whilst the church should, if possible, be left open during the day it should be locked during the hours of darkness other than for services or unless someone is present.

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. Remember, however, that someone left on their own in the church could be at risk and a means of communication such as a mobile telephone should be available. Ask people living nearby to keep an eye out for anything suspicious happening around the church.

Lock away as many valuable and portable items as you can. All silver items should be kept in a good quality safe. If possible keep brass and pewter items in the safe as well. If there is not room in the safe then lock them away in a secure area such as the vestry or tower. If you do not have a suitable secure area then try and create one, such as at the bottom of the tower stairs, provided of course that you do not cause any obstructions from a health and safety perspective.

Small valuable ornaments and items of furniture and furnishings should also be put away in a locked vestry, cupboard or safe when not in use. Coffin stools, chests and any item which can be used in a domestic setting are particularly vulnerable. If items cannot be locked away consider securing them to the floor or wall, which may not deter a determined thief but may be sufficient to prevent the more casual theft.

Arson

Remember that arson is basically a security problem. If the church is open during the day, take the simple precautions described here regarding locking up and visits. Remove all unwanted items that could be used to start a fire – such as old newspapers, candles and matches. Ensure also that any petrol for lawn mowers is kept away from the church. An automatic intruder alarm system will deter not just thieves but arsonists as well and will alert you to the fact that someone is on the premises.

For more detailed information see our separate guidance entitled '[The prevention of arson in churches](#)'.

Visits

Most thefts and damage occur when the church is unoccupied. Churchwardens and parishioners living nearby should make frequent irregular visits to the church. Anything suspicious should be immediately reported to the Gardaí

Safes

Valuables, such as the communion plate, should be kept in a safe or strongroom when not being used for a service. We will be happy to advise regarding suitable types. All safes should be securely anchored to the fabric of the building. For more detailed information see our separate guidance entitled - '[The purchase and installation of safes](#)'.

Substitution

During the week valuable silver and brass crosses and candlesticks etc. should be substituted with wooden replacements. Valuable originals should be kept in the locked vestry or other secure area. The vestry or room used for this purpose should have adequate locks on all doors and metal bars on all readily accessible windows.



Keys

These should be kept in the personal custody of a responsible official or in a secure place away from the church, e.g. the parsonage house. Keys should never be hidden in or around the church and the number of duplicates available should be kept to the absolute minimum. Safe keys in particular should never be kept in the church. A register should be maintained of everyone who holds a key and this should be updated annually.

Locks and bars

All external doors should be kept locked overnight with a good quality key operated lock, to prevent entry to, and hinder exit from, the church. If doors can be opened from the inside, large articles or furniture can easily be removed by thieves. Where the security of doors needs to be improved, fit locks that comply with BS 3621.

The vestry will often be considered a target from a prospective thief's point of view and should therefore be secured accordingly. Ecclesiastical should always be contacted prior to the installation of security devices in order for specifications to be agreed.

Time Locks

A time lock device is normally fitted to the final exit door of the Church. It is activated at pre-set times for opening and closing.

These locks are not a substitute for a traditional lock and key and they should only be used in exceptional circumstances.

When such locks are installed, it is recommended that a church official visits the church every two/three days to ensure there is no unauthorised activity being undertaken and the church remains clean/tidy. It is important to check for any evidence of theft, fire, water or malicious damage. This may be a policy condition. The locking apparatus should be installed and maintained as per the manufacturer's instructions.

Intruder alarms

Where there is a substantial amount of property to be protected an intruder alarm system should be considered. No alarm should be purchased without first taking professional advice and consulting Ecclesiastical. Installation and maintenance of an alarm system should only be undertaken by a company licensed by the Private Security Authority and approved by the National Standards Authority of Ireland or the Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Body (SSAIB)

Closed circuit television (CCTV)

CCTV permits the continual monitoring of an area using cameras. These are usually linked to a digital recording system or monitored by security personnel. Several considerations should be noted:

- it is important you consult The RCB before installation
- the quality of cameras varies tremendously
- systems can be expensive
- systems need effective monitoring
- systems are limited to what the camera can 'see'
- check what needs to be in place for your CCTV system to comply with data protection legislation, civil liberties and human rights issues.

Photographs and security marking

Should a theft occur, recovery is much easier if adequate information regarding the stolen items is available. Photographs of all valuables and portable furniture should be kept at one of the Churchwarden's houses and at the parsonage, in addition to the usual church inventory, which should be as detailed as possible. Record details of all valuable items using the Object ID Checklist. See below for details.

Consideration should also be given to the security marking of valuable articles by engraving or the use of SmartWater, which forensically links thieves to crime scenes.

For further details on SmartWater please visit their website www.smartwater.com.

Replacement or repair of stained glass windows will be greatly assisted if colour photographs are available. A ruler or some other means of indicating size should always be included in any photograph. A video or digital recording is a very quick and easy way of making a record of everything in the church.

Object ID checklist

If possible, record details of antiques and other valuables using the following checklist. This is to the recognised international standard that police forces use to create databases of stolen property.

Object ID uses the following headings;

- Type of object – What kind of object is it? e.g. painting, sculpture, clock, mask. Materials & techniques – What material is the object made of e.g. brass, wood, oil on canvas? How was it made? e.g. carved, cast, etched
- Measurement – What is the size and/ or weight of the object? Specify which unit of measurement is being used e.g. cms, inches and to which dimension the measurement refers, e.g. height, width, depth
- Inscriptions & markings – Are there any identifying markings, numbers, or inscriptions on the object? e.g. a signature, dedication, title, maker's marks, purity marks, property marks
- Distinguishing features – Does the object have any physical characteristics that could help to identify it? e.g. damage, repairs, or manufacturing defects
- Title – Does the object have a title by which it is known and might be identified? e.g. The Last Supper
- Subject – What is pictured or represented, e.g. landscape, battle, woman holding child?
- Date or period – When was the object made, e.g. 1893, early 17th Century, late Bronze Age?
- Maker – Do you know who made the object? This may be the name of a known individual, e.g. William Morris, a company, e.g. Tiffany, or a cultural group, e.g. Hopi
- Write a short description – This can also include any additional information which helps to identify the object, e.g. colour and shape of the object, where it was made etc.
- Take photographs – Photographs are of vital importance in identifying and recovering stolen objects. In addition to overall views, take close-ups of inscriptions, markings and any damage or repairs. If possible, always include a scale or object of known size in the image
- Keep the information secure – Having documented the object, keep the information in a safe place away from the church

The Object ID Checklist was devised by The Getty Institute and is reproduced with the permission of The Council for the Prevention of Art Theft.

Roofs

External lead and copperwork is particularly vulnerable and could be marked with SmartWater which forensic links thieves to crime scenes. Careful use of 'anti-climb' paints can make the thieves' job more difficult. Ladders should always be removed to a secure place. This is particularly important to remember when work is being carried out on the church. In the case of lead or copper roofing materials, consideration should be given to replacement with less theft-attractive material following a theft. In some cases this is the only practical solution. You should consult your architect in the first instance.

Gates

These should be kept locked at night to prevent vehicles being driven close to the church. This will deter thieves as well as making the removal of stolen articles more difficult. In the absence of gates consider installing security bollards to driveways to restrict vehicular access.

Outbuildings and boiler houses

Give some thought to the security of sheds, boiler houses and any other external storage areas. All too often these are overlooked, with a resultant loss of lawnmowers, strimmers and other equipment. Ensure the fabric of such structures is reasonably sound and fit good quality padlocks and locking bars to doors.

Lawnmowers and other valuable grounds equipment should not be kept in lightweight timber sheds. Petrol should be kept away from the church.

External lighting

A floodlight mounted on the tower or other high point illuminating the roof area acts as a deterrent to the theft of roofing materials. This is particularly useful if there are occupied houses nearby. Simple time switches are readily available and lights can assist in containing general vandalism. Additional security lights should be installed around the church to cover vulnerable areas. Some lighting systems can be operated by passive infra-red detectors which detect body heat.

Protection of windows

Vulnerable stained glass and other windows should be protected externally by wire grilles of copper, galvanised iron or stainless steel. Alternatively, clear-sheet polycarbonate could be used, e.g. Lexan or Makrolon. For more detailed information see our separate guidance entitled '[Protection of stained glass windows](#)'.

Advice

The Gardaí are happy to assist in preventing thefts and vandalism with helpful advice being provided by Local Crime Prevention Officers. If theft or vandalism does occur, the Gardaí and Ecclesiastical should be notified immediately. Please note that you may need to obtain permission from the RCB before some security devices are fitted.

Need to contact us?

For further advice Ecclesiastical customers can contact our Risk Management Team on **01 619 0300** (Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm, excluding bank holidays)

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