

## Churches robbed, communities devastated Extra vigilance is paramount

Stealing religious art and artifacts is a business and unscrupulous buyers don't care how the items are acquired. These sad truths were recently brought home to seven Anglican Churches in the Province of Quebec and one Presbyterian Church just across the border in Ontario. From March until mid April – week after week – thieves managed to break in and steal a large number of valuable stained glass windows and panels; in some instances they also made off with religious artifacts. In one case, the stained glass windows measured some 10 feet in height and dated back to the early 1890's!

The theft of these historic and irreplaceable stained glass windows has left communities reeling. Parishioners, many having attended their church for decades, are still in a state of shock and disbelief. Who would do such a thing, and why? While these questions remain unanswered, what is certain is that the thieves, for the most part, targeted churches in a geographically concentrated, isolated area of the Province.

### Facing the risks...and managing them

If your church is located in a remote area with few neighbours and little traffic, if Sunday services are virtually the only time parishioners visit the premises, these recent break-ins are a sad wake-up call – a time to assess the risks and do everything possible to manage them. There *are* a number of steps that your faith community can take to help prevent further incidents, to protect valuable and often irreplaceable art and artifacts, and to keep your property safe. For example:

Keep a close watch:

- Assign volunteers to drive by the church following a regular, but random, schedule. If potential thieves are studying your church's comings and goings, they will see that there is some 'security' and may abandon their plan.
- If you have a very small group of parishioners, engage the help and collaboration of the community at large – your closest neighbours, the local and provincial police, the mayor and other politicians. Speak to the members of other churches in the vicinity. With everyone in the community participating, you can create a powerful and effective ChurchWatch group...and make the entire neighbourhood a safer place.
- Install exterior security lights – flood lights or motion sensor lighting.
- Install a remotely monitored intruder alarm system and, if possible, closed circuit TV (CCTV) surveillance.
- Use a timer to keep interior and exterior lights on at night.

Protect stained glass on the outside:

Thieves who cannot gain access to the inside may well resort to vandalism. So it is equally important to protect the outside of your stained glass windows.

- Install exterior protective glazing – one-quarter inch safety glass, Plexiglas or a polycarbonate plastic like Lexan<sup>®</sup>, used for glazing and bulletproof windows. Where a polycarbonate application is used, make sure that there is adequate ventilation space to prevent heat and moisture build-up.
- Use wire or steel mesh woven closely together to prevent rocks or other items getting through.
- Keep all doors and windows – including frames – in good repair. Multiple locking points and hardened doorframes are best.

Follow good housekeeping rules:

- Make sure that your end-of-day checklist is posted and followed— all doors and windows locked, exterior lights turned on, etc.
- Create a clear line of sight from the road to your entryways. Trim any trees or bushes that may be in the way.
- Lock away all valuables.
- Caution outside groups who use your church for special events to lock up properly and engage alarms when leaving.

Be resolute, be prepared:

- Ensure that all valuables are professionally appraised.
- Photograph all stained glass and other religious artifacts. Note and record any makers' marks. Keep this detailed, photographic inventory in a safe, off site location.
- Report any suspicious activity to the police immediately.

For more risk information and for risk management tools developed specifically for your faith community, please visit our website [www.ecclesiastical.ca](http://www.ecclesiastical.ca).

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