

# A Guide to Security and Risk Reduction for Canadian Parishes



**Tips for reducing risks to your church from  
arson, theft and vandalism!**

*Pioneer Churches on the Prairies*

*February 2024*

## 1. Introduction

**A**s most people are aware, churches are increasingly experiencing problems with either attempted or successful vandalism, break-ins, theft, graffiti, and arson. These are frightening and potentially devastating crimes. When they occur at a parish, the physical, financial and emotional damages can be significant. Damages can include the total or partial destruction of a heritage building; irreparable damage to furnishings, stained glass windows, and other unique architectural elements; and, loss of irreplaceable historical, sacred and religious items. Their cemeteries also often risk the destruction and/or defacing of grave markers and tombstones.

If these crimes occur at small rural parishes, that have only a few remaining members, it is highly unlikely that they will have the financial or human resources to repair the damages or rebuild the church. Also, the loss of the church and/or their facilities leaves the congregation and community without a place to worship, or gather for religious and social events.

It is a sad fact that Canadian places of worship must be more vigilant than ever before! Parishes must make a concerted effort to face this issue head-on, and undertake steps to mitigate the risks of criminal activity.

## 2. Why churches are vulnerable

Whether they are located in isolated, rural locations, or in city neighbourhoods, churches are frequent targets and victims of crime. There are several reasons for this.

- 2.1 *Places of worship attract professional thieves.* Professional thieves may want to steal valuable artwork or antiques. There is growing international demand for religious artifacts. These stolen items command large sums of money on the black market. Fires are often started to hide the evidence of theft.
- 2.2 *Churches attract petty criminals.* Petty thieves view places of worship as “soft targets”. They are often empty and have less sophisticated security than commercial establishments. Petty criminals often break into places of worship to steal items that can be readily converted to cash. These include religious items and artifacts perceived to be made of gold and other precious metals.
- 2.3 *Places of worship may attract homeless people.* Many places of worship are left unoccupied during the week. Rural churches may have services only once or twice a year. Others, may be closed except for annual cemetery memorial services. These premises can be vulnerable to break-ins by people who seek shelter.
- 2.4 *Churches may attract youth delinquents.* Adolescents may view places of worship as easy targets. Many faith premises are unoccupied. There is often little or no security. Juvenile fire setters range from those who set fires accidentally, to others who are delinquent fire setters. Other youth may view isolated and/or closed churches as a great place to have drinking and drug parties.
- 2.5 *Places of worship are hate-crime targets.* Unfortunately, places of worship are considered to be ideal targets for sending politically or racially motivated hate messages. These crimes are calculated to be picked up by the media and viewed by sympathizers. Crimes range from graffiti sprayed on exterior walls and doors, to malicious vandalism, and destruction of property by arson.

### 3. Signs that your church may be at risk

There are often warning signs that a church may be a target. Often, the crime itself is the last component in an escalation process. The following are some of the risk indicators to watch for:

- There have been small fires, break-ins or malicious damage — for example, broken windows — during the previous two years.
- There have been fires and/or break-ins in nearby places of worship in recent months.
- Groups of youths have been seen loitering or congregating near the building.
- Empty beer/liquor bottles, cigarette packages, condoms, needles and other drug-related items are found on the grounds.
- There is graffiti on the building and/or in the cemetery.

Individuals under age 16 play a prominent role in arson and fire setting, accounting for more than half of all fire related arrests. About one in every four fires is intentionally set. Almost half of these fires were set by youths under the age of 18.

### 4. Ten steps to prevention and risk reduction

Parishes must take a thoughtful, systematic and proactive approach to crime prevention. They must identify the risks and establish procedures to control them. This will help prevent a potentially disastrous incident. The program should be overseen by a qualified individual and/or a security committee. It must be reviewed annually in conjunction with a formal risk assessment of the premises and property.

The following 10-step program highlights key guidelines for crime prevention.

#### 4.1 Act quickly to protect your property.

- Contact the police immediately if your place of worship has been vandalized or threatened. Your local police department will investigate and may also increase their surveillance of the area.
- Contact your insurer as soon as possible. No matter how minor, losses should always be reported. Your insurer can be a valuable source of risk management advice. Risk specialists may detect a pattern or potential threat that is not readily apparent.
- Repair any vandalism and remove graffiti as quickly as possible. Damages make your premises look neglected. They can act as an open invitation for further vandalism and more serious crimes.
- Document and record the adverse incidents and notify the appropriate authorities.

#### 4.2 Involve the community.

- Institute a *Church Watch Program* whereby participants share responsibility to visit or drive by the premises when it is unoccupied and report any suspicious activity to the police and/or the parish administrator or clergy.
- Ask neighbours and local businesses to be extra vigilant and report anything unusual or suspicious.

- Invite your local police department to hold informal information sessions with your congregation to discuss community-based crime prevention tactics.
- Ask your local police to patrol your premises regularly, especially if there has been an incident or threat.
- Ask your local fire department to hold information sessions, provide fire prevention advice, and provide training on “first response” measures.

#### **4.3. Restrict access and entry.**

- Manage access to your premises by locking all entry points at night and when there are no scheduled activities — doors, windows, exterior gates, etc.
- Inspect locks frequently to ensure that they are in good working order.
- Keep track of all keys in a log book.
- Install metal containers under mail slots to prevent damage in the event that combustible materials are pushed through.
- Install bars or mesh screens over low-level windows.
- Protect roof vents and skylights with grills, bars or other secure barriers.
- Replace plate glass windows with stronger and more secure laminate glass panels or cover them with security film.
- Protect stained or leaded glass with polycarbonate sheeting or wire mesh fixed securely to the exterior of the window frame.

#### **4.4 Implement security measures.**

- Install intrusion, smoke and fire alarms that are monitored by a central station.
- Install security cameras, lights and/or alarms (*see Appendix A*).
- Consider hiring a security firm to patrol your premises.
- Organize and implement a neighbourhood watch program for rural churches.
- Keep premises well lit, for example: install perimeter flood-lights on the exterior, motion-activated lighting near doors and windows, and point lighting to illuminate recesses and alcoves.
- Use timers to activate interior lights at different times.
- Post signage and stickers indicating that the premises are under surveillance.
- Post signage asking people to call the police or 911 if they observe any suspicious or unusual activities on or near the church premises or cemetery.

In Canada, privacy laws require that clearly visible signs must be posted when security cameras are in use. These signs have a significant effect on deterring criminal activity.

#### **4.5 Report any suspicious activity.**

Report anything unusual to the police:

- Groups of youth loitering on your grounds after hours or late at night
- Evidence of fire-setting (small garbage fires, spent matches, etc.) or graffiti
- Incidents of small fires in the neighbourhood
- Threatening letters or phone calls
- Incidents of petty theft or vandalism.

#### **4.6 Fencing and landscaping measure.**

- Define property boundaries by installing perimeter fencing that does not impede sight lines — for example, wrought iron or chain link fencing.
- Narrow spaces and gaps between structures should be blocked off with fencing or other barriers.
- Trim bushes and shrubs near doors and windows to eliminate hiding places.
- Plant thorny bushes under windows.
- Cut back grass and other vegetation to a minimum of 5 metres from the edges of buildings.

#### **4.7 Housekeeping program.**

- Inspect lightning rods and grounding cables to ensure they are in working order.
- Inspect propane tanks to ensure there are no leaks and that the tanks are at a safe distance from the church building.
- Disconnect power from the grid; consider using a portable power generator for infrequent church services.
- Keep premises free of litter, garbage and flammable materials.
- Do not leave ladders or other building tools in the open, anywhere on the premises.
- Lock tool sheds and outbuildings at all times.
- Keep only limited quantities of fuels and flammable solvents and make sure that they are securely stored.
- Do not keep ignition sources — matches, lighters — in plain view.
- Dispose of old newspapers, magazines, unused books, boxes and other paper products.
- Keep garbage and recycling bins away from buildings.

CREDITS: Most of the information herein (except for Appendix A) was taken, adapted and enhanced from Ecclesiastical Insurance's (*ecclesiastical.ca*) white paper entitled – *Understand, Manage & Reduce the Risks of Arson: Protect Your Place of Worship*.



Asking for trouble: ladders, unlocked shed with lawnmower and gasoline.

#### 4.8 Minimize impact.

- In cases of parishes with infrequent services, the sacred items should be removed from the church. These should temporarily be kept in safekeeping at the parish clergy's residence or in the home of a church member.
- Ensure that telephones are easily accessible for 911 emergency calls; post emergency numbers and procedures in several clearly visible locations.
- Make sure that smoke and fire alarms are in good working order and tested regularly.
- Keep money and important documents in a flame retardant safe, or better still off-site.
- Install portable fire extinguishing equipment and hold regular training sessions.
- If you have a fire sprinkler system, ensure that it is regularly serviced and tested.
- If your building is divided into separate fire breaks, ensure that all fire doors are securely closed when the building is unoccupied.
- Use flame retardant products and materials whenever possible (*see below*).
- Maintain an inventory database that includes photographs and serial numbers for all valuable property.



#### 4.9 Put safety first.

- Contact your local Fire Department for comprehensive Evacuation and Fire Safety Protocols.
- Inspect emergency exit lighting regularly; promptly replace burnt out bulbs.
- Post evacuation plans on doors throughout your premises.
- Make sure that there is a clear path to emergency exits at all times.
- Ensure that clergy, leaders, staff, volunteers and congregants are familiar with emergency procedures.
- Hold regular fire drills.
- If your place of worship is used for various member or community events, ensure that sign-in/sign-out procedures are in place.
- Do not re-enter a burning building.
- Never confront or pursue suspect individuals or vehicles.
- If possible, observe carefully, and report descriptions of individuals, vehicles, license plate numbers etc. to the appropriate authorities.
- If adverse events occur, be sure to provide the security camera recordings to the police and/or other appropriate authorities.

#### 4.10 Prepare for the worst.

Develop a *Disaster Preparedness Plan* that:

- Includes emergency readiness and response procedures
- Includes protocols to reduce the risks of personal injury and damage to your property
- Enables your place of worship to continue to deliver faith services and programs in temporary premises
- Allows you to restore your building with minimal interruption and as cost efficiently as possible
- Enables you to retain key staff and volunteers who may have to move on if normal operations cease for an extended period
- Preserves your reputation and good standing in the community.

## 5. Summary

Every year, Canadian churches, mosques, synagogues and temples suffer the consequences of deliberately-set fires, vandalism and theft. Personal injury is a major concern. Next is damage to the property, and the amount of time and money required to repair and restore the site.

A prolonged closure can have serious impact upon a faith community, including congregants who must seek other places of worship. That's why it's so important to take a proactive approach to crime prevention. In so doing, you can help ensure that your place of worship does not become a target... so it can continue to be a safe place for clergy, parishioners, and community members.

# Appendix A

## A-1: Solar-powered security cameras

One of the best ways to deter criminal activity at your rural / remote church is through the installation of surveillance cameras and signs. A study in the UK showed that by doing so, criminal activity was reduced by 72% (*for more information, see links below*).

The challenge is that many rural churches do not have power and are not connected to the Internet. However recent technological developments have made use of security cameras more cost-effective. These cameras operate by solar-power that recharges their battery.

The camera is triggered by suspicious activity and is recorded to a microSD card. If an adverse event occurs, the card can be made available to the police to assist in apprehension and conviction of the criminals.

There are many choices for these cameras available online and at retail stores. Here is one example that may meet the needs of most rural parishes. (*Please check out other cameras, some of which may be more suitable for your location and conditions*).

### Reolink Argus PT

 <p>Roll over image to zoom in</p>	<p><b>Features:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wire-free and solar powered</li><li>• High-capacity battery recharged by solar</li><li>• Tilt and pan to 355 degrees</li><li>• 5MP HD for clearer night vision</li><li>• Smart human / vehicle detection</li><li>• Event recording to microSD card (128 GB)</li><li>• Easy mounting and installation</li><li>• Weatherproof certification</li><li>• 2-year warranty</li></ul>
--	---

For more information on the use and effectiveness of security cameras see the following articles:

- [Is there Empirical Evidence that Surveillance Cameras reduce Crime?](#)
- [Do Surveillance Cameras deter Crime?](#)
- [How Well do Security Cameras deter Crime?](#)

## A-2: Deterrence with surveillance signs

According to Canada's privacy laws and regulations, any areas where there are security cameras are required to have posted conspicuous notification signs to alert the public. These signs alone, can be a significant deterrence factor. Would-be criminals and arsonists may think twice about entering the property and being photographed. It is more likely that they will give your property a pass and look for easier targets.

Several different types of signs should be considered and evaluated as to which will work the best for your property. Here are just a few examples.



Smaller warning stickers can also be used on doors and windows.

For more information on the use and effectiveness of security signs see the following articles:

- [Do Security Warning Signs really deter Criminals?](#)
- [Do Security Signs really deter Crime?](#)
- [Fighting Crime with High-Quality Signage](#)

### A-3: Solar-powered security lights

Another inexpensive option to deter criminal activity in rural or remote churches, is the use of solar-powered security lights. These strong lights will turn on when an activity or motion is detected, and thus scare away any bad-intentioned individuals. They automatically turn off when there is no more activity. Since these lights are solar-powered, they are relatively maintenance free and suitable where no electrical power is available.

Here are a couple of examples.

#### Ameritop Solar Lights Outdoor

 The image shows two Ameritop solar-powered security lights. Each light unit consists of a black rectangular solar panel on top and a white rectangular light panel below. The light panels are filled with numerous small yellow LEDs. A central circular sensor is visible on each light panel. A small black remote control with several buttons is shown to the left of the lights.	<p><b>Features:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bright solar motion sensor lights</li><li>• High efficiency silicon solar panel</li><li>• Works great in winter and rain</li><li>• Smart motion sensor</li><li>• AUTO turn ON and OFF</li><li>• Wide lighting area</li><li>• All weather resistant</li><li>• Easy installation</li></ul>
---	--

#### KagoLing Solar Lights Outdoor

 The image shows two KagoLing solar-powered security lights. Each light unit features a split solar panel on top, with one half being a larger, dark rectangular panel and the other half being a smaller, lighter rectangular panel. The light panels are white and filled with yellow LEDs. A central circular sensor is visible on each light panel. Two white remote controls with blue buttons and a Wi-Fi symbol are shown at the bottom left.	<p><b>Features:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Split solar charging panel</li><li>• High efficiency silicon solar panel</li><li>• Works great in winter and rain</li><li>• 3 adjustable lighting modes</li><li>• AUTO turn ON and OFF</li><li>• All weather resistant</li><li>• Easy installation</li></ul>
---	--

## A-4: Solar-powered security alarms

Solar-powered security alarms are another affordable option to deter criminal activity in rural or remote churches. These alarms will trigger very loud sounds and bright lights when an activity or motion is detected, and thus scare away intruders. They automatically turn off when there is no more activity. Since these alarms are solar-powered, they are relatively maintenance free and suitable where no electrical power is available.

Here are a couple of examples.

### Wonfast Solar Sensor Security Alarm

 A red and green cylindrical solar-powered security alarm with a solar panel on top. It includes a black horn, a remote control, a USB cable, a screwdriver, and a screw.	<p><b>Features:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 360-degree motion detection</li><li>• 129 db horn sound and 6 LED strobe light</li><li>• Solar energy and DC charging</li><li>• Changeable alarm sounds</li><li>• Remote control</li><li>• 24-hour flash and alarm, or on only at night</li><li>• All weather resistant</li><li>• Easy installation</li></ul>
---	---

### ChunHee Solar Strobe Siren Alarm Light

 Two red rectangular solar-powered siren alarm lights with solar panels on top. They include two remote controls and two USB cables.	<p><b>Features:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 125-degree sensing angle</li><li>• 129 db siren and 8 LED strobe light</li><li>• 4 function modes</li><li>• Solar energy and DC charging</li><li>• All weather resistant</li><li>• Easy installation</li><li>• 1 year warranty</li></ul>
---	--