

Personal Safety in and around Churches



Ian Simpson

March 2020

**PROPERTY
TEAM**  THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
BIRMINGHAM

Introduction

Personal safety is often overlooked but is in fact a crucial part of the Risk Assessment which each PCC is required by law to carry out. This booklet gives guidance on:

- Working alone in church buildings
- Safety around church during the hours of darkness
- Dealing safely with threats
- Where to find further information.

This guide is not a statement of the law but is intended to give you good general guidance. We will notify you of any significant changes to the law or regulations on the website and via our diocesan weekly email bulletin.

If you are unsure have any questions or need further advice then please do not hesitate to contact the author:

Ian Simpson MBA CIWM

Historic Places of Worship Support Officer, Church of England Birmingham.

ians@cofebirmingham.com



About the Author

Ian Simpson has been Church of England Birmingham's Historic Places of Worship Support Officer since July 2019 when he moved to the city from Liverpool where he had been Diocesan Heritage & Technical Officer for six years. Ian has two decades' experience in the care, maintenance and repair of buildings, specialising in historic buildings, and holds an MBA in Facilities Management. He is Vice Chairman of the Churches Visitor & Tourism Association.

Top Tips

Do

- Let somebody know where you are and when you expect to finish when working in church alone or at night.
- Ensure that your mobile phone is charged up if you are relying on it to summon assistance if needed.
- Ensure that exterior lights are in good working order.
- Ensure that all church staff and volunteers are familiar with the advice in this leaflet.
- Remember that your life and health are ALWAYS more valuable than church cash and trinkets – even “priceless” ones!
- Ensure that your parish’s Risk Assessment and Health & Safety Policy cover any risks to Personal Safety.

Do NOT

- carry out dangerous tasks, such as working at height, while you are alone in church.
- approach someone you are worried about in or around the church grounds – call for assistance instead.
- try using “self-defence techniques” unless you have been properly trained and certified in their use.

Personal Safety

The personal safety of clergy, paid church staff and volunteers – as well as that of members of the congregation and of other building users – is an important component of every parish's Risk Assessment and Health & Safety Policy.

This leaflet looks at circumstances in which individuals are placed at a heightened risk of being assaulted or of encountering difficulties when help may be some distance away.

It is always better to avoid risky situations altogether if possible and good housekeeping is one simple way of doing this: a church which looks open and cared-for is less likely to attract troublesome characters than one which looks semi-derelict and offers plenty of hiding places.

Good lighting always discourages those of dishonest intent, so make sure any external lights are maintained in good working order. If you do not have external lighting, consider getting it installed (but remember you will need a Faculty and may need Planning Permission).

An overgrowth of bushes and shrubs not only looks dreadful but it provides hiding places for the dishonest (*photo below*). Get it cleared!

Finally working alone in church should be avoided wherever possible, especially during the hours of darkness.



Lone Working

If you are working alone in church you may find it difficult to attract assistance if something goes wrong or you have an accident. If you cannot avoid lone working then:

Make sure somebody else knows exactly where you are and at what time you expect to finish. Preferably this should be someone who can gain access to the building if it becomes necessary to assist you.

Have somebody ring you every couple of hours to check that you are OK if you are working alone in church for any length of time.

Keep your mobile phone with you and fully charged up in case you need to ring out for assistance. If you don't have a mobile phone, you should consider getting one: most supermarkets sell basic "pay as you go" phones for about £20, a small price for peace of mind. Perhaps the Church could buy one for volunteers?

Lock yourself in the building so nobody else can come in and threaten you. Keep the key with you at all times in case you need to exit the building quickly.

Only low-risk activities should be carried out if you are working alone. In particular do not work at height if you are on your own: a fall could make it impossible for you to call for assistance.

ACTION: Review any tasks in your Church which require people to work alone in the building. If these can be rearranged so as to avoid the lone working, then do so. Make sure anyone who has to work alone sees this guidance.

During The Hours Of Darkness

Locking (or unlocking) the church in darkness is a time of extra vulnerability. The key holder should be accompanied at all times in order to minimise the risk of assault. Following the advice below will help ensure the safety of all building users during the hours of darkness.

Disperse after the meeting / event in a larger group rather than a small “one-by-one” trickle. Try to arrive in groups as well as possible: there is safety in numbers.

If arriving by car, park as close as possible to the door in order to minimise the distance you have to walk.

If you are the Keyholder get the correct keys ready before you arrive so as to minimise time spent at the door.

Consider carrying a personal attack alarm or a whistle in order to attract attention if you encounter difficulties.

If you are likely to be alone, make sure someone knows where you are, what you are doing and when you expect to finish.

If you are worried about someone outside the building DO NOT approach them. Stay inside the building (or if you are in your car, inside the car with the doors locked) and phone for assistance.

ACTION: If you have external lighting, go and check that all the lights are in good working order. Do this NOW! If any lights aren't working, get them fixed as soon as possible.

Dealing With Threats

Remember! It is extremely unlikely that you will encounter a serious threat – but it is worth knowing what to do if you do.

The risk of a personal threat is reduced by projecting an atmosphere of confidence: looking like you know what you're doing and where you are going, walking in an upright and purposeful manner, speaking clearly and confidently all make you seem less vulnerable and therefore to a potential attacker you become a less attractive target.

If you are threatened, shouting “FIRE!” loudly will both startle your assailant and be more likely to cause anybody nearby to come to your assistance than shouting “HELP!”. A panic alarm or whistle is also useful as the assailant will not want attention drawing to his / her presence and will probably run away.

Maintain eye contact with your assailant and remember to behave in a confident manner.

If the assailant is not deterred by the above and is demanding money or valuables then the best thing to do is hand them over – your life and your safety are worth so much more than cash and trinkets. Hand them over slowly, in such a way that your attacker will have to use both hands to take them if possible (and therefore having to drop their weapon), making a mental note of any distinguishing features which will help the Police identify the attacker.

We do not generally encourage the practice of self-defence techniques in the event of an assault, however those who have been properly trained and are competent in such techniques may use them if they are attacked.

Banking Church Cash

Making bank deposits alone can be dangerous. Those making deposits should always go in pairs. If you have to go alone, vary deposit times and carry the deposit inside a purse or a plain bag. Do not use a bank bag or a bag with a name on it. Never make deposits after closing, as this presents an obvious risk for robbery.

Preventing Access to Dangerous Areas

One important way you can protect people from danger in and around church buildings is to ensure they cannot walk – or fall – into dangerous areas. Access doors to areas like plant rooms and towers should be kept locked shut at all times.

Stairways down to underground plant rooms can be extremely dangerous. The example shown (*right*) is particularly bad; it belongs to a disused church now in private ownership and there is absolutely nothing to prevent somebody falling down and suffering appalling injuries, especially during the hours of darkness.



Underground plant rooms and their access stairways pose a number of hazards. Most in the author's experience are poorly-maintained with uneven, slippery steps and inadequate (if any) handrails. There should be a wall or railings around the opening to prevent anyone from falling in, with a padlocked gate to allow authorised personnel to access the plant room safely.

Further Information

The **Suzy Lamplugh Trust** exists to raise awareness of personal safety and their website <http://www.suzylamplugh.org/> has a range of resources which you may find useful.

The **Metropolitan Police** Personal Safety web page (<https://www.met.police.uk/cp/crime-prevention/violence/stay-safe/>) has a wealth of information and advice which is as relevant in Birmingham or Solihull as it is in London.

This booklet is one of a series published by Church of England Birmingham's Property Team to guide you through various aspects of caring for and making the most of your church's biggest and most important asset. The series covers a range of topics from health and safety through maintenance to visitor welcome. All are available FREE in PDF format from the Church of England Birmingham website <http://www.cofebirmingham.com>.

