

'Syndicates' behind rash of PE church burglaries

Thousands lost in sound equipment, computers – and security upgrades

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CHURCHES in Port Elizabeth are under attack by suspected crime syndicates, with a spate of burglaries in recent months.

Clerics and staff have described churches as "soft targets" for criminals and say the burglaries have cost them tens of thousands of rands.

Several churches have had to upgrade their security measures.

The Rev Rod Burton, of St John's Methodist Church in Havelock Street, Central, said burglars had even tried to break in on Sunday night.

"We managed to chase them away before they gained entry."

Burton said the church had been burgled six times since January and a R150 000 worth of electronic equipment stolen in total. "In most of the cases, they seem to gain entry by breaking windows. They don't seem to vandalise the churches more than they have to in order to gain entry."

Sound systems and computers appeared to be the main target.

"Each time they break in, we beef up security, but this costs us thousands of

rands each time."

Adele Erasmus, an employee at the Holy Trinity Anglican Church, also in Havelock Street, said about R70 000 worth of equipment had been stolen in four burglaries since the start of the year.

"They seem to steal electronic equipment like computers and the sound systems," she said. "I would say it is an organised syndicate targeting most churches, as they seem to know how to unplug the equipment as well as where it is stored."

Erasmus said the last burglary was a few months ago.

"Since we installed an alarm and put burglar proofing on the church windows, we haven't had much of a problem."

The Rev Bruce Woolard, of St Mark's Congregational Church in



MONTY MONTGOMERY

Westering, said the school section next to the church was burgled last week by "professional" thieves.

"They were very well organised and lifted the roof sheeting before hiding out in the ceiling.

"They then set off the alarm and hid until the security staff had checked the premises and left."

They had then stolen an undisclosed sum from the bursar's office

Woolard said electronic equipment had also previously been stolen from the church.

"We have had a few cases of theft where laptops, computers and electric equipment have been stolen."

Atlas Security operational manager Monty Montgomery, whose company guards more than 50 churches in the city, said they were definitely seen as easy targets.

He said it was possible that the church burglars were part of organised syndicates who targeted certain institutions for specific computer, electronic and sound equipment.

Police spokesman Captain Sandra Janse van Rensburg said yesterday they were investigating all "related" burglary cases to determine if a syndicate was operating in the city.