

Bell may be melted down: Thieves grab church's history

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Illustration: Colour Photo: Perry Beaton, Special to The Record, Special to The Record, Special to The Record / Royce Gale shows the smashed cast-iron supports where bell once was.

Photo: Nancy Nourse, The Record / Digging has begun at the new site.

SHERBROOKE - Parishioners of Sherbrooke's Plymouth-Trinity United Church were jolted to discover their religious heritage had been plundered by thieves who made away with their cherished Trinity Bell.

"I was pretty upset," said Ron Smith. "This is a piece of history and can't be replaced."

The bronze bell, which is more than 100 years old, once summoned congregation members to the bygone Trinity United Church on Court Street. The bell was installed on Plymouth-Trinity's lawn along Terrill Street after the Plymouth and Trinity congregations amalgamated in the early 1970s.

Smith, who estimated the bell weighs between 300 and 500 pounds, said thieves smashed its cast iron support and took off with it.

Smith said it wasn't the first item that's been grabbed.

A bronze plaque at the church entrance, identifying the structure as a historic monument, was ripped off last year.

Sherbrooke police spokeswoman Maryse Boulanger confirmed police were notified of the theft on Saturday.

Boulanger said the bell, with a 28-inch diameter, is estimated to be worth \$2,000. She said it's possible the robbers may want to melt the metal and sell it.

The theft is one of a handful of reports of large metal items stolen throughout the Eastern Townships.

The bell's disappearance comes as sad news to Martyn Sadler, the minister who helped dedicate the bell in the mid 1980s.

"It represents a physical link for the Trinity congregation to their former church," he said. "I'm sure they feel a loss."

Sadler said he hadn't heard about the theft until The Record called, but the bell reflects the region's rich religious history.

The retired minister said he couldn't verify the exact date the bell was inaugurated on the church lawn. But it may have been on a beautiful cool day in October 1985.

The year was the 150th anniversary of the Plymouth church congregation.

"We felt we were very fortunate to put it up and say a few words about it," Sadler said. "It was the one public symbol left of the old Trinity church.

"I'm sad it's gone."

He said the bell was a testament to the health of the original Trinity Church congregation, noting it was placed almost immediately after its tower was built. "In that time you could be waiting a long time before a bell could be installed," he said. "It tells you a lot about their resources."

Sadler said Plymouth-Trinity has other artifacts from the Trinity Church, including stained glass windows.

There would also be a better sense of security for all involved.

Gerry Armstrong, one of the members of the old Trinity congregation, said the bell's disappearance is a major loss. "You hate to see those things disappear," Armstrong said. "They're irreplaceable."

He believes that Quebec churches have become the latest targets for thieves.

"We're at the point where nothing is sacred and people will steal just about anything," he said.

Fellow parishioner Royce Gale agrees.

"The old aspects of church life are fair game for thievery," he said.

Armstrong, who is also the church's treasurer, said the insurance company has been contacted and they're waiting for a call from their adjudicator.

The bell's loss is also a major blow to city historians. Claude Metras, the chairman of the board of the Societe d'histoire de Sherbrooke, said the bell was a historic symbol and will be missed.

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