Police recover stolen Bible after church's string of bad luck

by Denise Hollinshed by Religion News Service

St. Louis — A scruffy-looking man walked up and down St. Louis' antiques row, trying to peddle an old Bible to store owners, but several thought something was amiss.

Kenez Jakovac of Hammonds Books said he felt the same way, but paid the man $30 for the Bible on Dec. 23. Jakovac said he believed the Bible was worth $500 to $1,000 and he suspected it might be stolen.

He said he did an Internet search the day after Christmas and found a *Post-Dispatch* story about a special Bible stolen from St. Johns Lutheran Church just days before Christmas services.

He said he called police, who were already scoping out local antiques stores after hearing from others that a man was trying to sell a big, antique Bible. Police picked up the Bible and returned it to Joan Potvin, secretary at the church.

"It's been a good day," Potvin said. "I can't even believe it. There is definitely a God, and he's been generous."

Authorities had a description of the burglar from surveillance images, and about the same time the Bible was found, officers were tipped off that someone matching the description was in the area. Officers arrested the man, who was wearing clothes similar to what was seen on the burglar in surveillance footage.

Cherri Elder of Elder's Antiques said she believed she was offered the same Bible by the same man Dec. 23. She said she declined to buy it because she didn't like the looks of the man.

"Who steals from a church?" she said Dec. 26. "It's not right."

The Bible, which dates to the 19th century and weighs more than 15 pounds, was stolen from St. Johns on Dec. 21. The antique Bible is used only for special occasions and had been brought out of storage for Christmas services when it was taken during a break-in at the church.

It was the fourth break-in at the church in a week, according to Eunice Bain, a member of St. Johns who oversees the altar items. She said the church had been vandalized more than a dozen times in the last year.

Bain said the same man appears in the church's surveillance videos from two of the most recent break-ins.

Also recently, someone broke into the church's school buildings, breaking doors and stealing $1,000 worth of fundraising gift cards. The person also broke into the freezer in the church's food pantry, ruining food meant for distribution to the community's poor.

In other incidents this year, someone used a fire extinguisher to break windows, painted graffiti on the church walls and swiped the church's two computers, Bain said.

During the Dec. 21 break-in, the suspect broke a number of windows, threw paper around the sanctuary and stopped to eat cookies and cake baked for a church fundraiser before stealing the Bible.

Authorities said they believe the man arrested may be responsible for six burglaries at the church since September.

The church got more good news: On top of getting the Bible back, an anonymous donor gave the church a substantial amount of money to buy a security system, Potvin said.

[Denise Hollinshed writes for *The Post-Dispatch* in St. Louis.]

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