

California Missions Get a Security Facelift

June 10, 2010 [Rodney Bosch](#)

I'd like to point you to a feature news article in our June issue that sheds light on the worthy endeavors of Larry Tracy and his self-assigned work to secure the historical California missions.

Tracy — former president of Aleph America Corp. and newly minted Hikvision executive consultant — is literally on a mission. Some dolts might suggest he's off his rocker too, considering the largess of time (and money) committed to his volunteer passion: installing security and fire systems, gratis, in each of the 21 adobe structures built by Spanish missionaries between 1769 and 1823.

The other day I caught up with Tracy and his two sons, Scott and Patrick, at Mission San Fernando, located north of downtown Los Angeles. The Tracy clan is currently installing an IP-based video surveillance system with megapixel cameras, intrusion protection and other safeguards there.

Some background... the missions hold artifacts — the value of some of this stuff will boggle your head — that were brought by missionaries who plied the seas between Europe and our Western coastline. Housed at each mission are statues, paintings, pious trinkets, literature and so many other cultural relics, big and small and infinitely rare.

You can hardly apply words like *preserved* or *secured* or even much protected when attempting to describe how these artifacts and the structures themselves have actually been kept through the decades. Vulnerable doesn't begin to describe just how much unprotected these places really are.

The San Fernando Mission, for example, is keeper of all archives collected by the Los Angeles Diocese. Walk through these rooms and even a security/life-safety neophyte would eventually recognize the smoke alarms are archaic and maybe don't even work, let alone monitored.

Most of the missions had never been outfitted with electronic security till Tracy came along. Mission San Fernando was an exception, but even there I saw 1970s-era motion detectors that had long been rendered useless, clogged with dust and what all else.

Tracy can tell stories for days about the thieving sorts who have preyed on the missions for decades because of the lack of security. Some of the missions are said to have lost 50 percent or more of their artifacts to thieves who simply walk in and walk out with

whatever they please. That is all changing, however. Oftentimes these crooks are now caught on camera or stopped in their tracks after tripping an alarm.

Tracy explains a typical culprit that nowadays is getting busted: “We caught a guy on camera who had been robbing the collection boxes every day at Mission San Juan Bautista for years and they didn’t know it. He would come in the morning when the mission opened and buy a candle and a card, walk to the back of the church and wait until everybody left. He had a little thin stick with a LED light that he would put into the collection box. He fished out everything but the \$1 and \$5 bills. The mission never recognized for years they weren’t getting anything but 1s and 5s.”

Tracy also witnesses some pretty shoddy alarm installation work at the missions and evidence of questionable ethics. Like outdated photoelectric beams with no receiver, yet the dealer was still charging for the devices. One mission in particular used Plexiglas to shield paintings worth millions of dollars onto which an installer placed “window bugs.” Of course, these little shock detection devices only work on glass.

So Tracy and his small band of hired hands continue to drive up and down the state making things right.