

**A Making it Easier Guide**  
*For Churchwardens*



***Working Safely***  
***At Height in***  
***Churches***



Diocese of  
Liverpool

## ***Introduction***

As a Churchwarden one of your key duties is to make sure that everyone who carries out work in your Church – whether or not they are paid for it – does so safely. This guide is part of a series which aims to make it easier for you to do this.

Falls from height can have devastating consequences, such as serious injury, permanent disability and death. In fact, falls from height are the most common class of workplace injury and therefore the focus of a major campaign by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE). This leaflet gives

- advice on avoiding working at height
- advice on working safely at height where it cannot be avoided.

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:

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# Top Ten Tips

## Do

- avoid working at height wherever possible, for instance by using extensible brushes for cleaning.
- make sure everyone who needs to work at height knows how to do so safely.
- visually check a ladder or stepladder for safety before attempting to use it.
- ensure all ladders and steps are checked for safety by a Competent Person at least every year.
- Take care when using ladders or steps to site them on a hard, level surface away from doors or windows.
- make sure that nobody can climb on any fixed ladders or scaffolding in or around the church.

## Do not

- lean over balconies when carrying out maintenance or cleaning tasks.
- stand on chairs or tables.
- over-reach whilst working from a ladder or stepladder.
- risk using a ladder or stepladder if you are not sure it's safe. If it doesn't look safe, it probably isn't.

# ***Working At Height***

## ***What it is, and why it matters***

Ask several people what is meant by “working at height” and you will likely get several definitions. “Above 6ft”, “over 9ft” and “above two metres” are common. In fact, the Health & Safety Executive defines working at height as:

**work in any place, including at or below ground level (for example in underground workings), where a person could fall a distance liable to cause injury.**

In other words, it is the potential for injury which defines whether the work is “at height”, not the actual distance above the ground.

Churches are often lofty buildings and a risk of injury can present itself from the need to clean and maintain items at height.

In February 2010 a man was killed when he fell from height in the Anfield Temple of Praise; in April 2012 Holy Trinity Brompton was prosecuted after a fall resulted in a worker becoming paralysed.

Apart from the risk of prosecution should anything go wrong, it is a basic part of our Christian care for our brothers and sisters who work to keep our church buildings in good order that we should do everything we can to keep them safe.

This guide is presented in the hope it will make it easier for you to do so.

# Avoiding Working At Height...

***... is the best way to keep everybody safe!***

The author of this pamphlet has seen some terrifyingly dangerous practices in churches during the course of his work and his academic research.

In Church A, the cleaners were seen regularly leaning over the balcony to clean dust off the ledges; one slip would have resulted in an 18ft fall headlong on to the solid oak pews below. Church B's Churchwarden used to stand on a chair to reach items down from the top of a wardrobe. In Church C, a rickety stepladder was used by the Churchwarden when light bulbs needed changing. This ladder was missing two of its four rubber feet and was held together with string.

Any of these scenarios could have resulted in a nasty injury or even death. Thankfully, they didn't. Yet... ***all of the risks could have been avoided!***

At Church A, extensible brushes could have been used either from the ground or from a safe point within the balcony. Alternatively, the dust could have simply been left there – it wasn't visible from the ground and the balcony is rarely used.

The simplest approach for Church B would be to stop storing items on top of the wardrobe! Failing that, properly-designed steps could have been provided for the Churchwarden to use.

Church C could remove the risks and save money by having all the light bulbs replaced with LED bulbs by a professional electrician using proper access equipment.

LED bulbs last much longer than incandescent or CFL bulbs and so do not need to be replaced nearly as often – and they are much more energy-efficient as well!

There is a principle here which should sit at the heart of our approach to working at height: **if you can find a way to avoid working at height, then do so.**

This may require some creativity and lateral thinking. Very often a suggestion for changing the way something is done will be met with the response “But we’ve *always* done it this way”: this must be resisted!

All Parishes should conduct an annual review of Health & Safety based upon a robust assessment of the risks, and this includes working at height.

**Look at all the tasks in your church which involve working at height. Is there another way the job can be done without working at height, for instance by working from the ground using long-handled equipment? If so, you should change the way the task is carried out to make it safer.**

# Working Safely At Height

***Where there is no other way to carry out a task than by working at height, then every care should be taken to ensure the work is done safely.***

Ladders are banned – right?

WRONG! It is a myth that the Health & Safety Executive has banned the use of ladders and stepladders, but they must be used in a safe way by people who know how to use them properly, and how to tell if they might be dangerous.

What you must NOT do, however, is stand on tables or chairs to reach objects at height. This is terribly dangerous – tables and chairs were not designed to be stood upon and can very easily overbalance causing a fall. If this is happening in your church, you must put a stop to it immediately!

## **Selecting a Ladder**

There are a number of factors to take into account when selecting a ladder.

1. It must be the right height for the job: too short and there is a risk of over-reaching, too long and it may be impractical to use in the space available. Ladders are available in a range of sizes from two or three steps, through seven or eight-rung stepladders, to three-section straight ladders of 10m or more.
2. Your ladder must be of the correct rating, a trade or industrial ladder rather than a domestic one. You must never use a domestic ladder in a church or in any other workplace.

Look out for the Standards **BS EN131** or **BS2037 Class 1** when you are buying a new ladder – if the ladder is not tested to one of these standards, then it is not suitable for use in church.

3. The material of which the ladder is constructed makes a difference. Aluminium is lighter than wood and therefore easier to carry. Fibreglass is lighter again, but a lot more expensive.

### **Check Ladders / Stepladders BEFORE you use them!**

You should check that a ladder is safe before you use it. Don't just assume that the equipment upon which you are relying is undamaged and free from dangerous defects – look at it properly and verify that it is! The photographs overleaf will help you.

Does it have all its feet? A missing, worn or damaged foot means the ladder will be unstable and could tip over or slip in use. Are all the treads (rungs) present and intact, and are they securely fastened to the ladder? If not, don't use the ladder.

Are there any bends in the stiles (the vertical rails of the ladder)? Or, if the ladder is of wood, are there any splits in the stiles? If there are, don't use the ladder.

For a stepladder, are the stays present and in good working order? These are essential to the ladder's stability so don't use the ladder if the stays are damaged or missing.

Be very suspicious of wooden ladders which have been painted. The paint could hide dangerous defects.

**IF A LADDER LOOKS OR FEELS DANGEROUS, IT PROBABLY IS!**





**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder is missing a foot.



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder has a bent stile.



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder's foot has worn away. There is no friction between the ladder and the floor, so it could slip.



**DANGEROUS!**

This ladder was condemned for the state of its treads and a split in one of its stiles.



**GOOD!** Properly designed steps, much safer than standing on a chair



**GOOD!** An up-to-date safety ticket from a competent ladder inspector.

## **Using a Ladder or Stepladder Safely**

***As with any piece of equipment, there is a right way and a wrong way to use a ladder. Get it wrong and you might spend the rest of your life regretting it!***

You should take care to ensure that the floor surface is both level and stable where you are going to use the ladder. If it isn't the ladder could easily overbalance and tip you off.

Site the ladder so it is facing the job, so that you do not need to twist, turn or over-reach whilst working.

Make sure that a straight ladder is at the correct angle before you climb it: about 1 in 4 (75 degrees) is right. It should be anchored and / or footed to ensure it cannot slip.

Always fully open a stepladder before climbing it. Make sure that the platform and stays are locked into place.

Maintain three points of contact with the ladder whilst you are on it: two feet and one hand whilst working. Do not lean sideways or backwards off the ladder.

NEVER stand on the platform of a stepladder. The platform is made for tools and equipment, not for standing on!

Never spend more than 30 minutes up a ladder.

Avoid working at height if you are in a church on your own: if you have an accident there will be no-one there to assist you or summon help.

**Make sure everyone in your church who needs to use ladders knows how to do so SAFELY!**

## Maintaining Ladders

***Properly cared-for, a ladder should give many years of safe and useful service – so follow these simple tips!***

In Victorian times it was taught that “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” – and when it comes to ladders it is still true. If you spill anything on your ladder you should clean it off immediately and you should regularly wipe off any accumulation of dust and dirt. It is especially important to keep the plastic or rubber feet clean to maintain the correct friction between ladder and floor.

The Law<sup>1</sup> requires that ladders and steps are inspected regularly for safety by a Competent Person. Where ladders see only occasional use this should be done annually. A sticker showing the result of the inspection should be affixed to the ladder. If the ladder is found to be unsafe, it must be taken out of use.



If a ladder suffers any accident or damage it should be taken out of use until it can be inspected for safety.

**Check your ladders are clean, and arrange for a safety inspection if you haven't already done so.**

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<sup>1</sup> *Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (1998)*

# Working at Great Height

***Jacob's Ladder went all the way up to Heaven. Your ladders don't, so know what to do if you need to go higher!***

For working at heights beyond the reach of ladders, or for working at any height for long periods of time, seek professional assistance. It may be that scaffolding is needed, or there may be a requirement for a Mobile Elevated Work Platform ("cherry picker"). Either way, you must make sure that anyone who supplies or uses such equipment at your church (inside or outside) is properly qualified and insured to do so.

When applying for a Faculty to carry out work at height you will be required to show that the work is properly insured. You must ensure that nobody can climb on any scaffolding inside or outside the church.

## **Fixed Tower Ladders**

Fixed tower ladders are a specialist item beyond the scope of this leaflet, but you must ensure that no unauthorised personnel can gain access to the tower ladder if you have one in your church.

### **Further Reading / Information**

*Health & Safety Executive Publications:* INDG402 "Safe Use of Ladders and Stepladders – an Employer's Guide", INDG405 "Top Tips for Ladder and Stepladder Safety" (free downloads from [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk))

*Ladder Association Publication:* "The Ladder Book" (free download from [www.ladderassociation.org.uk](http://www.ladderassociation.org.uk)) . Also look out for the annual *Idiots on Ladders* Facebook campaign and the Ladder Exchange programme for replacing "dodgy" ladders at discount prices.